



COUNTRY ★ STRONG

SINGER **JASON ALDEAN** WAS ON STAGE IN LAS VEGAS WHEN THE SHOOTING STARTED AT THE ROUTE 91 HARVEST FESTIVAL. SIX MONTHS LATER, HE'S GOT A NEW ALBUM—AND PLENTY TO SAY. BY NOLAN FEENEY @NOLANFEENEY



GROWING UP IN A WORKING-CLASS FAMILY IN MACON, Ga., Jason Aldean could hardly afford tickets to see his favorite baseball team, the Atlanta Braves. Now the country singer is about to headline their home turf. On a near-freezing day at SunTrust Park this month, Aldean held a small press conference to detail his upcoming July 21 show. For a seasoned superstar who has 17 country airplay No. 1s to his name and is about to release his eighth album, *Rearview Town*, on April 13, playing large venues isn't new. But it's not every day you get to perform for roughly 40,000 people in what is essentially a hometown gig—or persuade Hootie & the Blowfish to reunite as your opening act. Looking out onto the empty field, Aldean, 41, called this concert, along with a 2013 performance at the University of Georgia stadium, his two “career-defining” shows.

Right now, however, there's a third career-defining show that's not so celebratory. On Oct. 1 last year, during Aldean's closing set at the Route 91 Harvest festival on the Las Vegas strip, a gunman opened fire on the crowd, killing 58 people and injuring more than 700 in the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history. Talking about that night is still hard for Aldean—when Vegas first comes up during a sit-down interview with EW later that day, he looks down at the table and pauses, his signature cowboy hat covering his face—and he's still figuring out what his role in the conversation about gun safety should be. “I never want people to feel like I'm exploiting that situation and trying to hawk my records,” he says, seated in a Braves' break room deep inside the stadium. Here, Aldean reflects on his groundbreaking career, returning to normalcy after Vegas, and how he broke out of a creative rut to make his new album.



You helped kick open the door for country artists to incorporate hard rock and hip-hop influences into their music. At times that made you a polarizing figure in the genre. Do you feel more understood now?

I think so. Early on, people were figuring out what we were, and in a lot of ways I was figuring it out too. We were just doing what we wanted to do: If it was a hip-hop song, okay. If it was a rock & roll song, okay. There were no rules. When we were putting out songs like [2010's] “Dirt Road Anthem,” there were a lot of people going, “What is *that* on the radio?” Now you hear guys talking fast and trying these little raps on songs. It's cool if people like what you're doing enough to want to emulate it. When you get into the music business, everyone asks you: “What makes you different? Why should I sign you?” You do those things that set you apart, and when everybody else starts doing them, you have to go, “Okay, I don't want to just keep up with the pack, what's our next move?” I like keeping people guessing. And that's where I feel like

I slipped a little bit on the last couple of records—I got a little too relaxed.

How did you fix that with this record?

It wasn't so much about trying to change the sound. We got into this rut where we were cutting really good songs, but they weren't songs that had that extra *thing* about them. They were hit songs, but they weren't mega songs. I was more conscious of that on this record. Songs I probably would have cut on the last couple of records I didn't cut for this record.

What's one of the new songs you're proudest of?

“Rearview Town.” It's a dark, haunting song that just sounds badass. Part of the reason I named the album that was because it's a metaphor for putting all the bad s--- that weighs you down behind you and looking down the road to the better things ahead. Over the last five years or so, my professional and

personal life has just been a roller coaster for me.

Do you consider Vegas a part of that?

To an extent. I don't know if you can lump that in with everything else. But that was a big one, and it took a toll, having to get back up and dust yourself off and play shows. I don't know if we were ready to do that. We wanted to, but it was a matter of, “Will my legs let me walk up there and do this tonight?”

You gave a short but impassioned speech at your first concert back in Tulsa that month: “People are gonna continue to try to...make us live in fear and be scared. And to those people, I say, ‘F--- you.’” Did you feel an obligation to say something?

Yeah. You could've heard a damn pin drop in that arena, which is not normal. It was quiet as a damn church. I wanted to let people know that by playing, we weren't trying to be disrespectful. It was important for us to get back to normalcy: I did *SNL*, and then I went back to Vegas and

visited people in the hospital, but mostly I went underground and didn't really want to talk about it or deal with it. I felt like it wasn't appropriate for me to have my face on every news channel.

But now Vegas is probably going to come up in every interview you do, even though your record was mostly done last fall and doesn't touch on it. How are you dealing with that kind of attention?

I'll be honest with you, man, it's not something I enjoy talking about. It's not something I choose to keep reliving over and over. I'm just hoping that on this album cycle, we talk about whatever people want to know so we can go, “Okay, there's nothing left to say, let's focus on whatever we do next from here on out.”

Country music has long been associated with conservative politics, but in the wake of the Vegas shooting, some country musicians reconsidered their views and called for stricter gun control. I noticed, though, that in statements and interviews

Jason Aldean performing in Macon, Ga., in 2017; on the *Today* show in January



you gave after the shooting, you de-emphasized politics, saying that finding a solution shouldn't be a matter of Republicans versus Democrats; it should be everyone united against hate.

I'm not a politician. I'm not trying to push my own agenda. If I say that I believe this, I'm gonna piss off half of the people, and if I say I believe that, I'm gonna piss off the other half. I have my opinions, but what the hell do I know? I think everybody needs to sit down, stop pushing their own agendas, and figure out what will make it safer. When people can't go to a damn movie or a concert and not worry about somebody shooting the place up, there's a flaw in the system.

It must be hard to navigate what to do with your platform. You only signed up to be an entertainer, but now you're facing this pressure to be a spokesperson on an issue.

People make the case that I should stand up for [a particular policy change]. It's not my place. I have my theories on what I think could help, but I'm not a pro. I think part of the issue is kids at home playing virtual reality games where they're shooting people all day. They sit down for hours and hours, and that starts to become actual reality. Get out and throw a ball, you know what I'm saying? I think that's part of the problem, but I don't know.

Let's end this interview on a lighter note: How has your relationship with your older material changed over the years?

If you go back and listen to the songs I was cutting on my first two albums, I would never cut those songs now. I hadn't lived enough to know what the hell I was singing about. As an artist, you get older and start being drawn to songs that are more age-appropriate, songs that you can relate to more. I just turned 41, so I still feel like I got a long way to go before I'm an old man. Maybe I'll still be rapping at 50. I ain't much of a damn rapper anyway. I just play one on the record here and there.

I think you can see that growth you're talking about on a new song like “Better at Being Who I Am.” When you sing lines like, “Your world and mine are worlds apart/This ‘square peg, round hole’ thing’s too hard... I’m better at being who I am,” that sounds like a later-in-life realization you don’t have at 20. It's probably the most well-written song I've ever recorded. A lot of times you mold yourself into being something that you think somebody else wants in order to please them. You're never going to be happy doing that. You have to be yourself and do your own thing, because if you're not happy, it ain't ever gonna happen with anybody else. There's nothing special about that song, there's no bells and whistles on it. Just a great lyric, a great melody—honest and to the point.

ALDEAN: RICK DIAMOND/GETTY IMAGES; THE TODAY SHOW: NBC