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Laurel Cove Music Festival



By Saving Country Music.com

It seems like everyone is trying to tap into Kentucky authenticity in music these days, and we shouldn't be surprised. It was Sturgill Simpson, Tyler Childers, and Chris Stapleton who sparked the country music revolution, and it's the Bluegrass State that continues to seed so many of the best and fastest rising names in music today. You can either listen to artists "inspired" by the Kentucky sound—or who synthesize it through the lumbering motions of the Music Row machinery in Nashville—or you can go directly to the source.

On the side of a hill at a state park in Bell County, Kentucky rests the Laurel Cove Amphitheater. Appearing like something taken from a scene of a J.R.R. Tolkien novel, the natural amphitheater fitted with seats and stones for sitting looks over a quaint stage, with a lagoon-like water feature in the front. Lichens and moss adorn everything, and in every nook and around every corner is a magical little spot to commune with nature.

But most important to this little piece of Kentucky paradise is the Laurel Cove Festival that commences

each June. It might as well be the headwaters for genuine country and roots music talent from Kentucky, Appalachia, and beyond. In 2025, two of the three headliners we're Kentucky natives: landmark generational songwriter Ian Noe, and surging Southern rock band Ole 60.

Due to inclement weather though, only one of those headliners got to perform. Ian Noe ended up getting scrubbed Friday night. But direct supporting artist Evan Honer held court under a small pavilion with some very wet and very lucky patrons getting an unplugged and acoustic set they won't soon forget. Jonathan and Abigail Payton weren't even on the lineup, but sang an acapella tune for the ages. Hill Country Devil also performed under the pavilion in moments that will surely be referenced in Laurel Cove lore for years to come.

The rain mostly held off for Ole 60 on Saturday night, but water works weren't completely absent. It's the

mix of strikingly emotional moments, combined with unabashed euphoric flourishes of rock that makes the Ole 60 experience so compelling. As the announcer said ahead of their set, when they first appeared on the scene like a thunderbolt, nobody knew



anything about them ... except that they were from Kentucky. For Laurel Cove, that's qualification enough. Along with their original songs, Ole 60 also covered Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here" and Coldplay's "Yellow."

Setting the table for Ole 60 was Oklahoma's Kaitlin Butts, but it was a group of young girls and a boy

that threatened to steal the show. They were standing on the side of the stage the whole show, singing and dancing along. Kaitlin walked over at one point and gave them their own little private show. Then at the very end of the set, Kaitlin brought all the kids

out on stage, and they danced off together to close the set as the crowd went nuts.

Afterwards, Kaitlin hung out with the kids (see video), signed a bunch of stuff for them, and made their little years. And then after the show, Kaitlin drove her own tour van towing a trailer BACKWARDS all the way down the mountain like a damn boss

because there was nowhere to turn around. The crew at the Laurel Cove Festival couldn't believe it. "She's a badass!" one crew member said.

It's moments like this that people will remember, young and old, for years to come. But the Laurel Cove Music Festival is just as much about the opening and up-and-coming names to discover as it is the big evening acts, if not even more.

London, Kentucky is not too far up the road from Laurel Cove in Pineville. But Jack Browning hails from the other London where the King sits on his throne. In Kentucky, you have colonels, not Kings. But Browning could be mistaken for a hill-jack in the right light, and certainly sounds like one, speaking to the worldwide influence of Appalachia on music.

Not nearly as far away, but still at an impressive distance, Noeline Hoffman came down from Canada to hit the cove for a third time, second

as a performer, and first time on the main stage. She actually shares a kinship with Jack Browning since they both released tribute songs to fallen country music artist Luke Bell, who though usually associated with Wyoming, happened to be born in Kentucky. They both performed their versions of "The Bullfighter" on the weekend, but nobody complained.

It was Noeline's Hoffman's speech in the middle of her set that really spelled out why small independent festivals like Laurel Cove are so important.

"Laurel Cove ended up being the most important part of my whole trip down here to the United States ... I ended up at Laurel Cove at the very end of my trip, and it completely changed my life, all the artists, the people and music that I met down here. If I didn't end up here, I don't know what my life would look like now. I know it sounds dramatic, but it really is true."

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