

THIS WEEKEND

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Who's playing Justin Vernon's Eaux Claires fest in 2026?

BY CHRIS RIEMENSCHNEIDER
The Minnesota Star Tribune

MINNEAPOLIS

Even as it relocates to a more central site in its namesake city, Justin Vernon's Eaux Claires festival will be all over the map musically in its 2026 comeback.

Experimental R&B singer Dijon, '80s hitmaker-turned-acclaimed-songwriter Aimee Mann, Atlanta rapper Lil Yachty, Louisiana music vets Jon Cleary and Nathan & the Zydeco Cha Chas and Minnesota-rooted fuzz-rock band Hotline TNT top off the eclectic list of names so far confirmed for Eaux Claires 2026. The initial lineup was revealed at a Feb. 11 party at the 410 Bar in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, Vernon's hometown.

The Grammy-winning singer-songwriter of Bon Iver fame, Vernon is bringing the festival back from an eight-year hiatus July 24 and 25 and moving it to a new location, Eau Claire's riverside Carson Park.

Vernon is also part of the festival roster, but not for a performance by his Bon Iver band, which has been on hiatus. Instead, he is listed as host of an all-star tribute to fellow Upper Midwest songwriting hero Bob Dylan, who performed in Eau Claire for the first time last April with Vernon in attendance.

Fans can also likely expect to see Vernon take the stage with Dijon, who enlisted the Wisconsin indie-rock vet to perform in his band on "Saturday Night Live" and at his sold-out show at the Fillmore in Minneapolis in December. They're good buds.

Other names revealed on the lineup for Eaux Claires' comeback year include: Yeah Yeah Yeahs guitarist Nick Zinner's cover band BSCBR (Black Sabbath Cover Band Rehearsal); the chamber-folk duo Mary Lattimore and Julianne Barwick; Toronto neo-soul singer Daniel Caesar; longtime Vernon cohort Phil Cook and his band the Union; ex-Phox singer Monica Marton, plus a "very special guest" yet to be announced.

Pop star Gracie Abrams - who recently recorded a charity single with Vernon - came up on one of the pull tabs that were coyly used to reveal the names at the unveiling party. However, she is not officially confirmed as part of the lineup.

Akin to when Vernon asked the Indigo Girls to play their "Swamp Opelia" album in full at Eaux Claires' 2015 inaugural year, Mann is booked to perform her acclaimed 2000 LP, "Bachelor No. 2, or the Last Remains of the Dodo."

Not exactly a roster of megastars - Eaux Claires always eschewed the norms of other summer music fests - the lineup clearly marks an adventurous alternative to the many nostalgic, radio-hits-driven festivals already on tap for 2026, including St. Paul's Minnesota Yacht Club (happening the weekend before Eaux Claires with Matchbox 20, the Lumineers and the Strokes).

Eaux Claires first took place at a campground on the outskirts of Eau Claire in 2015, under the direction of Vernon and the National's Aaron Dessner. Over the next three summers, it drew thousands of music fans from the Twin Cities (90 minutes away) and from all over with lineups featuring Paul Simon, Chance the Rapper, Wilco, Mavis Staples, Spoon, Erykah Badu, Feist and then-newcomers Phoebe Bridgers and Sturgill Simpson, plus Bon Iver and the National.

Tickets for this year's fest went on sale Feb. 13 for fans who sign up for a presale access code via eauxclaires.com. There will be an in-person presale option for locals on Feb. 12 at various locations in Eau Claire. Prices have not yet been revealed, but two-day passes are expected to start around \$150.



JOHN J. KIM TNS

Maryanne Colter talks with fellow participants of a workshop about family and politics with the Chicago chapter of Braver Angels, an organization aimed at building trust and understanding across political differences, at St. Pauls United Church of Christ on Feb. 7, 2026.

WTTW's new season of 'Firsthand' hopes to show that democracy is 'a participatory sport'

BY DARCEL ROCKETT
Chicago Tribune

CHICAGO

For seven seasons, the people behind WTTW's "Firsthand" documentary series have gathered to figure out what subject to focus their efforts. In previous years, executive producer Dan Protess and his team have centered such topics as segregation, coronavirus, poverty, homelessness and life after prison. This season is about the state of American democracy and how people in the Chicago area are fighting for democracy in one way or another.

"My framing device is that chant you often hear at protests: 'This is what democracy looks like!'" Protess said. "Unless you're a political scientist, it's a bit hard to wrap your brain around what democracy does look like. We're taught in school that democracy is your role as a citizen, and democracy is to show up and vote once every two or four years. We wanted to look at, what are the other faces of democracy? What are other roles that citizens can take to participate?"

"Firsthand: Democracy" features five people filmed over the course of last summer and fall, including Isabel Aquilar, a naturalized U.S. citizen from Mexico who volunteers as a tutor for immigrants; Maryanne Colter, who teaches people how to tone down toxic partisanship; Julee Mortensen, a 72-year-old suburban grandmother who organizes and participates in protests; Miten Patel, an Evanston Township High School teacher and British-born Indian immigrant who encourages his students to engage with the political process; and Camille Williams, whose mother was murdered when she was 6 years old, and who works to ensure those impacted by the legal system know their rights, including the formerly incarcerated.

Right now, Patel is looking forward to the Illinois primary on March 17, showing underclassmen what it is to vote, so they're not only seeing it when they experience it at age 18.

"There's no way to sugarcoat it," Patel said. "You need to know what's happening, where you fall in, in terms of what is happening and what you can do if something disrupts or violates your constitutional rights. How do I impress upon these young adults not to be so disenfranchised, so apathetic that they don't take that huge civic right that they have to vote when the

the nation's 250th anniversary, this season will draw audiences from other cities. The one thing he wants people to take away: "That democracy is a verb, a participatory sport. I'm hoping these stories will provide people with models of roles that they might be able to play, whether it's facilitating dialogue, maybe not on a mass scale like Maryanne, but maybe within their family or their workplace, or as educators doing their part."

"We all have a role to play if we want to have a healthy, thriving democracy," he added. "I think most people do, but they've forgotten, in no small part because of social media, what their role is beyond shouting in the comments section."

Patel teaches AP government and politics. He found education after banking and journalism didn't hold his attention. When he began his role as educator, things like books and history weren't points of contention, whereas now there's greater control over what can and cannot be done inside the classroom. But in a glimpse of Patel in front of his class in the series, his enthusiasm is palpable as he engages in conversations with his students, sparking dialogue that makes them think. Executive orders and actions on the congressional floor are debated and students question those in power in their workplace or at school, including local legislators.

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Maryanne Colter

time is appropriate? I keep saying it and not moving away from it, because I truly believe in it. Understanding that triangle relationship between legislative, executive and judicial is probably one of the most important things I could impress upon these young adults."

Colter "solves democracy one conversation at a time," by volunteering with the nonprofit Braver Angels, an organization created in 2016 to show individuals how to disagree on topics like politics without changing one's views on issues. She does that by conducting workshops on how to talk with one another.

"One of our new phrases that we're using is: how can we choose connection over domination?" Colter said. "Since the last election, my phone's been ringing off the hook with churches, colleges, high schools, and now middle schools. The temperature is rising and we need to rise with it. Listening to somebody is not the same as

agreeing with them. It's OK to disagree. How do we make that constructive? How can we get in front of more people to teach them how to have respectful dialogue and understanding?"

The situation is so pervasive that a Northwestern University psychology professor created a research-backed game to equip people with a method for teaching productive disagreement. The goal is to understand each other's reasoning well enough that players can visualize "why" they disagree. A 2025 study by Northwestern University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill revealed it is possible to change an opinion of someone with an opposing view by bridging identity divides, viewing another person's perspective, and utilizing personal narratives. Researchers found that those who emphasized their political knowledge or bombarded folks with facts to prove them wrong wasn't effective.

Colter says Braver Angels Illinois has at least four events a month. Protess said regardless of avenue, the conversation is not mediated by an algorithm that surrounds us with people who agree with us.

"Sometimes it's more what you need to unlearn than what you need to learn," Colter said. "There's no substitute for sitting down across the table and having a one-on-one conversation with somebody that you know sees something differently. We always tell people, listen for values and concerns, and therein, you'll find the common ground of the issue."

WTTW is partnering with Braver Angels of Illinois, Illinois America 250, Illinois Humanities, and Mikva Challenge to host community conversations on democracy, the first in its studios on Feb. 16, when at 5:30 and 10 p.m., "Chicago Tonight" will present the first "Firsthand" episode. Visit wttw.com/events for more information.