

LET THE GAME BEGIN!

COUNTRY STARS SCORE WITH SPORTS EVENTS PERFORMANCES

by KIP KIRBY

The request is simple: "Ladies and gentlemen, please rise for the national anthem." Seventy thousand fans shuffle respectfully to their feet. The stadium falls silent. The opening notes of "The Star-Spangled Banner" soar out over the sound system, delivered by a Country artist who, battling nerves, the glare of the spotlight and the intensity of the moment, works through the performance until the final crescendo triggers a roar of applause and cheers.

It's game time!

Whether singing the national anthem or doing a halftime mini-concert or post-game show, Country artists can be found frequently onstage in sports venues throughout the United States. The reasons are obvious: They draw well among sports fans and they benefit in turn from the local and national exposure that comes with the territory.

"Our goal is to give the fans the best entertainment value we can," said Scott Cunningham, Director of Game Entertainment, Atlanta Braves. "They aren't just coming for the game; they're coming for an entertainment experience. Our fan base falls into five groups: families, corporate, casual fans, avid fans and entertainment seekers. And being here in the South, a lot of these groups share a common interest in Country Music."

This is good news for artists, especially given the crossover appeal of sports and Country Music, as documented in CMA's BrandProspect Segmentation Study, which found a higher-than-average interest in sports among adults 18-54. It's good as well for some of the franchises whose budgets might not allow them to book the giants of the genre to perform a halftime, pre- or post-game show.

For example, Watkins Glen International, a premier road course in upstate New York, draws a core NASCAR crowd that camps out regularly for race weekends. So Brett Powell, Special Events & Partnerships Manager, International Speedway Corporation, doesn't bother going after big-name entertainment. "Booking the developing acts works out best for us financially," he said. "We look for somebody who's a quality singer but can also appreciate the national and international coverage they'll get while they're here."

Some artists enjoy another advantage from these bookings, in that franchises often help maximize exposure by setting up pre- and post-game acoustic sets for them to showcase their music, coordinating promotional tie-ins with team sponsors and local media, providing mentions and write-ups on team Web sites and arranging interviews with local Country radio stations. At Watkins Glen, acts who sing the national anthem even get help finding gigs in nearby clubs. "We try to help them create a small tour here in this market," Powell said. "Obviously



LEANN RIMES PERFORMS AT THE KENTUCKY DERBY IN 2008.



SHERYL CROW AND SARA EVANS BETWEEN PERFORMANCES AT MLB ALL-STAR GAME IN ST. LOUIS IN 2009.

we have a lot of radio station and venue contacts that can be lucrative for the artists."

Sports franchises can also offer ways to reach fans that are otherwise unavailable. The NFL's Pittsburgh Steelers promotes their musical guests through pre-game e-mails to their million-plus fan database as well as through the team's popular "in-bowl texting system," which allows fans in the stadium to receive a personal videotaped message from the artist on their cell phones. At halftime, the artist is invited to visit one of the texting booths to sign autographs, photos and CDs. "We have a very passionate fan base," said John Wodarek, Marketing Manager, Pittsburgh Steelers. "And Country Music is very popular here in Pittsburgh. We can create a lot of exposure for the artists who play here."

Television exposure is another plus. Because most major sports events are carried live on national broadcast networks as well as local media, TelluRide's performance of the national anthem at a NASCAR race was televised over ESPN. Of course, performing live on TV can be as much a challenge as an opportunity, in this case because the group had to synchronize with an F-18 flyover: When the planes ran late, the group had to stretch. Apparently their performance scored, as they were subsequently booked to do four pregame songs at home plate during the Chicago White Sox's final pre-playoff game; that performance was videotaped by Major League Baseball and posted at MLB.com.

TelluRide entertained as well during Derby Week. The Art of the Game, a Nashville-based marketing and entertainment production company, booked them there as well as Megan Linville and LeAnn Rimes, whose rendition of the national anthem was the first in the Kentucky Derby's history by a nationally recognized recording artist. Though Rimes is a headliner, Doug Fraser, President of The Art of the Game, maintains that sporting events are especially beneficial for new acts, including those who, like Linville, have yet to sign a recording deal.

"When she plays one of these events, she's creating a new fan base for herself, not only through people who hear her sing for the first time but through the publicity and promotion and online activity that she generates," said Fraser. "Emerging artists aren't expensive to book and they provide strong entertainment value. In the sports world, acts have to appeal not only to the fans but to the VIPs and corporate sponsors as well. Country acts who do well benefit even without a major label."

To find these acts, sports organizations maintain relationships with record companies, managers and booking agencies and monitor download activity on iTunes, MySpace and other sites. That's how the Atlantic Coast Conference discovered James Otto. The college football

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DEREK SHOLL SINGS AT BALTIMORE'S ORIOLE PARK AT CAMDEN YARDS IN 2009.



CARRIE UNDERWOOD SINGS AT GAME 3 IN THE WORLD SERIES IN 2007, AT DENVER'S COORS FIELD.



JASON MICHAEL CARROLL SINGS AT CHICAGO'S WRIGLEY FIELD IN 2009.

LADY ANTEBELLUM PERFORMS ON NATIONAL TELEVISION AT THE COKE ZERO 400 NASCAR RACE AT DAYTONA IN 2008.



CINCINNATI REDS MASCOT ROSIE RED WELCOMES BRIAN SMITH, JIMI HENDRIX, ADAM CRAIG AND RYAN JONES OF TELLURIDE IN 2009.



conference chose his "Ain't Gonna Stop" as the theme song for its 2009 marketing campaign, "Ain't Gonna Stop on the Road to Tampa Bay." Otto's involvement with the ACC put him in front of hundreds of thousands of college football fans throughout the season, in person and online, culminating in a live concert and national anthem performance at the championship game at the Dr Pepper ACC Championship Game, televised live by ESPN from Tampa.

"This is the first time that the ACC has partnered with a Country artist," said Michael Kelly, Associate Commissioner for Football Operations, ACC. "We looked at a lot of different songs, but when we found a willing partner in James Otto and his management, we zeroed in on making this work. The song has the right feel for college football, not dissimilar from what ESPN does week in and week out with Big & Rich's 'Comin' to Your City.'"

Particularly for emerging artists, exposure of this magnitude can compensate for the fact that these engagements, particularly if they only involve singing the national anthem, are often unpaid. "We've had budgets of \$60,000 to produce postgame shows — and we've had budgets of zero dollars," noted Fraser. "We put Lady Antebellum at the Coke Zero 400 NASCAR race at Daytona on the Fourth of July in 2008 for their first national television appearance. The race was carried live by TNT with a viewing audience of about 16 million. A few months later, Lady Antebellum broke through big time. We helped Jimmy Wayne launch his album (*Do You Believe Me Now*) through MLB.com. The site streamed videos from an acoustic in-studio performance, which helped introduce Jimmy's album to around 11.3 million daily viewers after we'd posted it in August 2008."

Veteran agent Rod Essig of Creative Artists

Agency advises considering several factors before booking a free sports show. Does the artist have a new single or album to promote? Will there be TV exposure? Is there a major Country station in the market? Can the act route through on the way to another gig or pick up a paying venue in the vicinity? And will the appearance help their career down the line?

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— John Wodarek, Marketing Manager, Pittsburgh Steelers



DAVID NAIL, WITH DRUMMER ERICH WIGDAHL AND KEYBOARDIST ERIC KINNEY, PERFORMS ON COUNTRY MUSIC NIGHT IN CHICAGO'S U.S. CELLULAR FIELD IN 2009.

"Sometimes just hanging with the PDs (radio program directors) and being able to take them to the game to see you sing can build support for an artist's music," said Essig. "The PD remembers you later and says, 'Do I want to play this record? Sure — I hung out with them and they're cool.'"

"Early on, almost everything we did was without pay," said TelluRide manager Jeff Catton of InTune Entertainment. "We've driven through the night to sing for 60,000 fans at one of these events. We went in the hole. But we looked at it as an opportunity. We know we're going to be here for the long haul. We're building a career. And we decided if it means one visit at a time, one station at a time, one sporting event at a time, so be it. Sometimes it costs you money, but it gives you the opportunity to make a valuable impression on somebody that will help you in your career later on."

Then there's something else that's not so easily quantified: the thrill that artists get from singing before athletes they've long revered. Just ask Jason Michael Carroll. When he performed at a Chicago Cubs game, several of the players ended up coming to his show the next night. And after singing the national anthem at the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo at Las Vegas in 2008, Carroll was delighted to later learn that just as he hit the "really, really high note," Ronnie Dunn leaned over to Kix Brooks backstage and said, "Now, that right there was a good job!"

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