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## Aiken for Some Country

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On July 29, Norfolk-based country-rock troubadour Mike Aiken released *Hula Girl Highway*, his much anticipated follow-up to the critically-acclaimed *Just Add Salt*. Where Aiken's national debut album introduced him to the country music world, *Hula Girl Highway* is sure to place him on Nashville's inner-loop radar.

*Port Folio Weekly* caught up with Aiken last week for the following interview.

### How would you compare *Hula Girl Highway* to *Just Add Salt*?

I've spent the last year or so touring more with a band than a solo/duo act and I put that into my writing. It's more of a band oriented CD. In fact, most of the tracks were done in one or two takes. I'd done the "I've played all the tracks" thing before and wanted the feel you can get when you put a group of handpicked players together in one room and give it room to move. The energy feeds off of itself and if you give it the latitude to move magic can happen.

The concept of the *Hula Girl Highway* has been in my head for a long time. When I was a kid I saw the movie *South Pacific* and that was it for me—the sea, boats, warm water, music and hula girls.

This CD became a large part of a dream for me. I found myself signed to a good label with access to Nashville studios and musicians and with enough success to warrant putting out a new CD. We picked a funky old studio on Music Row and tracked on 2-inch tape. I wanted that analog tape warmth for this CD and had the chance to do it that way.

Between *Just Add Salt* and *Hula Girl*, I wasn't looking to reinvent the wheel and compromise who I am musically, I just wanted to ramp it up a bit. To do that, I recorded the project in Nashville.

**"Jagger and Jones" is the obvious choice to pitch to commercial radio stations. How did this tune come about?**

The recording story of "Jagger and Jones" is that due to having my van broken into the first night (in Nashville), Amy and I pulled in to record but I didn't get to record that tune during the studio time I had reserved. Plus the song lyric wasn't quite finished. Three weeks later I was back to start mixing and managed to get the band back together and used a studio from 9:00 a.m. to 9:50 a.m. I had the song charted and we did one rehearsal run through and tracked it in one take. Everybody was diggin' the tune and played their asses off. The engineer played it back said, "We've got 10 minutes, you want to do another take?" I finished writing the lyric in my bus at lunch and tracked the final vocals at 2:00 that afternoon and had the song mixed by 4:30 the same day.

**Has your business relationship with Nashville-based Aspirion Records been beneficial?**

Very. It's been a real asset to have the knowledge and experience base to pull from and bounce ideas off of. There is making music and there is the music business, and to be successful you certainly need both.

One of the things that was a pleasant surprise from the label was the push not to go too Nashville (contemporary) country. I was expecting the opposite. I had been urged to move to Nashville from other sources for the past couple of years. But the Aspirion line was "Stay on that boat, keep writing and being true to yourself. That's why we signed you."

They strongly urged me to come to Nashville to record *Hula Girl Highway*. I'm very pleased with the outcome.

**What are your plans in support of the new CD?**

I'll be touring as much as possible to support the CD. I'm a road dog for sure. Amy and I are not too comfortable being in one place for too long. The advance single, "Find Me," charted last week. With the release date being July 29, more dates are rolling in. At this point we're booked in Alabama, Virginia, Ohio, New York, Florida, California, and we'll be back in Europe this fall. As far as Tidewater dates go, I'm doing a 3-piece acoustic show at the Circle restaurant (Portsmouth) on August 13; a date not to be missed is October 3 at Kimball Theater in Williamsburg, and then Smithfield Music's annual Aiken and Friends Fest on October 4.