





















demonstrated their staunch support throughout the season. As *American Idol* paid for only one parent to accompany a contestant under eighteen, the family's neighbors raised money so that both of her parents could travel to Los Angeles to be with their daughter. Later in the season, Rossville dedicated May 14, 2011, as Lauren Alaina Day.

Throughout the competition, Alaina sang such tunes as "Hello, Goodbye" by the Beatles, "You Keep Me Hangin' On" by the Supremes, "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman" by Aretha Franklin, and "Any Man of Mine" by Shania Twain. By the final round, which aired on May 25, 2011, the field of thirteen finalists had been whittled down to just her and Scotty McCreery, another young country singer. During the final show, Alaina sang a duet with former *Idol* winner Carrie Underwood, a personal hero of hers, before being named runner-up to McCreery. Following her second-place finish, she told Jennifer Still for *Digital Spy*, "I think everything happens for a reason and God has different plans for me. There are hundreds of thousands of people out there who would love to be second place in *American Idol* and I'm fortunate to get as far as I did."

### WILDFLOWER

Following *American Idol*, Alaina was signed to a record deal with Mercury Nashville, 19 Recordings, and Interscope. She released her first single, "Like My Mother Does," in May 2011, which peaked at number thirty-six on the Billboard Hot Country Songs Chart. On October 11, 2011, she released her debut album, *Wildflower*, which garnered lukewarm reviews. "Lauren Alaina is at her best on *Wildflower* when she's selling teenage stories of love, loss and freedom," Billie Dukes wrote for *Taste of Country* on the day of its release. "At such a young age, it'd be unrealistic to expect her to deliver an instant classic. *Wildflower* is the musical equivalent of puppy love. It comes on strong but doesn't stand the wear and tear of time and repeated listens." Despite the criticism, Dukes conceded, "Alaina's debut project shows she has plenty of potential and will be capable of big things in the next few years." *Wildflower* peaked at number two on the Billboard Top Country Album Chart.

Such mixed feelings on the part of critics did not prevent Alaina from being invited to perform at the Grand Ole Opry, on such television programs as the *Ellen DeGeneres Show*, and in front of President Barack Obama at the White House for a 2011 PBS special. Additionally, she sang the national anthem at the 2011 Thanksgiving Day game between the Detroit Lions and Green Bay Packers, and she performed a song on the televised *American Country New Year's Eve Live* in 2011. Alaina remained in demand

as an opening act throughout 2012, opening for Sugarland on their In the Hands of Fans Tour and appearing on the My Kinda Party Tour with Jason Aldean and Luke Bryan. She later opened for Underwood and Alan Jackson on their respective tours in 2016.

### ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Alaina has acknowledged that she was bulimic throughout much of her teenage years and early career. "I was really sick. I don't know that person, I can't believe that was me," she told Jessie Van Amburg for *Time* (10 May 2016). "I just desperately wanted to be thin. . . . I was obsessed with it, which it was ridiculous because I had everything going for me. I was following my dream. Everything I wanted at the time, I was getting." She credits her mother's advice to look in the mirror each day and find positive things to focus on for her gradual recovery and healthier attitudes. In addition to her own eating disorder, Alaina was forced to contend with her father's alcoholism. Although he ultimately achieved sobriety, her parents divorced in 2013. Both remarried—her mother to Sam Ramker, who had been one of her father's good friends.

Alaina included these struggles when writing the songs for her second album, *Road Less Traveled*, which was released on January 27, 2017. Discussing all she had been through in the years before the album's release, Alaina told Taylor Weatherby for *Billboard* (8 Mar. 2017), "Those things gave me my story and made me who I am. I would go through those things a million times to feel the way I feel now and know the things I know now about myself. I really feel like I found myself, and when I found myself, I found the music along with it."

In a review of the album for *Taste of Country* (27 Jan. 2017), Cillea Houghton wrote, "Her vocals have matured vastly since her *Idol* days, exhibiting genuine emotion and pure control in her singing abilities." In particular, Alaina was rewarded for her work on the album's title track and its subsequent music video, which won the CMT Music Award for Breakthrough Video of the Year in 2017. Houghton concluded: "*Road Less Traveled* stands out at the core with its lyrics, all about empowerment, positivity and loving yourself no matter what you're faced with in life—valuable lessons to learn from a young artist who's managed to overcome adversity and turn it into art that aims to empower us all." The song "Road Less Traveled" also inspired a television movie of the same name, which starred Alaina and premiered on CMT on November 10, 2017.

The same year Alaina was featured on the song "What Ifs" by childhood friend and fellow country singer Kane Brown. The song spent five weeks at number one on the Billboard Hot

Country Songs Chart, and the music video for the song won Alaina and Brown the 2018 CMT Music Award for Collaborative Video of the Year. Alaina was also awarded the 2018 ACM Award for New Female Vocalist of the Year.

### PERSONAL LIFE

Known for her commitment to philanthropy, Alaina traveled to Pyeongchang, South Korea, for the Special Olympics World Games in 2013, as an ambassador for Project Unify. In 2017 she founded her own charitable organization, My Kinda People. Named after the title of one of her singles, the nonprofit supports special-needs children and other causes.

In July 2018 Alaina became engaged to model Alexander Hopkins, whom she began dating in 2012.

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—Mari Rich

## Jason Aldean

**Date of birth:** February 28, 1977

**Occupation:** Singer

Country music star Jason Aldean is known for a lengthy string of top-ten singles on the Billboard Hot Country Songs chart such as "Big Green Tractor," "Dirt Road Anthem," "Fly Over States," "Take a Little Ride," "Night Train," "Lights Come On," "A Little More Summertime," "Any Ol' Barstool," and "You Make It Easy." Aldean has taken home a slew of honors—including a Country Music Association (CMA) Award for Album of the Year for his 2010 hit record *My Kinda Party* and Academy of Country Music (ACM) Awards for Entertainer of the Year in 2016, 2017, and 2018.

Despite those accolades, some observers have pointed out that the innovations he has brought to the country genre are not universally beloved. "With his hard rock and hip-hop influenced brand of country music, the Macon, Georgia, native is, to his detractors, the embodiment of how far country has drifted from its roots," Joseph Hudak wrote for *Rolling Stone* (28 Nov. 2016). Still, Aldean has made an undeniable mark on his industry. "We did help to shape the sound of country music for a generation," he told Hudak about his own work as well as more progressive peers such as Luke Bryan. "There is somebody right now sitting in a room listening to our songs trying to figure out how to play them. They'll be the next wave of country superstars."

Long a fixture on the country music scene, Aldean came to widespread notice even beyond



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