

THE BLADE

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FASTER HORSES FESTIVAL A MUSICAL, ENTERTAINMENT FEAST

Brian O’Connell, Live Nation’s president of touring, can put together a star-packed lineup for any country music festival or stadium or arena show in the country.

The Country Music Association honored him in January with its CMA Touring Lifetime Achievement award. Artists love working with him.

When the Faster Horses Festival, which O’Connell heads, kicks off Friday afternoon at the site of the Michigan International Speedway in Brooklyn, Mich., there will be plenty of stars. Blake Shelton and Brantley Gilbert will be on stage Friday night, Brooks & Dunn and Billy Currington on Saturday night, and Tyler Farr, Dustin Lynch, and Florida Georgia Line on Sunday.

That is not the only reason O’Connell is expecting large crowds to pour through the gates over the weekend.

“This festival happens the third week of July for a reason. It’s magical because of the community. You have a bunch of people who have something in common: they want to spend three or four days with buddies and listen to country music and go festivaling. They want to do different things and have different experiences,” O’Connell says. “The festival has to be the star. It has to have that vibe to make you come back.”

Now in its sixth year, Faster Horses continues to reinvent itself each year, morphing into a multidimensional entertainment event. There are rides and games, live band karaoke, a giant water

slide, a marketplace, a rock bar serving Michigan craft beer, and pancake breakfasts. On Sunday, there will be the Faster Humans Fun Run around the MIS track. The entertainment options are seemingly endless.

“It’s about consistency. When we started this thing, we walked through the site in our mind. And each year, we ask what can we do better? Where do people pool when there is nothing to do? Where is the hole in our swing, so to speak?” O’Connell says, adding that this year a dead spot next to the main stage has been transformed into a rock garden with a bar as its centerpiece. “We don’t just throw a stage up, put some tents up, and open the doors. We want to make it more experiential.”

That also goes for artists, many of whom circle this event on their touring calendar because of the camaraderie with the dozens of artists in the three-day lineup, and because of the royal treatment O’Connell gives artists big and small. A backstage area is closed off to everyone but the performers, an oasis of solitude where they can get together with friends who they only cross paths with a couple of times a year.

Faster Horses is also about the Nashville experience. There will be spotlight sessions for some of Nashville’s top songwriters, including the Warren Brothers, Detroit native J.T. Harding, and Lee Thomas Miller, the current president of the Nashville Songwriter’s Association. A secondary stage, called “The Next from Nashville Stage,” will feature some of Nashville’s future stars, acts that O’Connell has an impressive record of identifying. He notes that Florida Georgia Line has grown up with Faster Horses. Tyler Hubbard and Brian Kelley will close the festival on Sunday night.

Charlie Worsham, a Warner Brothers recording artist and longtime session player in Nashville, will play on the secondary stage.

“The thing I love about festivals is playing for folks who are already invested. They have given up hard-earned money, vacation days, they probably had to figure out the logistics of a road trip. It’s always a fun audience to play for,” Worsham says.

The Mississippi native will be playing with only a drummer and bass player, an unusual gig for Worsham, who usually is with a full band or in a studio playing on other people’s records.

As an up-and-coming artist, Worsham writes his own songs, again, an emphasis for O’Connell in putting together the festival.

“Songwriting is the Lego block that builds everything in our world. Everything starts with that creativity and spark of inspiration,” Worsham says. “For me, it’s something I have to do. It’s therapy, my journal, even my social life. I write songs every day with people who are genuinely my friends.”

O’Connell loves to see the growth of acts like Worsham, and even Florida Georgia Line, but he will always have a soft spot in his heart for Ronnie Dunn and Kix Brooks, who will be hitting the stage at 9:30 Saturday night. The best-selling duo in country music history is only playing limited shows outside of a residency in Las Vegas. O’Connell worked with them extensively during the height of Brooks & Dunn’s career.

“Getting Kix and Ronnie back together is huge. They haven’t played the Detroit market since 2010, and I know because I was there. There is a giant resurgence of ‘90s country music right now,” O’Connell says. “So the idea that we could get a future hall of fame act like Brooks & Dunn, well, I just can’t wait for that.”

The Faster Horses Festival begins Friday on the grounds of the Michigan International Speedway. Information on camping and ticketing packages, along with maps, lineups, and an FAQ, are available at fasterhorsesfestival.com. A Faster Horses Festival app is also available for phones.