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Music

Country's new generation

Exclusive: As Monday's CMA Awards loom, two rising young musicians chat about life on the road — and packin' heat.

BY ALANNA NASH

SHE'S A FIERY, in-your-face country rocker who sings about a torched ex-lover in the hit *Kerosene*. He's a dad with perspective on life in small burbs off interstates (*Hicktown*). Both of them are hot: Miranda Lambert, who turns 23 on Friday, is nominated in two categories at Monday's Country Music Association Awards, and one is for the Horizon Award (up-and-comer of the year). Jason Aldean, 29, is the Academy of Country Music's reigning "New Male Vocalist of the Year." Both have notched smash sales for their freshman albums, and critics consider them among the best of Nashville's new bumper crop of young country artists. They've even toured together. In our exclusive interview, they chat about fame, crazy fans and the new talent that's making country music more energized than ever.

Is being a hot new country star all you thought it would be?

Jason: No. It's a lot busier than I thought!
Miranda: Same here. I didn't realize how much time away from home I'd be spending. I'm a single girl, but Jason has a daughter. I know it's tough on him being away. Everybody thinks it's a big party all the time, and it is, especially when Jason and I play together. But it's still a job, like everything else.

The biggest surprise about the CMA nominations this year was the people who weren't nominated, especially among the more established stars, such as Toby Keith. What does that signify about where country music is heading?

Jason: I think it says we've got a lot of young listeners right now who are hearing country for the first time and like the new music. That's apparent when you look at all the Horizon nominees that have only been out for a couple of years — Miranda, and Little Big Town and Sugarland. Guys like George Strait grew up listening to Merle Haggard. But I grew up listening to everything from George Strait to Guns N' Roses. So, for



LOOK WHO STOPPED BY TO CHAT

Miranda Lambert

Hometown: **Lindale, Texas**

Latest release: **Kerosene**

Next album ETA: **March**

Biggest influences: **Merle Haggard, Tammy Wynette**

What you never would have guessed about her:

She loves listening to Beyoncé CDs before every performance.

Jason Aldean

Hometown: **Macon, Ga.**

Latest release: **George Strait, Alabama**

Next album ETA: **spring/summer**

Biggest influences: **George Strait, Alabama, Tracy Lawrence**

What you never would have guessed about him: **He has held jobs as a pager salesman and a Pepsi deliveryman.**

younger fans like me, it's different. In the late 1980s and early '90s, all kinds of acts came in and played different styles of country music that people hadn't heard before. It was a crazy period, and people couldn't get enough of it. I think we're seeing that again.

Miranda: Yeah, we're making a splash, and people are taking notice. That's huge. There's a lot of rocking new stuff coming out.

It's more entertaining. This new music from Rascal Flatts and Keith Urban — even Jason and me — is high energy. And it's bringing in a younger audience to country music, because it is something they haven't seen before.

One of Aldean's influences, George Strait, right, will be inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame at Monday's CMAs (ABC at 8 p.m. ET).

Have you two had any surreal experiences on the road with those younger audiences?

Miranda: There's always crazy stuff. Last night I got my first pair of boxers thrown on stage! That surprised me. I hung 'em on the microphone stand until I could figure out what to do with them. And then I swung 'em around and threw 'em back out there. I'm like, "What am I gonna do with a pair of dirty underwear? I really don't want them." Our fans get a little rowdy sometimes.

Jason: I had my first experience with almost getting my pants ripped off about two nights ago. I was on stage playing, and they just grabbed my pants and started tearin' 'em.

Miranda: You mean the fans were rippin' 'em?

Jason: Yeah. They ripped 'em up about halfway to my shin.

Miranda: Oh my!

Maybe you're the new Elvis.

Jason: Actually, I got ticked off. It was one of my favorite pairs of jeans. [Laughs.]

What do you do for fun on the road?

Jason: My band plays golf four or five days a week. We didn't until a couple months ago, but we were sitting on the bus a lot doing nothing. The whole band likes to play golf, so we got everybody to bring their clubs out, and now we play all the time.

Miranda: I bring my four-wheeler out to ride around, especially in the summer. But a lot of times, I'll just sit in a lawn chair at fairs and festivals and people-watch. And I've got a bow. I'm starting to bow hunt, and I brought that out last summer as my hobby on the road. I travel with a target. I mean, I don't shoot it at people!

And you have a thing for guns, right?

Miranda: I grew up around guns. My dad and mom were PIs who snuck around and took people's pictures in their windows. My parents always took me everywhere, so I learned about life early. I got my permit to carry a concealed weapon last spring.

Jason: I'm finding out all kinds of things about you. I didn't know you traveled with a piece! **EW**