

(5.22.17) <https://www.si.com/nhl/2017/05/21/nashville-predators-dierks-bentley-hockey-market>

Music, Predators' hockey entwine to make for an 'on fire' atmosphere in Nashville

NASHVILLE — Soundcheck time atop the band stage at Bridgestone Arena, three hours until the puck drops on the first conference finals this city has hosted—in any pro sport—and the Small-Time Rock Stars are tuning up. By now, after 200-some gigs spanning roughly 15 seasons, the name probably warrants an upgrade. From their perch above the Zamboni tunnel between Sections 110 and 111, they have jammed live alongside the likes of Charlie Daniels, Alice Cooper and Carrie Underwood. Of course the last celebrity act wasn't exactly difficult to book, being the exponentially more famous half of team captain Mike Fisher and all. But everyone else was equally eager. Music...hockey...“it's all part of the DNA here,” says lead guitarist Steve Mandile, slipping into a Predators jersey. “The lines are pretty blurred.”

This has been true for two decades, ever since the expansion franchise rolled onto Broadway and convinced famous local female artists to pose for billboard ads with their front teeth blacked out. Garth Brooks was among the earliest promoters, helping out an old friend who would help his band book ice time while on tour: the Predators' first head coach, Barry Trotz. During the breakaway challenge portion of the 2016 NHL All-Star Game skills competition, winger James Neal fed a pass to country crooner Dierks Bentley and yelled, “F---ING BURY IT!” A '97 graduate of Vanderbilt University, the same year NHL owners approved the experimental melding of hockey and honkytonk, Bentley obliged. “God,” he recalls, “that's one of the best feelings I've ever had in my life.” Heck, Predators strength and conditioning coach David Goode asked the Small-Time Rock Stars to play his wedding; when Mandile married a woman who spotted him shredding on the Jumbotron and

introduced herself via Facebook message, Trotz attended the ceremony.

It's just that the wider sports world is finally taking notice, learning about an atmosphere that general manager David Poile proudly declares is, “on fire.” The abundance of stars clearly helps. This postseason, the lineup of anthem singers has stretched from Underwood to fellow Universal Music Group artists like Bentley, Lady Antebellum and, on this Tuesday before Game 3, Keith Urban. Two nights later, the members of Kings of Leon serve as the ceremonial towel-wavers at Game 4, one of them while sporting a T-shirt that reads, “GORDON BOMBAY CAN'T SAVE YOU NOW.” (The enthusiasm goes both ways; when asked for his welcome-to-Nashville moment after getting traded from Columbus in Jan. 2016, center Ryan Johansen cites running into the band's lead singer, Caleb Followill, over lunch at an Italian restaurant near Music Row.)

But none of this reaches national audiences without the accompanying success of the main attraction. “We know what our role is—to be part of the atmosphere,” Mandile says. “They're not here to see us.” Right now, it's all about the Predators. “We're deep in the heart of football country here, and yet it seems like hockey is the sport,” Bentley says. “It just fits the culture of Nashville even more than football does. That was unthinkable even 10 years ago.”

Fly into Nashville International Airport. Climb onto the rooftop bars. Banks and churches and boot stores and restaurants...everywhere hangs the same golden flag, flapping the same team slogan: Stand With Us. There could have been animus between the industries upon the Predators' arrival.

Instead, as they took a 3-1 series lead over the Blues in the second round, the cast of CMT's Nashville huddled around a television near the snack table while filming scenes in suburban Belle Meade, cheering quietly to avoid disrupting the shoot. "This hockey insanity," says Charles "Chip" Esten, known on the show as Deacon Claybourne, "is just a blast."

Esten was born in Pittsburgh and raised in northern Virginia, but cheered for neither the Penguins nor Capitals. But then he moved to Nashville for the pilot five years ago and got asked by the Small-Time Rock Stars to sing covers at a couple games. "I quickly caught this fever that I'd always been immune to, I guess," Esten says. So he and Mandile produced a hard-driving, pump-up rock anthem titled, Here Come The Predators. The first verse and chorus go like this:

A cold wind blows across the ice.
It rolls in and whispers this advice:
"You might not make it through the night"
You stand tall and try and fight your fear.
But they already know you're here.
Now, what's that sound you hear?

Here come the Predators on the prowl.
In the night, hear them howl.
Sharp teeth. A low growl.
You better run.
Here come the Predators now.

How far have the Predators come?

Gone are the "Hockey 101" classes meant to educate new fans on rules and tactics. Forgotten are the concerns about relocation, persistent until local business owners assembled to buy the team in Nov. '07. At one time, Nashville modeled itself on the Red Wings. "We were just nervous of them all the time," Poile says. "We wanted to be like Detroit and beat Detroit." When they finally did at the right time—in five games in the first round of '11-12—the Red Wings promptly changed conferences. "We've been chasing you for 10 years and you leave," Poile would joke with counterpart

Ken Holland. So the target then switched to Chicago; this spring's series ended in a sweep. "As we go forward," Poile says over a recent lunch, "that's probably the confidence, the shot that we needed to have that belief."

Along the way, Nashville never lost the nontraditional elements of its nontraditional market. Bridgestone Arena remains the only place where CEO Sean Henry allows his 9-year-old daughter to say the word, "sucks"—lest she feel left out jeering the opposing goalie—and yet the crowd also cordially thanks its public address announcer with one minute left in each period. It was the first franchise whose broadcasts interviewed backup goalies on the bench during games and the first rink to distribute LED bracelets that light up alongside the pregame music, a concept inspired by a Taylor Swift concert. "The amount of ideas our fans give us," Henry says, "we'd only have to play 642 playoff games to satisfy them."

Lately many have written to suggest anthem singers, the identity of whom Henry and the event staff steadfastly keep secret until the lights dim and they stroll onto the golden carpet. While the Nashvilles crew was working in Belle Meade, Vince Gill and his daughters, Jenny and Corrina, were performing before Game 4 of the St. Louis series. "I think he sang just so he could walk by the Blues goalie and give him some crap," Bentley says, something Gill already does plenty from his season-ticket seat located against the glass.

For a time, whenever Bentley played gigs in northern cities, he'd open with a joke: "I'm so happy to be here in Minneapolis," he might tell the crowd, "where I can say I'm a country music singer and a hockey fan and not have people look at me like I have two heads." Now? "That joke doesn't work as well anymore. There are fans all over the south. It's not a weird thing to say that you're a hockey fan. It had a northern vibe to it for a while, but how can you not love the pace and, to be honest, the aggressiveness?"

"It's something any country boy can wrap their heart around."