



## **JASON ALDEAN: WINNING BY KEEPING IT ROUGH**

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Jason Aldean came from nowhere with his breakout hit “Hicktown” and announced himself as a voice for the unrepentant new breed of rednecks, hillbillies and outliers. Aldean is truly an independent spirit—his label Broken Bow built itself alongside its breakout artist, his producer Michael Knox fired a sound known for its aggression and his touring strategy suggested a take-it-to-the-people-where-they-are ethos. He has developed into one of country music’s emblematic superstars, with 15 #1 singles and six albums that have all been certified platinum.

Having won the coveted Country Music Association Album of the Year in 2011 for the triple-platinum *My Kind of Party* and sweeping the Academy of Country Music’s Top Male Vocalist in 2013, 2014 and 2015 on his way to the 2016 Entertainer of the Year, Aldean’s brazen hybrid merges hard rock’s attack (“She’s Country,” “Crazy Town”) with legit rap-meets-rural authenticity (“Dirt Road Anthem,” “1994”) and enough roots (“The Truth,” “Amarillo Sky”) to make him a more honest core sample of hard-working America than some of his party-friendly peers.

Just as importantly, the kid who gave up a baseball scholarship to chase his dream by playing music in bars has rekindled a more forward eroticism in the songs. For if Conway Twitty sang “She Left Love All Over Me” and “Love to Lay You Down,” the Georgia-born and bred vocalist offers the same point of entry in hits “Burning It Down,” “Night Train” and “Just Getting Started.”

So, there you are in Vegas, and they’re reading the nominees. They open the envelope and say, “The Academy of Country Music Entertainer of the Year is... Jason Aldean!” What runs through your mind, or your veins?

I was hoping it wasn't a Steve Harvey moment, honestly. I was so used to not getting it, I remember talking to Kenny [Chesney] about it, and he said, "If it's gonna happen, it's gonna happen..."

I remember looking at my wife, thinking, "Did I just hear what I just heard?" I saw her face and I knew. All the years of being on the road, missing out on personal stuff, those moments you don't get back—it was really a flood of all of that. I didn't know quite what I was feeling, but, you know, there it was.

You gave a pretty great speech for all of that.

I think the best speeches come when you shoot from your hip and the words come from your heart. I really wanted that award, and I know I'm not Nashville's choirboy by any means. But I love this business and everything that we do out there. So it really meant something to me.

So you were almost in shock?

When I finally got back home and on my couch and thought about it, that's when it hit me, when I went, "Wow! That really happened." It was incredible.

Was it really that much of a surprise?

Being nominated, I think it was the fifth time, and to win it was a goal I'd had for years... I'd felt like I'd deserved it, and it didn't happen. I was starting to think, "Well, maybe this isn't going to happen."

It's a very competitive award.

Well, I'd been nominated five times. I watched my friends win it. The first year Luke [Bryan] won it, he was our opening act. I was the first one onstage, congratulating him and being happy for a friend. But you start to wonder.

Was it like you expected it to feel?

I thought if I ever won, I'd just jump up and go ballistic, but it was really more emotional than I'd ever expected. That's the best way to explain it.

Well, you did it on your terms, especially being on an independent label.

It probably made it more of a challenge, but I think it says a lot to that label, and my crew and my team. I remember signing with Broken Bow, and people telling me I was crazy. I didn't really know the difference between a major and an

independent label. But I'd passed on every major out there twice, and these people heard something and believed in me.

So in the end, what does being on an indie mean in terms of career?

We kinda grew together. When you're on a small label it's harder to win any of those things. But I think they went out and fought for something that was a little outside of what was going on, instead of trying to make me into what everyone else was doing. And I think as you go, you're not as scared to branch out and change it up a little bit.

Do you think it's a numbers game, especially with the awards? Doesn't music drive those things, too?

I think there's a point where music should matter, but the people who should win don't always. There's so much more that goes into it. And it's not just a numbers game; at the end of the day, tickets to shows, albums sold and that stuff, those things show you're hitting a nerve, whether you win awards or not.

You arrived at a time when country wasn't hard traditional, but it was a bit country and maybe a bit smooth. You shook that up.

People were doing it in their style—and we may be more blue collar. That may be me being drawn to songs I can relate to, [that felt like] where I grew up, the experiences I had and can relate to. But I'd be lying if I said it was a conscious effort to go after an audience, or a kind of person. I just sang what I know.

What did you know? What kinds of jobs were you doing growing up, or chasing music?

Gosh, I bagged groceries, cut grass. I worked for Pepsi, was a delivery guy, sold cell phones and pagers when that was a deal. By 14, 15 years old, I was making my money in bands—playing nightclubs and country bars wherever I could find them in Georgia and Florida.

So music took over when you were pretty young.

If a fair came to town, I'd go play there on some little stage or whatever. I'd play outside diners for tips. I had a house gig at a typical honky-tonk country bar in the '90s where people would line dance and do like that. There were a lot of them back then, and you could always find work.

Who were you listening to back then?

Alabama was my favorite band ever. The '80s, and that style of country. "Feels So Right," that was a thing.

Sex was also kind of a thing back then. And it's funny, because I think you bring a lot of actual sex instead of just everything that leads up to it—or sort of happens after—to your music.

“Burning It Down”? Well, those songs that are a little sexier; you need to remember that's part of it, too. And I think it's a little more... open. People are able to be blunt about it. It used to be you could kinda go there, but radio might shy away.

Actually, country was a lot more open about sex before we went after all the kids. Vern Gosdin, Conway Twitty, Alabama with “Take Me Down.” And you're back tangled up in the sheets, covered with sweat.

[Laughing] I mean, I never thought about it that way. I've never really been one to shy away from telling it like it is, and I guess the songs are an honest take on it. Obviously, the older I get, the more it appeals to me, and I can relate to different, deeper things.

My dad was taking me to a bar called Alabama Jack's when I was five years old, not even five, and I didn't get [the sexual overtones]. At 15, when I started, I still didn't get it; I was just trying to learn the words, and play the guitar! As a younger man, it is an innocent thing. I'm 39, and you do think about that stuff on a deeper level.

So is it a matter of being older and more experienced?

It is a confidence thing a little bit. You talk about Conway, who's a great singer. I saw him, and he had some swagger about him. You see someone who's so confident in themselves, that's a turn-on.

Though we could argue you hit country radio with a fair amount of swagger. “Hicktown” was pretty all-out.

I definitely think when we hit the scene, it was a different sound we brought to the table. I had my band recording the album, and they all came from a rock background. Not that we didn't know or care [about what was going on]. It was just how we played.

I never wanted to be the guy following the pack; I wanted to be the trailblazer. But we didn't realize how much it would change the way things would sound after. It set a new standard, sort of: that big, loud, grungy guitar, the power chord kind of thing and those choruses. But then that made us want to change things up every time. We did “Dirt Road,” and there was the rap. Then we went on the

“Burning It Down” trip. Now with “Lights Come On,” that’s still the big riffs, the power chords, that nasty feeling.

And some of it is the song selection, too.

It’s evolved. For Michael [Knox], as the producer too. The more you do something, the better you’re gonna get. When we did that first album, we didn’t say we don’t know what we’re doing. It was more anything goes, because we don’t didn’t know who the audience was or what we were trying to do.

It’s different when you go out onstage every night, and look them in their face; you see things that wouldn’t occur to you. One thing that cracks me up is you’ll see these really big dudes who’ll be singing “My Kind of Party,” every word, but then you’ll see these same guys doing every single word of something like “The Truth,” a really sensitive ballad. And then you do an anthem like “She’s Country,” everybody’s on their feet and the energy’s cranking. You’ve got all these different kinds of songs, and you can see it’s all connected.

Everybody loves to go out on the weekend, loves to party and have a blast, but people really want what’s real: I’ve been in love and had heartache, trying to make life work. Those songs are a big part of it.

Is there anything you avoid?

One of the things I really don’t like is vanilla songs, and I could go out and find a million of ’em tomorrow. We all come from that rock background, so there’s a part of it, in that I don’t do slick. Records from the ’70s and ’80s were rough! There wasn’t Pro Tools to make everything so perfect.

I loved hearing a singer sing it his way. It wasn’t perfect pitch, but it was stylistic, and that lets a record sound the way it’s supposed to sound. The little blemishes you hear? We left ’em in on purpose. I don’t know what made it all come together for me, but that roughness gives character where everyone else tries to please.

You talk about records from the ’70s and ’80s.

When I was a kid, I was listening to The Eagles, Hank Jr., Charlie Daniels Band, Allman Brothers and Lynyrd Skynyrd. When I got older, it was Bon Jovi, Def Leppard, Guns N’ Roses. Then came the ’90s and Pearl Jam and Nirvana and Garth Brooks and Alan Jackson. I loved Stevie Ray Vaughan, too. Those are all things that were kinda loud and a little aggressive.

Do you think country can have that? Or is there common ground between the two most people miss?

To me, it just sounds cool to play Aerosmith, then turn around and play Keith Whitley. I love John Anderson; we used to cover “Black Sheep” in our show. All those acts have intensity. They’re not alike, but they have that in common.

There’s that thing of identification. Last year at the stadium shows with Kenny Chesney, you could spot the guys who wanted to be you in the crowd. They dress just like you.

It’s a little weird, but obviously, it’s flattering. It says they think you’re cool—and they’re trying their best to imitate you. When I was out with Kenny, I saw guys dressed like him, too. It’s just a way of showing you are into the music and what that person represents, I guess. And we’ve all done it.

You have?

[Laughing] I’ve got a picture of me and Tracy Lawrence in the ’90s. I’d gone to see him—and except for the mullet hanging down, I’ve got the big belt buckle, the Wrangler starched jeans, the shirt tucked in and I looked just like some kid wearing what I was able to find that looked like him.

What is it about you?

I hope it’s that I’m a guy they feel like they can go and sit down with and drink a beer, someone they can hang out with. Maybe it’s someone who’s afraid to speak their mind, say whatever they need to, and because I’m not afraid to speak my mind and am confident in my decisions and don’t sugarcoat things. At the end of the day, I hope that’s one of the qualities.

So many people play it safe. You don’t.

A lot of times, like in “Johnny Cash,” it says I flipped off the boss. A lot of people would like to say that. So I may be the guy who says and does what they want to, so instead of doing it, they can go listen to the record.

How direct are you?

I’m pretty blunt and to the point. Talk the talk, walk the walk. [Unlike] people who are so busy talking, they don’t have time to walk.

I’ve heard you’re going into the studio with Tyler Farr as a producer.

Tyler's one of my best friends. He's getting to make his next album and he was over at the house, talking about it. He wanted to know about some songs they were looking at, changing it up. He wanted something to come out of the gate with a little more punch to it. I said, "Want me to do it?"

He was looking for a little more drive in his stuff. He thought I was kidding. But I said, "Look, I'll go do it as a favor to you. We can go I and have some fun. See what we get, and if it's working, figure it out." A third album is pretty pivotal. He's very stylistic and has a very unique sound to his voice.

And your thoughts on why Tyler's working or not working?

They figured out songs like "Whiskey in My Water" work for him, but you gotta have tempos to kick it up and get some more drive to 'em. I think it's sort of Hank Jr.-esque, that early period. It's a different era, so you have to find things that are gonna fit today, but it's what he needs.

You've won Male Vocalist a bunch of times. When you step up to the mic, what are you thinking?

I spend a lot of time before we go in working on keys and making sure I've got the songs down. I know that when I get to the chorus, I want to hit 'em with power and conviction. That's where the money is, and I wanna bring the song home. I know it's in my wheelhouse. So just to be able to put myself there, when people hear it, you know they're gonna feel it. That's the deal: singing so people know you mean it.

Do the songs create what the albums are going to be, or is it more about finding the songs that reflect where you are in your life at any given point?

For me, the songs dictate the album. We go out and try to find really great songs that represent me. There are some really great songs out there, but they are things I'd never say. I just wouldn't, so I wouldn't put it on my album—because at this point, it's putting the Aldean stamp on what we're doing. We have a sound, and it's not for every song.

Is it evolving?

The older I get, the better I get as an artist, as a singer, as a song selector. Trying to be a trendsetter or a trailblazer isn't enough. You have to be focused with it, be who you are. Then, once people catch up, I don't want to be doing the same things. I want to experiment with sounds and effects on guitar, find songs that are us, but haven't been done before.

We have a song called "Little More Summertime," and the arrangement we've done on that is almost taking songs that are '80s rock songs, but it sounds different. We mess with stuff; then, when we go back, we realize that was what we wanted.

So with an album coming in the fall, Fenway Park with Kid Rock coming up, not to mention Entertainer of the Year, has anything shifted for you?

It put me in a different place. I want to prove to people we won and it wasn't a fluke. I don't feel like I have to prove myself, but I do want to prove that the award wasn't just something that happened.

I come from a sports background. I am very driven, very competitive. I don't care if we're playing Monopoly, whatever. That's why Entertainer was so important to me! It says to the ones that won: "You're the best." That's why they got the award. And I never played it down. I always let people know it.

If it didn't happen, you know, we'd have made it work. It's been a different career because of what and where we are. But it was almost like a shot of adrenaline for me. As much as I thought people weren't paying attention, well, maybe they were. And it's funny. I always said I just wanted to get it once. But now that I got it once, I lied! I want it again. Winning lit a real fire under me.