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# Clay still finds home welcome

## In Raleigh, the singer gets degree of support that eludes him elsewhere



Hometown boy Clay Aiken croons for fans at the N.C. State Fair during a concert that sold out in minutes.

Staff Photos by Scott Lewis

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By **MATT EHLERS**, Staff Writer

RALEIGH -- In this town, the man can do no wrong.

So when the music started and the smoke began to seep from beneath the fairgrounds stage, the women waved their arms and shook their behinds.

The collective scream from the overwhelmingly female crowd -- lots of middle-aged women with their daughters -- bounced off the glass walls of Dorton Arena. Then Clay Aiken appeared, putting his twist on U2's 1987 hit "Where the Streets Have No Name." All seemed right in their world.

It's been a year since the Raleigh native's debut album "Measure of a Man" hit stores. The sheen of "American Idol," with its weekly TV appearances and constant hype, has faded.

But the second part of Aiken's career is just beginning. Whether he will keep the momentum he's built over the last year and a half, or vanish like so many other pop stars, is anybody's guess. He has plenty to keep him busy in the meantime.

His inspirational book, "Learning to Sing: Hearing the Music in Your Life," will be released in November, along with a new Christmas album. An Aiken Christmas special will air Dec. 8 on NBC.

Ask his fans what they think about his future, and they'll tell you they're following Aiken wherever his career takes them.

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"I think the hoopla's dying down already, but he has lots more outlets to explore," said Jenny Hudson, 29, an elementary teacher from Clayton who took half a day off work to attend the show.

Fans still buy his first record, "Measure of a Man," 2.6 million copies so far, according to Nielsen SoundScan. His two-track single, "Solitaire/The Way," is No. 12 on the Hot 100 singles sales chart in the latest Billboard magazine, its 29th week on the chart, even without major Top 40 radio airplay.

And Aiken's a draw on the road. An average of 4,539 people attended his concerts during the past three months, said Gary Bongiovanni, editor of Pollstar, a publication that covers that concert-tour industry. "He's not selling out every city, but he's doing respectable business for a new artist," he said.

By comparison, the "American Idol" summer package tour, which featured High Point native Fantasia Barrino, averaged an attendance of 5,358 people.

About 12,000 attended Monday's shows, which earned Aiken's tour \$200,000. Aiken was supposed to do one N.C. State Fair concert, but when the evening show sold out in about 10 minutes, organizers added a matinee performance. That one sold out just as quickly.

#### Slow sales elsewhere

On the other side of the state, fans haven't been as receptive. Aiken played a show Saturday at Paramount Carowinds amusement park outside Charlotte. Park officials wouldn't release attendance figures but said the amphitheater seats 13,000. Tickets were still available the day before the show.

During an interview last week, Aiken expressed his gratitude that the two Raleigh shows sold out so quickly. But he also wondered about the Charlotte show.

"It's kind of amazing to me that we could do so well in Raleigh and then, what, just 200 miles down the road, not be able to completely sell out yet," he said.

It's too early to tell whether reality-show-bred pop stars can make a long-term go of it, Bongiovanni said.

"Let's face it, very few of the singers who have gone through 'American Idol' have emerged as artists whose careers have lasted more than a few minutes," he said. "It'll be interesting to see if we're still talking about Clay Aiken a year from now."

Kelly Clarkson, the show's first-year winner, seems to be beating that trend. Her first album, "Thankful," went multiplatinum. Her latest single, "Breakaway," was a late-summer hit.

Perhaps Aiken, the runner-up from "Idol" second's year, will follow her lead.

One factor working against Aiken is his lukewarm reception from mainstream radio. Pop stations gave some spins to "This is the Night" and "Invisible," but Aiken has not yet had a breakout Top 40 radio hit.

**Sean Ross, vice president of music and programming for Edison Media Research**, isn't sure how much that matters. He remembers e-mail he received from a 50-year-old woman who said she'd listened to nothing but National Public Radio for years until Aiken came along.

"If you can put together a career of a million of those people, then what does it necessarily matter if you're not on the radio?" Ross said.

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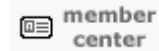
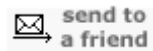
The state fair concerts Monday were the last two of his summerlong solo tour. For Aiken, the shows were special, a homecoming, a stop off in the part of the world where he grew up, where the fans are especially fired up.

"Hello, Raleigh, North Carolina," he yelled. "Whoo!"

They yelled right back.

And they likely always will.

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