

## Country USA



**Jamey Johnson**

Some people look down on me, but I don't give a rip.  
I'll stand barefooted in my own front yard with a baby on my hip,  
'Cause I'm a redneck woman.

-Gretchen Wilson "Redneck Woman"

As a former western warbler, I love country music. With hair teased long enough that it started to fight back and an electrical sawharp, I sang twangy torch songs of love and loss with enough feminist backbone that cheatin' hearts got squashed and women chose big rigs over men.

I flaunt predilections for Dolly Parton, Porter Wagoner, Kitty Wells, and the ghost of Waylon Jennings. I'll admit a soft spot for new traditionalist like Dwight Yoakum or the offbeat modern interpretations of Neko Case and Gillian Welch. But I have a dirty secret, something I barely utter in mixed company. God and Reba know that I harbor a dark fondness for brand-spankin'-new, overproduced, radio-friendly, crap country.

Sure it's crassly commercial, virtually soulless, and a little dumb, but who amongst us hasn't dated someone with these very qualities?

The slick hillbilly soundtrack of county fairs and corner bars is American music. Hardasses with handlebar moustaches find the slide of a lap-steel transports them from the foundry, patrolling with the minutemen, starting honkeytonk fights, or worming their wounded ways into my heart. Red, white, and blue bombast in snakeskin boots and crumpled cowboy hats is as old as the hills and as new as a creepy collarless shirt imprinted with neon bulls running through flame.

Love it or hate it, this is the music of our peoples who wander where the buffalo roam from sea to shining sea. Hating country is a simpering self-loathing that will only lead to constipation and cutting. The artists sing of heartbreak, nationalism, and sexy tractors. How can you deplore honest adulation of personal misery, the very land that provides

such bounty, or farm equipment? It is tantamount to treason. As Merle Haggard said, “If you’re runnin’ down my country, man, you’re walkin’ on the fightin’ side of me.”

It is with flag-waving fervor that I recommend you cut those jean shorts off another half inch and pitch a tent for five days of rural camping where you can bask in the splendor that is Country U.S.A.

If you have something better to do during the weekend of June 24<sup>th</sup> through the 28<sup>th</sup>, I demand you write to me and state your case. The only excuse to skip the biggest Oshkosh party of the year is marriage, sex reassignment surgery, or your own funeral. Also, if your parole officer says the ankle bracelet is out of range in the three hundred acres of Ford Festival Park, you best stay ‘round the old homestead.

The Weather Channel says the Oshkosh extravaganza is “one of the nation’s top three outdoor music festivals.” If there has ever been an arbiter of what does or does not rock in the world of massive boondock concerts, it’s The Weather Channel. If you don’t trust them, consult Rolling Stone the next time a tornado is headed your way.

Things that make the event great include an exciting two million dollar lineup of current country stars, five stages of nonstop music, on-site camping, vendor tents for shopping, and plenty of food. Things I could live without: that one racist homophobic goon who’s gonna need to get socked in the jaw and wireless internet. I don’t want to see anyone geeking out on a laptop when Gretchen Wilson starts singing “Here For the Party.”

A neutral concert calendar is available at [www.countryusaoshkosh.com](http://www.countryusaoshkosh.com). Tickets can be obtained by calling 1-920-882-4949 locally or 1-800-326-SHOW from Alaska, Guam, or Micronesia. Here is an unofficial overview of the lineup cheapened by my two cents.

### **Wednesday, June 24<sup>th</sup>: Preteen Prelude**

Milwaukee maven **Katiebeth** opens the festival with her girl-next-door sincerity. Banjo picking gets smothered by electric guitars, but she shows promise in tackling the classic country terrain of luckless love.

Nashville-based **Broadband** is, get it, a band of broads. I imagine those guys making use of the wireless internet will be turned on by the name. This all-girl group is led by a gravel-voiced bar vocalist with a rock edge. The lyrics could use some work as any song including the phrase “talk to the hand” is rendered irrelevant, but they make up for it by being fun and cute.

Southern-fried rock operatives **Chasin’ Mason** offer wholesome country tunes by young bucks in snap shirts.

Cleveland county cornball **Jimmy Wayne** will strain through a pop performance on the strength of his Ephron bangs and plentiful eyebrows. Still, this young songwriter is already on his way in the competitive world of country music publishing.

HEADLINER: Jonas brother reject and starlet most resembling a junior high girl's image of an angel, **Taylor Swift**, will be singing her thin sweet hits from the multi-platinum record *Fearless*. Swift towers above young tabloid harlots with her earnest lyrics and remarkably age-appropriate material. In the spirit of Tanya Tucker and LeAnn Rimes, Swift shows a maturity beyond her years and the simple anti-Cinderella anthem "White Horse" should be required listening for any young girl emerging from latency. "I'm not a princess; this ain't a fairytale," she says, "now it's too late for you and your white horse to come around." Amen, sister!

#### **Thursday, June 25<sup>th</sup>: Old Men in Big Hats**

2008 WAMI Country Group of the Year, **Geoff Landon and the Wolfpack**, hail from Milwaukee and pen regular Joe music while covering Top 40 hits.

New York's **Loose Cannon Live** are billed as "the ultimate country rock 'n' roll weapon" (while I appreciate their bravado, we all know the real ultimate country rock 'n' roll weapon is your ex-wife's attorney). They work their way through some enjoyable tributes, but a lackluster rendition of "Man of Constant Sorrow" needs about 78% more sorrow.

American hero **Sergeant First Class Jamie Buckley** of the U.S. Army seems influenced by the old stuff while opening for some of the biggest new names in country music. He's no Sergeant Barry Saddler, but then again, who is? Support the troops!

With his turquoise eyes and vampire teeth, **Jake Owen** (a hick version of Luke Wilson) is cute as they come. Committed to music "that is not over done or over thought," the deep-voiced singer has an engaging sound and rascally point of view. His radio hit "Startin' With Me" begins, "I had a one night stand with my best friend's baby sister." I'll bet!

A slightly generic but competent coed group, **Little Big Town**, rollick through a top-selling playlist of nonconfrontational compositions.

HEADLINER: **Montgomery Gentry** has been around for a spell. Baritone front man Eddie Montgomery provides the muscle while tenor Troy Gentry keeps it smooth. The memorable hooks of cuts like "Cold One Comin' On" have solidified them as one of country's more dependable acts. Current radio favorite "What Do Ya Think About That?" takes a jab at suburban gentrification by making a case for burnt out old barns and pickup trucks in the yard. Montgomery Gentry has a knack for preserving yesteryear in amber while acknowledging progress. In "Daddy Won't Sell the Farm" they show pops battling the minimart, "His cows get loose and run right through the fast food parking lot."

#### **Friday, June 26<sup>th</sup>: Naughty and Nice**

**Country Storm** and **Joe Zeler** start the weekend along with Northeast Wisconsin players **Southern Gypsy** who cover the likes of Brooks & Dunn and Diamond Rio.

Former Trick Pony wild woman **Heidi Newfield** tones down her solo show with personalized ballads and slower, smarter music. Her current favorite “Johnny & June” pays homage to the First Couple of Country.

**Keith Anderson’s** single “Pickin’ Wildflowers” was a raunchy scorcher with a saloon thump beat and dirty mouth harp reverberations. If you heard them right, the lyrics were slightly perverted. Today, he has mainstreamed his sound and bland selections like “I Still Miss You” are the fodder of late-night long-distance radio dedications.

HEADLINER: If you can’t find a spot in your hardened arteries for the likes of America’s man-sweetheart **Brad Paisley**, then all hope is lost. The doe-eyed picker and grinner has racked up a string of number one hits including the single dad lament “He Didn’t Have To Be,” the wedding favorite “Wrapped Around,” everyone’s drunken sing-along “Alcohol,” the anti-metrosexual mantra “I’m Still A Guy,” and a song about a wife’s ultimatum that he either give up their relationship or his fishing hobby. That one’s called “I’m Gonna Miss Her.” When he saw Kimberly Williams in *Father of the Bride Part II*, he thought, “I’d love to marry a girl like her.” He stealthily cast the actress in a music video and they are now the proud parents of a baby boy named Jasper. Brad Paisley’s message is seize the day!

#### **Saturday, June 27<sup>th</sup>: Those Who Drive Away in Pickup Trucks**

**The 3<sup>rd</sup> Degree** burns up the stage followed by Appleton’s pleasant Southern rock group **Cherokee Rose** (PS This is my new CB handle!). Next up is the **Volunteer U.S. Army Field Band**.

Established outfit **Diamond Rio** sing Christian-themed songs like “In God We Still Trust” and “I Believe.” Their repertoire harkens back to a simpler time of small town values and FFA puppy love. “Norma Jean Riley” and “Meet In the Middle” have been part of the permanent rotation on country radio since the dawn of time.

*Dancing with the Stars* hooper **Julianne Hough** tries her hand at pop-twang and turns out a so-so debut. Still, her recognizable television persona draws an audience that may give her time to do the work required to define a signature sound.

HEADLINER: **Dierks Bentley** needs to ramble. Good looking in a hometown way, this relative newcomer shows off his sultry drawl in “Come a Little Closer,” but the call of the road seems to find Dierks’ hands off the woman and back on the wheel by nightfall. Whether he’s hoping his lady will hit the breaks on her truck in “Settle for a Slowdown” or whether he’s hopping in his truck to run from love in “Free & Easy Down the Road I Go,” someone, somewhere, is always driving away.

#### **Sunday, June 28<sup>th</sup>: The Best New Male Country Artist Alive and the Queen Bee**

**Loose Cannon Live** warms up the crowd for Milwaukee's **Black Frog**, a motorcycle club with guitars that wins the honorary Lemmy from Motorhead Chops Award. Their revenge song "Hey Danielle" begins, "Here's a song about a gold-diggin' ho." Guys who pump their fist to this one may just be having fun but ladies will read the words "BURNED" on their foreheads.

If there is one underrated performer at Country U.S.A. it is the amazing **Jamey Johnson**. After hearing his craptastic song "The Dollar," I stopped paying attention. My loss. Johnson went on to record a collection of authentic country songs with a sexy "real man" voice that makes me weak in the knees. His 2009 ACM Song of the Year "In Color" recounts the stories of old war photographs. Of all recent genre singers, he epitomizes the sound of a bygone era with enough resonance and control to be compared to the greats. He has Willie-Johnny-Merle-Waylon power with a touch of David Allan Coe. Listen to him sing "The Last Cowboy" and you hear nostalgia and resignation rather than mimicry of times past. This is the one singer you are guaranteed to fall in love with. Still, until he gets rid of that billygoat beard, the wedding is off.

MuzikMafia pimp **James Otto** owes a lot to his association with Fox News fan-boy John Rich. His unmemorable mid-tempo tunes appeal to a certain listener with midrange expectations.

**Lady Antebellum** (PS This is my other CB handle!) are talented kids who need to get hurt harder in order to write great songs. Still, their naïve idealism spawns a few little gems, "I run from hate, I run from prejudice, I run from pessimists, but I run too late." Country needs a little conscience sometimes.

HEADLINER: The Redneck Woman, **Gretchen Wilson**, will finish off the show teaching the crowd what it means to be a lady and a tramp. The drowsy-eyed temptress who won't cut her long sassy hair despite teetering on the precipice of middle age is fully in control of her persona and career. Her writing often relies on old tricks and sloppy schlock, but when she shines, she is golden. "When I Think About Cheatin'" is sung with the same throaty pain harness by the classic queens of country. She is the pure uncensored voice of the single mom on a budget who likes to pretty up on the weekends, "Victoria's Secret, well, their stuff is nice, but I can buy the same damned thing on a Wal-Mart shelf half-price and still look sexy." Damn straight.

Come celebrate the end of a long Wisconsin winter and channel your inner bumpkin at this five day festival of new western sounds. I'll be the girl with a flower in her hair and pink Calamine dots covering chigger bites. That's my hand sneaking into your cooler to help myself to a free beer. Let it go. At Country U.S.A., everyone is family.

