

Q&A



ALAN JACKSON

After decades of hits, country's coolest character wants to make good music

GEORGIA NATIVE ALAN JACKSON'S smooth baritone and sharp songwriting have been a constant presence on country radio since 1989. The songs on his 17th studio album (and 16th with producer Keith Stegall), *Thirty Miles West*, range from the rollicking "Dixie Highway" to the tender "When I Saw You Leaving (For Nisey)," about wife Denise's recent battle with cancer. "Hopefully my music stands for itself," says Jackson, 53. "When you get to my age, you get a little wiser about things. You realize the most important thing you want to be remembered for is being a good man. A good man who made good music."

How has your writing evolved?

As a writer, you're always writing about stuff you live and see. As life goes on, your perspective changes. I'm writing about things I wouldn't have when I was 25. It's evolved that way, but I really don't know if I'm any better or worse than I was a long time ago.

What is your process?

I'm like a kid waiting until the night before the test to study. I'm always jotting down hooks and little pieces of melodies. I rarely ever sit

and write a complete song unless some big inspiration hits me. Most of the time I keep all this stuff packaged up. When I know I've got an album coming up, I start trying to piece it all together and write. Most of my best ideas and melodies come to me when my mind's relaxed.

Was it hard to write "When I Saw You Leaving (For Nisey)"?

When we found out Denise had cancer about a year ago, that song started creeping out—it was everything I was feeling. I never played it for her or anybody else until we went into the studio, and it was the hardest thing we ever recorded. The musicians on my records know us both, and we could hardly get through the first couple passes. It was pretty emotional. But for me, writing about things like that is therapeutic. It's been that way my whole life.

How do you and Keith Stegall relate?

We trust each other. Keith's well-rounded. He's been an artist who's had radio hits, written great songs for multiple formats and plays several instruments. Because he's been on the other side of the microphone,

he knows how to get what he needs out of the pickers and me as a singer. A lot of times you can beat a song to death trying to get it perfect, but then there's no feeling. Keith knows how to bring in emotion. We always try to make nice-sounding records, but we're not so stiff about making them technically perfect.

Do you still want hits?

I've been lucky to have such great success that the labels have pretty much left me alone to make my own records. We've always consulted on the singles, but I've been pretty free to do what I want to do. Anybody who makes a record would love for it to go to the top of the charts. That's why you make them—to reach people. Not many artists have had a career this long and are still on the radio. I just feel lucky to still be here. Anything that works now is gravy. I don't feel any pressure to be at the top. I've done everything and won every award you can imagine 10 times. There's hardly anything left for me to accomplish, so it's almost relaxing to be able to kick back, make music I like and hope it works.

—Juli Thanki

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