

The Des Moines Register

What you need to know before going to a country show in Iowa



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Thousands of fans passionately singing along to a catchy tune. Men and women jumping out of their seats to dance to a favorite number. Giving a jovial cheer when the performer salutes your participation.

That's what helps create a memorable country show in Iowa.

Between Lady Antebellum at the Iowa State Fair on Sunday, Blake Shelton invading Kinnick Stadium at the end of the month or the upcoming appearances from Carrie Underwood and Eric Church at Wells Fargo Arena, country music's biggest and brightest stars are set to invade Iowa in the coming months.

What goes into creating the best country experience? The Register caught Dierks Bentley's Monday night show — which drew 8,366 people — at the Iowa State Fair to find out.

Tailgating is encouraged.

While the Iowa State Fair might not be the most ideal spot for a tailgate (unless you're paying cash to do it in someone else's yard), other upcoming country shows provide ample opportunity to set up outside the venue and enjoy time with family and friends.

What better place to practice the American tradition of hanging out (and hopefully grilling) in a parking than at Blake Shelton's upcoming appearance at Kinnick Stadium? Scheduled for Aug. 27 — with support from Big & Rich, Tucker Beathard, Thomas Rhett and more — the country show is an opportunity for Hawkeye fans to show off their parking lot partying skills at an event that involves the other Beathard brother.

For Roxie Rayla, of Urbandale, tailgating at a show is about sharing the experience with other country fans.

"You get other people's perspectives (at a tailgate)," Rayla said.

Those attending an upcoming country show at Wells Fargo Arena: consider scratching your tailgating itch by catching a pre-show get-together with other fans at Buzzard Billy's on 615 3rd Street, a few blocks from the arena.

Get the attire right.

Before heading to the tailgate, you've got to get the right outfit. For some country fans, there's a formula for what can (and can't) be worn to a show. Must-wear for many: boots, jeans (or jean shorts) and flannel. Most who walked through the Grandstand gates on Monday night donned at least one piece of this country trifecta.

"Most of the girls dress the same for a country concert," said Sarah Carnahan, 18, of Altoona. "It's a country concert ... you've got to wear your flannel."

Not all who catch a country show give in to the dress code, though. That's the case for Erin Sheehy, 18, of Ottumwa, who said you don't need to dress a certain way to fit in at the show.

"You don't always need boots to go and enjoy a country concert," Sheehy said. "You can enjoy this kind of music and not dress that way."

Sing your loudest.

After deciding on if you're for or against adopting a pair of boots for the evening, come to the show ready to sing. One aspect of Bentley's performance Monday night that fans agree on is the enthusiasm shown during the show. For Bentley, tracks like "Drunk On A Plane," "What Was I Thinkin'" and "Somewhere on a Beach" all drew huge sing-alongs from the crowd.

There's dancing, swaying, and cheering. There's singing and there are even collective "cheers" as fans raise their drinks during certain moments. And, for many, include Katie Madsen, 32, of Audubon, Ia., that's what completes the experience.

"(At a) country concert," Madsen said, "You relate to it. You feel like (they're) speaking directly to you ... not to 15,000 people."

Bentley worked the crowd on Monday night, ripping through slower songs (like "Riser" and "Black") as well as faster, more dance-friendly numbers (like "5-1-5-0"). Multiple times in the set he referred to the night as "unbelievable" and even payed homage to the times he played free stages at the fair in the mid-'00s.

"I do not take this for granted," he told the crowd before going into "What The Hell Did I Say."

Don't feel like drinking's required.

With songs from Bentley like "Drunk on a Plane" and "Somewhere On A Beach," one could assume drinking and a country show goes hand-in-hand. And, for those who are of age and choose to partake, that's the case. But that doesn't mean it needs to get out of control.

"Honestly if you drink too much at a concert you don't remember the experience," Rayla said. "Have fun (and) drink a few beers but really be there for the experience."

Echoing Rayla, Madsen said you don't even need the beers to have fun at a country show. But, when she does indulge in a cold one, she prefers Busch Light.

"You can be sober and have fun at a country concert," Madsen said, laughing.

If going to one of Bentley's show, don't tell him you're not obligated to drink. At one point in Bentley's set, he brought a man from the crowd on stage to shotgun a beer with him. It was a race, Bentley declared. And he won.

"There's no shame in second place," he said to the man he pulled on stage. "It's 2016 ... everybody gets a trophy, right?"

Most of all, just have fun.

Most fans who descended upon the Grandstand for Bentley all expressed the same sentiment for what they wanted in a country show experience: to have a good time.

“The long and short of it is,” said Kellie Lewis, 36, of Monteith, Ia., “If you want to get back to your roots ... go country.”