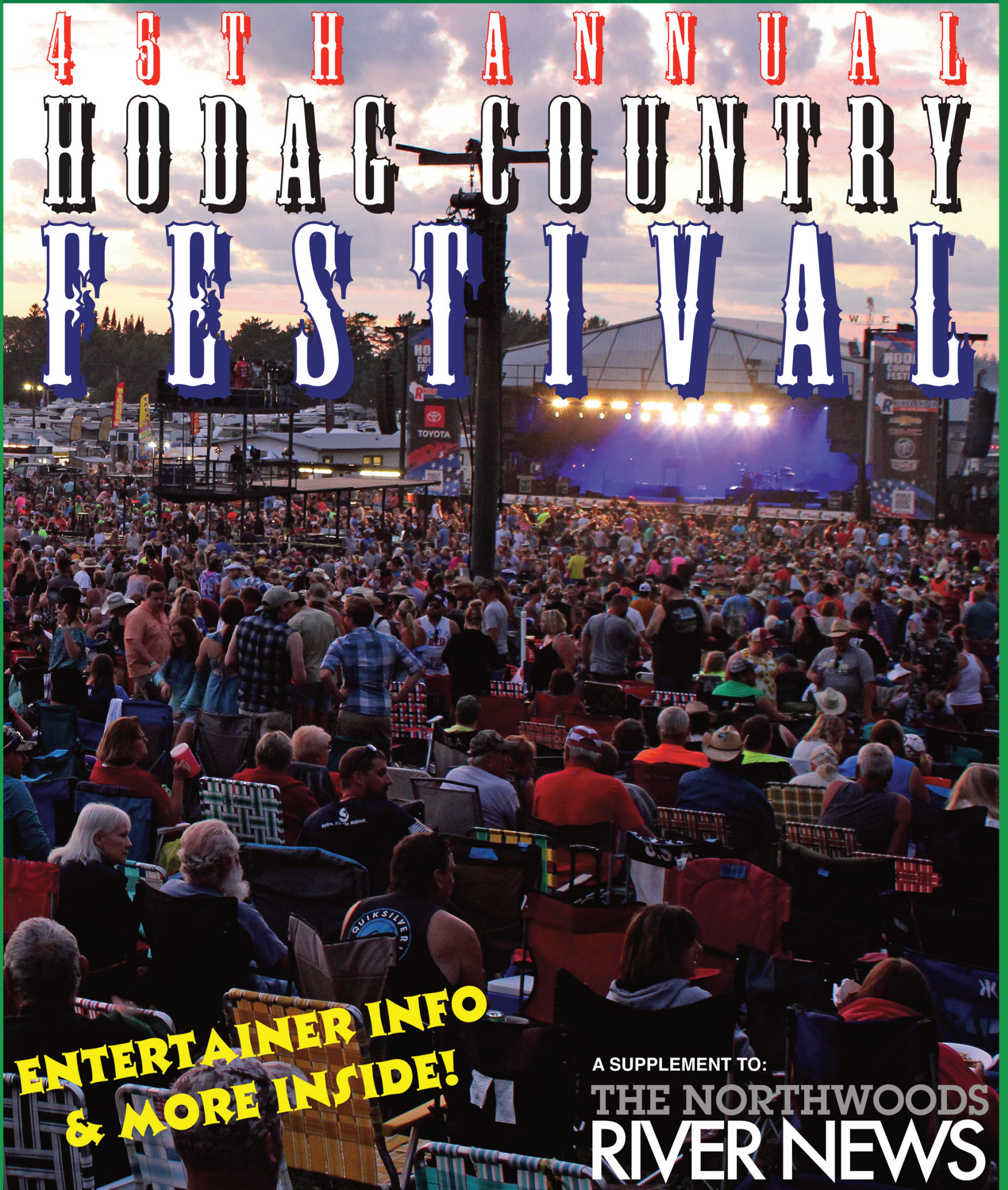


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45TH ANNUAL
HODAG COUNTRY
FESTIVAL

ENTERTAINER INFO
& MORE INSIDE!

A SUPPLEMENT TO:
THE NORTHWOODS
RIVER NEWS

JULY 6-9, 2023 • RHINELANDER, WI

CONTENTS

HODAG GUIDE
A to Z guide to the Festival ... 2

MAIN STAGE LINEUPS:
Thursday 5
Friday 6
Saturday & Sunday 8

ENTERTAINER PROFILES:
Brett Westgrove 5
Jordan Blanchard 6
Maddie & Tae 7
LOCASH 8

CHAIR LINE DOS & DONTS
2023 Rules 9

ABOUT THE COVER

The sun sets as Hodag Country Festival goes prepare for Saturday night's final show during the 2022 festival.

TREVOR GREENE FOR THE RIVER NEWS

HAPPY HODAG!

Your A to Z Guide to the 45th Hodag Country Festival

BY RIVER NEWS STAFF

Since its inaugural event in August of 1978, the Hodag Country Festival in Rhinelander has brought the best of the best country music stars to fans in the Northwoods. This year is no different. Below is an A-to-Z guide to this year's event.

A Is for Ashley. Recent Grammy winner Ashley McBryde is making a return visit to the Hodag. She has a new album coming out this fall called "The Devil I Know."

B Is for Beverages. Beer, soda, cocktails are available throughout the Hodag Country Festival grounds. Drink responsibly!

C Is for Cars. If you're just coming for the day, you'll need to park in the overflow parking area. Follow River Road past the three main gates. Drive safely!

D Is for Dean. Country music mainstay Billy Dean will take the main stage on Sunday afternoon, right after Drake Milligan.

E Is for Entertainment. There is no shortage of entertainment at the Hodag Country Festival. Take some time to walk the grounds and check out the creative camping set-ups.

F Is for Fireworks. All types of fireworks are prohibited on festival grounds.

G Is for Grub. Whatever you're craving, you can find it at the Hodag Country Festival. No one ever goes hungry.

See A to Z... page 3

OFFICIAL SPONSOR



FRIDAY, JULY 7TH IS HODAG HANKIE DAY!

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A to Z

From page 2

H Is for Hardy. The versatile one-name musician is the headliner on Saturday night.

I Is for Injured. In case of injury, there are first responders located throughout the Hodag grounds. Deputies, security officers and EMTs are always moving around the grounds.

J Is for Jump. Jump into the line in front of the main stage if you want to get closer to your favorite performer, but please follow the directions of the security staff.

K Is for Kick. Kick back and enjoy the show. For a few precious hours, you don't have to think about work or what's happening at home.

L Is for LOCASH. The fan-favorite duo will close out the festivities on Sunday evening.

M Is for McBride. Make sure you're in your chair on Friday evening when Martina McBride shows off her pure soprano vocals.

N Is for Neal. No explanation needed. If you don't understand why Neal McCoy is so beloved among Hodagers, just wait until he hits the stage.

O Is for Options. There's a perfect souvenir for everyone. Just keep browsing the vendor tables until you find the right keepsake. And you can never have too many cowboy hats!



FILE PHOTO

Neal McCoy, aka "Mr. Hodag."

See **A to Z** . . . page 4



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A to Z

From page 3

P Is for Pavilion. Don't bypass the pavilion. You never know when the next country superstar will take the stage. For a complete schedule, go to www.hodag.com/pavilion_entertainment.shtml.

Q Is for Questions. If you have questions about the Hodag Country Festival, visit the festival's website at www.hodag.com.

R Is for Rules. It's always a good idea to consult the rules and regulations section on the festival website.

S Is for Showers. Let's face it, you're going to get dirty. If you don't want to shower on the grounds, Rhinelander High School will be opening its doors each day for showers and breakfast.

T Is for Tanya. Country music legend Tanya Tucker is not to be missed. She'll take the main stage on Saturday evening.

U Is for Unique. If you've never been to the Hodag, get ready to see some truly unique costumes. The creativity knows no bounds and it's all in good fun.

V Is for Visit. Make sure you visit the city of Rhinelander and surrounding areas when there is down time. The Hodag city has a lot to offer!

W Is for Wisconsin. There are two Wisconsin residents scheduled to hit the main stage this year, Rib Mountain's Brett Westgrove and Green Bay's Jordan Blanchard.

X Is for X. X marks the spot of the Hodag Country Festival on maps. Or, if you're like most people and are using a maps app on your phone, punch this address into get to the fes-

tival grounds: **4270 River Road, Rhinelander, Wisconsin**. If you get lost, just ask anyone in town!

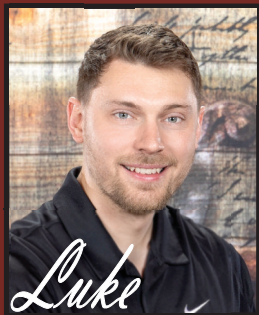
Y Is for Yell. Let the performers know how much you are enjoying the show!

Z Is for Zap. Don't forget bug spray. The mosquitos of northern Wisconsin are not to be taken lightly.



TREVOR GREENE FOR THE RIVER NEWS

Festival attendees raise their drinks to fellow fans as they pass by.



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FILE PHOTO

Rib Mountain native Brett Westgrove will take the main stage at approximately 5:45 p.m. Thursday, July 6.

Westgrove relishes performing in Wisconsin

BY RIVER NEWS STAFF

Brett Westgrove is becoming a regular at the Hodag Country Festival.

The Rib Mountain native first performed on the main stage in 2019 and hasn't missed a Hodag since.

"Wisconsin is one of my favorite places to play, hands down," he told the *River News* in 2021. "I've been into music all my life, since I was 2. I have photos of me playing guitar. However, I never actually performed in Wisconsin until years after I left. I never did the bar

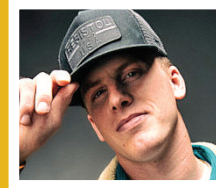
scenes or a band that played outside school functions. Coming back now and doing that, I get to experience what that crowd is like for the first time and I love it. I announce a show in Wisconsin and the excitement is huge."

For those not familiar with Westgrove, who is still fairly new on the country music scene having moved to Nashville in 2017, the country music artist has said he draws his influences from some of the 1990 country music stars such as Garth Brooks, Alan Jackson, Brooks &

THURSDAY ENTERTAINMENT

JORDAN BLANCHARD | 5 P.M.

Jordan Blanchard is a Nashville recording artist from right here in Packerland. The Green Bay native's first single dropped in 2022 and accumulated over 100,000 streams in its first month. He is one of two Wisconsinites to take the main stage on Day 1.



BRETT WESTGROVE | 5:45 P.M.

Brett Westgrove will follow Blanchard on the main stage at approximately 5:45 p.m. Westgrove grew up in Rib Mountain but now makes his home in Nashville. He is known for such songs as "Somewhere Town", "Beautiful Crazy" and "Truck Bed's Good For."

NEAL MCCOY | 7 P.M.

Mr. Hodag himself, Neal McCoy, defines the word entertainer. Just ask anyone who has ever seen him perform at the Hodag. Sit back and enjoy, or get up and sing along, as McCoy moves through his extensive songbook including "Wink" and "Billy's Got His Beer Goggles On."



TYLER HUBBARD | 9 P.M.

Tyler Hubbard is most well-known for his work as one-half of the duo Florida Georgia Line but he sure can get a crowd rocking all on his own. Fans can expect to hear Hubbard's first two No. 1 songs as a solo artist, "5 Foot 9" and "Dancin' In The Country."



Dunn and Joe Diffie.

"It's actually all over the place when I describe my music," Westgrove said in 2019. "The best way to put it is modern country. If you look at my Spotify, it's a lot of '90s country up to current stuff, mixed in with some electro pop, and top 10 pop. So yeah, it's pretty extreme."

Westgrove says having a festival such as the Hodag — that offers a spotlight to newer, up-and-coming artists — is a huge blessing.

"As an independent rising artist it

can be very hard to get into festivals and shows that are bigger and that's so critical for growing a brand," Westgrove said. "When I first met the Hodag crew and they first talked to me about playing, I was so excited about it because it's hard, it's really hard to get those opportunities. Especially because there are so many people trying to capture that. So to have someone trying to help new, rising artists and on top of it being home state show, it's something really special."

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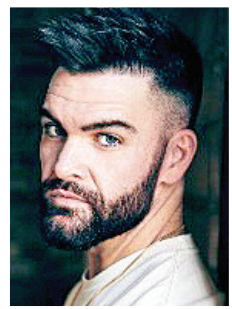
FRIDAY ENTERTAINMENT

IAN MUNSICK
5 P.M.



Wyoming native Ian Munsick will transport Hodag fans to the Rocky Mountains, courtesy of his roots-pop sound and odes to the wide open spaces he knows so well. Fans can expect to hear songs from his albums *Coyote Cry* and *White Buffalo*.

DYLAN SCOTT
7 P.M.



Louisiana's Dylan Scott has the second slot on Friday evening. He'll be living his best life as he performs such songs as "Nobody", "My Girl" and "Can't Have Mine (Find You A Girl)."

MARTINA McBRIDE | 9 P.M.

Friday night's headliner is none other than Martina McBride. Her pure soprano voice has been wowing crowds since the early '90s. It's impossible to choose a favorite Martina song but some contenders include "Happy Girl", "Cry on the Shoulder of the Road" and "Independence Day."



Jordan Blanchard has always been an original

By **Beckie Gaskill**
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

Jordan Blanchard has always been an original. He was a self-described "troublemaker" as a child, but always kept true to himself and who he was. That pattern continued after he developed a love of music at a young age, learning to play keyboard by eighth grade. He also played saxophone in fifth grade and was in the jazz band throughout middle and high school. It was not until he was 20 years old, though, that he picked up a guitar.

At the time, playing at the Hodag Country Festival was not on Blanchard's radar. He simply wanted to be able to play songs he liked that he heard on the radio. He practiced diligently, at least two hours per day. Soon he was playing in front of friends and family. By 2021 he played 225 shows in a year.

Over time, he said he grew tired of playing other people's music over and over, and to

keep up that schedule left him with little time to learn new material, or to write his own songs.

He needed a change. It was at that time he made the decision to go to Nashville. He met with a producer and got to thinking he could write his own songs. By 2022, he hit the studio and produced his first track.

"I said, this is what I was supposed to do," he said. "I put a band together, and here we are playing. We're playing at the Hodag, you know?"

"My family often thought I was crazy, but that was nothing new," Blanchard said, laughing. "They had kind of felt that way about me all my life. I was always my own person and dedicated myself to what I liked to do. In high school it was sports. In my younger years I wanted to be a cowboy or a construction worker or whatever your dreams are when you are young. But I think you have to be a little bit



Blanchard

crazy to run a business of any kind. At the same time, they were always super supportive. And that meant so much to me."

While he had gotten away from country music in high school, he started listening to it again after high school and heard an instrument he wanted to play. That instrument was a guitar. Once he got the idea that he was going to play, he let nothing get in his way.

Becoming a recording artist

There is pressure in keeping his team active and profitable. With band members, sales people, videographers, photographers and a social media manager, it can be stressful. Also, when one starts to achieve regional success, there is pressure to build on that.

Blanchard pointed to country superstar Toby Keith as one of his influences. He grew up listening to Keith and when Blanchard got into music, he marveled at Keith's style change over his career, moving from the '90s sound to a more rocking country sound. Blanchard said he was impressed with that.

As a performer,

though, there's another person who stands out to him.

"This is going to sound silly, but I do a lot of research on Taylor Swift," he said. "She is one of the greatest performers of all time. She has sold more tickets than anybody in the history of the world. We look at a lot of the elements of her live show and we incorporate them into our own."

The songs

He finds inspiration in his own life when writing songs. "Running Red Lights" was the song he was least sure about when it was released, but one that he has heard so many people say is their favorite. The inspiration came from a relationship with a girl he liked, but not enough to continue dating. Of course, when she was gone, he missed her, and it was a bit of a back and forth that ultimately ended.

Blanchard said he believes the best songs come from personal experience. His goal is to connect with his fans who have had similar experiences in their lives, he added.

See **Blanchard** . . .
page 7

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Blanchard

From page 6

“I think that’s the most beautiful thing about being an artist,” he said. “There are people out there who feel the way I do and when I sing these songs, they can relate to them.”

Country Fest

Blanchard said he got a call in 2021 from a local radio station about a pick off for Country Fest, asking him to get involved. He did not win that competition, as a bigger band prevailed. By 2022, he had put a band together and entered the competition again. The first Hodag Pick Off he and his band attended brought them a second place. At the next they landed in third. The last competition, the Frog Country Kick Off, was where they finally qualified.

“One day I got a phone call, Blanchard said. “This lady said ‘I’m from the Hodag Country Festival.’ She told me they were cancelling the band’s pick offs, because they wanted me to play the main stage.”

He and his band were getting their chance to get on the stage at what would become one of his favorite places to play.

“I guess I never really dreamed we would take it as far as this has gone,” Blanchard said of making the stage at the Hodag, right before Neal McCoy. “I just about lost it.”

The Hodag is the biggest thing he’s done to date, he said, noting that the Hodag is his type of festival. He loves tradition, the beer-drinking crowd, street meat and tacos and everything that goes along with Country Fest.

The early years

Blanchard comes by the troublemaker label honestly, at least in his younger days. In grade school, yellow slips of paper were given out for misbehaving. The goal was not to get any yellow slips.

“I set the record for the most yellow slips in kindergarten or something like that,” he laughed. “It held for a long time. I have to still be top five or something.”

As a kid he enjoyed being outside and being active. He got heavily into sports by high school and can draw some comparisons to performing now and sports in his past. Performing feels like a competition, he said.

“I’ve always been a dreamer,” he said. “I’ve always been a little bit of a troublemaker. I’ve never been afraid to go my own way, regardless of the consequences.”

If Blanchard had a chance to talk to a younger version of himself and give him any sort of guidance, he said he would tell him to get a guitar as soon as possible.

“I would tell him to keep doing what he’s doing,” he said. “I would tell him to keep being himself and that all of his work would be rewarded and to keep his priorities in order.” He said he would not try to change anything about the path of his life.

Those looking to connect with Blanchard and to listen to his music can find him on any of their favorite streaming services. He is also active on social media through Facebook, TikTok and Instagram. Information and music can also be found on his website JordanBlanchard.com.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

All grown up

Maddie & Tae return to the Hodag

BY RIVER NEWS STAFF

The last time Maddie & Tae were on the Hodag stage, Maddie was celebrating her 21st birthday.

What a difference seven years makes. The ladies are back and they’re all grown up. Maddie Marlow is now Maddie Font and Taylor “Tae” Dye is Tae Kerr.

Kerr gave birth to a daughter, Leighton Grace, in January 2022, and Font is expecting her first child this fall.

Maddie and Tae have known each other since 2010 when they were both going to the same vocal coach and met at a showcase in Dallas — halfway between where the two girls were growing up.

“We met at one of these showcases that he would hold and we just hit it off,”

Maddie told the River News back in 2016. “We started talking about songwriting, got into a room and started doing that. The rest is history. The songwriting is what brought us together.”

Getting an early start

Entering the music business at just 15 years old can be a scary and eye-opening event and it wasn’t any different for Maddie and Tae.

“It comes with a lot of ups and downs,” Tae said. “We honestly didn’t know what we were getting into at the age of 15 when we started working together. We just knew that we had this dream and we were going to chase it and try to make it happen no matter what.”

The two moved to Nashville two years later

and say that’s when they really learned what the business was about, how to stand their ground, and what to do to be artists.

“There were a lot of sacrifices we had to make, but for us our passion was completely overriding all of those sacrifices and we knew we wanted this,” Tae said. “It is very scary when you think about everything you have to give up and everything you have to do.”

The two wrote their debut single “Girl in a Country Song” and 23 weeks after its debut in July 2014, the song reached No. 1 on the charts. It was the first debut single by a female duo to reach number one since The Wreckers did it in 2006.

See **Maddie & Tae...** page 8



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Maddie & Tae

From page 7

"It was cool because we were nervous that we were the only ones that kind of felt that way," Maddie said of the song. "Just how women were being portrayed was so odd to us at that point."

The two wrote the song not thinking anyone was going to hear it.

"Our record label got ears on this song and loved it and were passionate about it," Maddie said. "We went out on our radio promo tour and figured out that fans wanted to hear that same message. It was great to see the connections and start meeting fans with that first song."

In 2014, Maddie and Tae released their self-titled EP, featuring "Girl in a Country Song" as well as three new songs: "Sierra", "Fly", and "Your Side of Town."

The duo released their debut album, Start Here, in August 2015 and co-wrote every song on the album. It's first single, "Fly" became a Top 10 hit on both Hot Country Songs and Country Airplay.

"We moved to Nashville to, number one, be songwriters," Maddie said. "That was our first dream. We never thought being an artist was an option, we never thought it would happen."

Maddie and Tae's third single "Shut Up and Fish" was released to country radio in November 2015.

In October 2018, the duo released "Die from a Broken Heart" and followed that up with Through the Madness Vol. 1, in January 2022.

They're just getting started.

Feels like home

LOCASH to close out '23 Hodag

BY RIVER NEWS

Chris Lucas and Preston Brust, better known as LOCASH, will close out the 2023 Hodag Country Festival on Sunday night and you know they'll go out with a bang.

In a 2021 interview with the River News, Brust said the two get excited about the Hodag because of the fans they'll be performing for.

"We're going to hit that stage and everybody will be singing along and it's kind of like family again," he said. "It's like our home away from home because everyone is just so awesome there and they treat us great."

The 2023 Hodag will mark LOCASH's sixth appearance at the festi-



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

val, quickly becoming a fan favorite. Their first appearance was in 2015. They returned in

2017, 2018, 2019 and 2021.

Brust and Lucas have several different influ-

ences in their music, from rock and roll to church music.

"You'll hear a lot of rock-and-roll in our music, a lot of southern rock and then Chris grew up with '80s rock and I grew up with church music," Brust said. "When you get Chris and I together, there are a bunch of difference influences. It's pretty wild."

The two have three albums under their belts, starting with LOCASH Cowboys in 2013, which reached No. 25 on the U.S. Country charts, The Fighters in 2016, which climbed to No. 14, and Brothers in 2019 that went up to No. 34.

SATURDAY ENTERTAINMENT

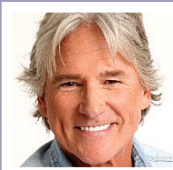


DRAKE MILLIGAN | 1 P.M.

Drake Milligan will kick off a jam-packed slate of main stage entertainment on Saturday afternoon. Milligan portrayed Elvis Presley on the CMT series "Sun Records" and you'll understand why when he takes the stage.

BILLY DEAN | 2:30 P.M.

A modern-day troubadour born and raised in Florida, Billy Dean has been entertaining country music lovers for decades. He is known for such songs as "Somewhere in My Broken Heart," "If There Hadn't Been You," and "I'm Not Built That Way."



TANYA TUCKER | 4:30 P.M.

Recent Country Music Hall of Fame inductee Tanya Tucker has been bringing the house down since she was teenager crooning "Delta Down". More recently, she won her first two Grammy awards for "Bring My Flowers Now" and "While I'm Livin'," both released in 2020. Tucker's "Two Sparrows in a Hurricane" is also an audience favorite.

ASHLEY McBRYDE | 6:30 P.M.

Arkansas native Ashley McBryde will follow Tucker at approximately 6:30 p.m. A recent Grammy winner for "Never Wanted To Be That Girl", a duet will Carly Pearce, McBryde is making her second visit to the Hodag. She was last on the main stage in 2018.



HARDY | 9 P.M.

Saturday night headliner Hardy — given name Michael Wilson Hardy — cannot be pinned down. Twice named ACM Songwriter of the Year, for "God's Country" by Blake Shelton and "One Beer," his collaboration with Lauren Alaina and Devin Dawson, his new album "the mockingbird & The Crow" is described as half-country, half-rock. Either way, fans will be more than satisfied.



SUNDAY ENTERTAINMENT

DREW PARKER | NOON

First up on Sunday will be Drew Parker. He started singing at the age of 3 in church in his hometown, a tiny unincorporated hamlet in Georgia. A gifted songwriter, he had a hand in penning Luke Combs' debut platinum record "This Ones For You," Jake Owen's single "Homemade" and Luke Combs' "1,2 Many."



JOHN CONLEE | 1:30 P.M.

John Conlee is a veteran Hodager, having played the main stage in 1983, 1997, 2003, 2009 and most recently in 2018. He has charted several No. 1 hits including "Lady Lay Down", "Backside of Thirty", "Common Man", "I'm Only in It for the Love" and "In My Eyes."



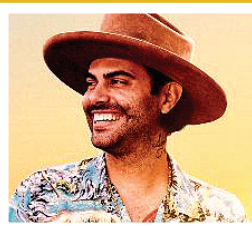
MADDIE & TAE | 3:15 P.M.

Hodagers have watched Maddie & Tae grow up. In fact, Maddie celebrated her 21st birthday at the Hodag back in 2016. Seven years later, the ladies are back for more. Madison Font (nee Marlow) and Taylor "Tae" Kerr (nee Dye) are known for such songs as "Die from a Broken Heart" and "Don't Make Her Look Dumb."



NIKO MOON | 5 P.M.

Niko Moon, born Nicholas Cowan, will follow Maddie & Tae and you can be sure he isn't the only one who hopes "Heaven Has a Bar." With the word "good" tattooed on his right leg and "time" inked on his left, there's no way this show won't keep the good times rolling.



LOCASH | 7 P.M.

Closing out the 2023 Hodag will be the duo LOCASH. Vocalists Chris Lucas and Preston Brust are back for another round of fun and music. They are sure to send the fans home happy with such hits as "I Love This Life."



The DOS and DON'TS of the chair line

One of the most anticipated parts of the Hodag Country Festival takes place before the talent takes the stage. The chair line procedure has been tweaked a bit over the years, so it's always a good idea to review the rules.

This year's chair line process is as follows, according to the festival website.

2023 Chair Line Rules

The Hodag Country Festival chair line is a lottery-style system that provides an equal opportunity for all who participate. The chair line is an option many Hodagers enjoy; it is not mandatory to participate. Chairs can be put out any time after the chair line event is complete.

There are three simple steps if you want to participate in the chair line:

1. COLLECT VOUCHER STUBS

Obtaining a voucher this year will be simplified as every 9-day ticket has a chair line voucher stub attached to it. Get your "chair family" together by having one member of your party collect voucher stubs from everyone in your group. Just take the voucher stub off the ticket by tearing along the perforation. It would be nice if you would put the voucher stubs in numerical order before the next step! Hodag Country Festival is not responsible for misplaced voucher stubs.

2. SPIN THE WHEEL FOR A LANYARD

You will bring the voucher stubs to the Festival with you to spin the Chair Line Wheel for a color!

See **Chair Line**. . . page 10



RIVER NEWS FILE PHOTO

A tradition like no other, the Hodag Country Festival chair line.

ONEIDA COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE



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2023 *Events Guide*

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Chair Line

From page 9

The wheel will be located in the Pavilion and you can spin it between the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Saturday, July 1 through Monday, July 3, and Tuesday, July 4, 9 a.m. and 8 p.m. Only one person from your group needs to be present to spin the wheel.

When you spin for a color, your color will correspond with a time. The time corresponding with the colors will be drawn in the Pavilion at 8:05 p.m. on Tuesday, July 4 and announced via Facebook, email blast, Twitter and Instagram after 8:05 p.m. That corresponding time is when you can make your way to the seating area on Wednesday, July 5, 2023 with your chairs to set out.

After you spin, you will be given a lanyard that shows your number of verified chairs and your color. This lanyard is what will give you access to the seating area during your designated time slot.

3. PUT YOUR CHAIRS OUT

When it is your time to enter the seating area, there only needs to be one person present to set out your chairs; but if you have a larger group, you may have more than one person to assist.

There will be eight areas of entry to the seating area that will be clearly marked. People that are loitering with chairs before their assigned time are subject to having their lanyard revoked. Without a lanyard, you will have to wait until the final time slot is over to place your chairs.



A fan hits an inflatable ball into the Hodag crowd.



PHOTOS BY TREVOR GREENE FOR THE RIVER NEWS

Fans laugh and enjoy the music and company of their friends during a 2022 performance.



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