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## FarmBorough Festival, a Country Music Kickoff in the Big City

By ANDREW R. CHOW JUNE 25, 2015



Dierks Bentley will play the FarmBorough Festival. Al Wagner/Invision, via Associated Press

Three weeks ago at Randalls Island, it was Ray-Bans, ironic T-shirts, snapbacks and Lana Del Rey. This weekend it's cowboy boots, denim shorts, trucker hats and Brad Paisley. New York, home of hip-hop and downtown experimentalism, may not seem like the most hospitable place to host a major country music festival.

But Founders Entertainment, the company behind Governors Ball, the pop music behemoth on Randalls Island, has created the first: FarmBorough Festival, which begins on Friday. It's a leap of faith, for sure, but also a bet on New York's large, growing country market. Whether it can draw in enough New Yorkers to thrive is yet to be determined.

"For years, we had been noticing country acts going into Madison Square Garden, MetLife Stadium, amphitheaters like Jones Beach: sold-out show after sold-out show," said Jordan Wolowitz, one of the festival's organizers and a partner at Founders. "It was just so abundantly clear how well country was doing in the live space."

The idea for the festival was born in May 2013 after the third year of Governors Ball. Mr. Wolowitz flew to Nashville to meet with Live Nation's Brian O'Connell, who had founded

country festivals, including the Faster Horses Festival in Brooklyn, Mich., and the Watershed Festival in Quincy, Wash. The two were encouraged by success of the Stagecoach Festival in California, which started in 2007 as Coachella's little cousin and by 2014 had become the highest-grossing country festival in the world, according to Statista. They hoped FarmBorough could similarly piggyback off Governors Ball, using their stage equipment on Randalls Island, allowing them to cut costs.

Signs point to an underserved populace of fans in the Northeast. A study by Nielsen SoundScan in 2011, for example, found New York to be the largest country market in the United States, based on album sales. In 2013, Townsquare Media, a digital and radio media company, successfully brought a large festival, Taste of Country, nearby in the Catskills. And many acts, like Luke Bryan and Kenny Chesney, have been able to sell out venues in the metropolitan area.

FarmBorough's general strategy is to target fans from the region rather than trying to lure curious New Yorkers. This decision starts with the lineup, which squarely hits the center of current popular country music: The Billboard mainstays Brad Paisley, Dierks Bentley and Luke Bryan will headline. (Mr. Bryan sold out Madison Square Garden two years ago.)

"There's no different methodology in it at all," Mr. O'Connell said of constructing the lineup. "You put the best players on the field."

A bigger challenge may be drawing the musicians, many of whom don't often perform in New York. "Every time an artist goes up there to play for the first time, they're a little worried about how it's going to go over," Mr. Bentley said. "But the fans come out of the woodwork."

The roster does little to dispel the recent criticisms of the genre's stark gender disparity. Mr. O'Connell attributed the festival's lack of star women, like Miranda Lambert or Kacey Musgraves, purely to availability. "I don't think there's a bigger supporter of female artists in the business than me, based on festival bookings," Mr. O'Connell said.

While advertising for Governors Ball was 95 percent digital, according to Mr. Wolowitz, marketing for FarmBorough has been much more traditional, including television and radio stations like Nash FM, where country fans are more likely to tune in. And the organizers hope that country fans will make the trip to New York to take in both the music and the city.

"Every interview that I've done, I've been asked, 'How do I get the cool, hip Manhattan people to come across the river?'" Mr. O'Connell said. "But I also have 300-odd million people in the United States that really like New York City."

"Certainly the person in Ottumwa, Iowa, doesn't know what the heck Randalls Island is," Mr. O'Connell added. "After the weekend, they go back to their hometown and say, 'Next year we gotta go to New York for this.' That's the goal."

This year, FarmBorough is not going to sell out, or come particularly close. According to organizers, it is on pace to sell 40,000 to 45,000 tickets over the weekend (a three-day pass costs \$225), or 15,000 people a day — only a third of what Governors Ball pulled in this year. "Fifteen thousand smiles. Those are my expectations. I don't have any other ones," Mr. O'Connell said. "Until you have Year 1, you can't have Year 2."

Gary Bongiovanni, the editor of Pollstar, an industry trade publication, said: “The truth is, most festivals in their first one to three years lose money. It’s part of establishing a local identity.” He added, “But if they’re successful enough to show they can grow it — and Live Nation certainly has the deep pockets to withstand a marginal year — I would look for them to come back.”

Both Founders and Live Nation expressed a commitment to the festival in the long run, regardless of how Year 1 proceeds. “We have every intention of this festival being around for decades to come,” Mr. Wolowitz said.