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POP MUSIC REVIEW

Jackson's old-school ways make the grade

The veteran country singer roams skillfully through his material at the Nokia Theatre.

By MIKAEL WOOD

Implicit in the name of Alan Jackson's current road show, the *Keepin' It Country* tour, is the idea that this veteran country star is engaged in some resistance. It presents Jackson as a guy defending himself and the tradition he embodies against pressure to change.

But who (or what) is applying that pressure?

One possibility is age. At 56, Jackson has less company than he used to in Nashville, where he came up as part of a pack of slick neo-traditionalists — "hat acts," they were often called, for their omnipresent cowboy hats — that also included singers such as Mark Chesnut and Clint Black.

Today many of his former peers have retired from the road, as George Strait did last year, or ventured outside the country mainstream, as Garth Brooks did in November with his pointedly titled comeback album, "Man Against Machine."



BRANDY CLARK adds a soft-rock touch.

Jackson's tour, which stopped in at the Nokia Theatre in Los Angeles on Friday night for a sold-out concert, might be an assurance that he won't be next to disappear.

Then again, perhaps the would-be disrupter is Jackson himself — specifically, the eagerness he's shown over the past few years to experiment. His recent albums have included forays into gospel and bluegrass as well as a collaboration with the Americana queen Alison

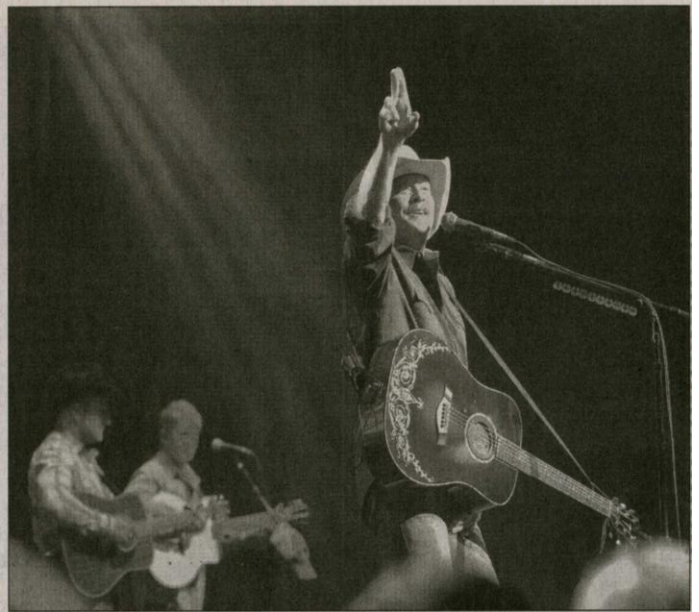
Krauss.

Yet the singer all but ignored that work in Friday's show, which he said came 25 years to the day after the release of his debut album. Like Jackson, country music as a whole has broadened during that time, looking beyond its established borders for new sounds and attitudes; right now, the genre's biggest young stars are known for borrowing elements of hip-hop and R&B and for boosting the music's energy to arena-ready levels.

Here, though, Jackson seemed determined to roll back those changes, focusing on his older material — and handling his more recent songs with a stoic efficiency — as though he were willing a return to an earlier era. He was keepin' it country, in other words, by yesterday's standards.

Which hardly meant the performance lacked variety or that it felt like a bloodless reenactment; indeed, it showed how demanding those old standards could be.

Backed by an expert eight-piece band, Jackson roamed skillfully from crisp party songs such as "Good Time" and "Chattahoochee" to dreamy ballads like "Here in the Real World" and "I'd



Photographs by KATIE FALKENBERG Los Angeles Times

ALAN JACKSON has shown an eagerness to experiment, but in his show at the Nokia he seemed intent on rolling back some of the changes in country music.

Love You All Over Again," which he said he'd written for his wife on their 10th anniversary while he sat in a hotel room on tour in Pine Bluff, Ark.

That kind of detail elevates many of Jackson's songs to a complexity that isn't necessarily promised by their subject matter. "Remember When," for instance, might've been a corny assortment of family memories, easy pickings with Jackson's middle-aged crowd.

But then there's this line, which he sang at the Nokia with just a touch of pain in his voice: "Remember when the sound of little feet was

the music we danced to week to week."

Jackson was equally moving in "Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)," his meditation on the events of Sept. 11, 2001.

"Did you lay down at night and think of tomorrow? / Go out and buy you a gun?" he asked. "Did you turn off that violent ol' movie you were watching? / And turn on 'I Love Lucy' reruns?"

It's hard to think of a songwriter capable of packing more shades of emotion into four lines.

That Jackson sang these sophisticated words with so little flash makes him some-

thing of an A-list misfit in the age of Luke Bryan and Florida Georgia Line. But that's a position he seemed to be signaling his acceptance of with his choice of opening acts.

Up first, Brandy Clark embroidered her well-observed character studies with gentle soft-rock touches happily out of step with the boot-stomping anthems of Miranda Lambert (for whom Clark has written).

And though he's got as many tunes about drinking as the next bro-country lunk, Jon Pardi flashed a sly sense of humor that let you know he was in on the joke.

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