

Violence, tragedy, mass arrests: What is going on with country music concerts this summer?

By Emily Yahr
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You may have seen the stories in the last few weeks: A 22-year-old man was found dead in a landfill after being “extremely intoxicated” at a Jason Aldean concert in Cleveland. An 18-year-old male was accused of raping a 17-year-old girl at a Keith Urban show in Mansfield, Mass., with “the only certainty” being that they were both drinking. At the same event, so many people went to the hospital with alcohol issues that officials declared it a “mass casualty incident.”

The common thread is that these incidents all happened at country music concerts and all were booze-related. Although violence, tragedy and police intervention can occur at any type of concert where people get rowdy, this particularly brutal stretch comes as modern country music is increasingly populated by extreme alcohol-themed, hard-partying songs.

What's going on here? For many years, country music was targeted to middle-age women, with the reputation of sappy love songs and family-friendly tunes. Now, the demographics have dramatically changed, as the audience is getting younger and the demand grows for rock-charged songs that blast out of your speakers as you pre-game a concert. At the moment, the genre's most popular artists (from Aldean to Kenny Chesney to Luke Bryan, whose 2011 smash album was called “Tailgates & Tanlines”) cater to a young, often testosterone-fueled audience, many of whom enjoy an alcoholic beverage before, during and after a show.

Some who specialize in security have a theory about why there are so many issues at country shows: Tailgates.

“The country crowd is more of a tailgate crowd – they like to get their drink on,” said Lenny

Lambert, the senior regional manager in the D.C. area for Contemporary Services Corporation. The company handled security recently for the Aldean stadium concert at Nationals Park. Things went smoothly, he said, because they knew from previous large shows to be prepared.

It helped that the July concert date had beautiful weather – if it's a scorching hot summer day, that definitely affects crowd behavior, Lambert said, especially if people get dehydrated. Plus, there's not a lot of room for tailgating near Nationals Park.

However, authorities say weather didn't contribute to the horrible scene in Massachusetts at the Urban show, when the triage area outside the Xfinity Center called for assistance when there was an overwhelming number of intoxicated concertgoers. Seven additional ambulances had to be called, said Mansfield Deputy Fire Chief James Puleo.

“The biggest issue that we saw that night was related to tailgating, alcohol and potential drug use by the patrons,” Puleo said.

Urban, for what its worth, isn't one for party songs. Still, his concert attracted lots of people who were drinking heavily, including minors who weren't served by the venue that brought their own libations. Puleo estimates the biggest surge of people needing medical assistance came around 8 p.m., before Urban even went on stage.

Meanwhile, city officials in Pittsburgh made some serious changes to tailgating rules this summer after fans trashed downtown prior to Bryan's concert at Heinz Field football stadium in June; the same thing happened to the city last year during a Kenny Chesney-Tim McGraw headlining tour. The Bryan concert

also resulted in many arrests, fights and hundreds of 911 calls.

"City authorities played a role in enabling this behavior by not really cracking down on it for a while," said Timothy McNulty, a spokesman for the mayor's office, citing the "calls to 911 and mountains of garbage at the Luke Bryan show" as when they decided to revamp the procedures.

New rules went into effect when Aldean made a stop at PNC Park baseball stadium a couple of weeks later — the lots opened at 2 p.m. instead of 11 a.m., and tailgating had to end by the time the first opening act took the stage. There were still several incidents and multiple arrests, but thanks to cooperation from promoters and parking lot operators, things were much less chaotic, McNulty said.

In the Washington area, 25,000-capacity Jiffy Lube Live in Bristow attempted a tailgate ban in 2012 that was met with outcry from fans of all genres, which shows that the problem goes much further than just country music.

Still, many are quick to link the recent flood of drinking songs coming out of Nashville to this recent spate of concert incidents. While drinking has always been a popular trope in country music, it's difficult to ignore the wave of beer-chugging, whiskey-swilling, shot-taking tunes that top the country charts at the moment. It recently prompted Billboard to ask "Does Country Music Need An Alcohol Intervention?," calling out current hits including Dierks Bentley's "Drunk on a Plane," Little Big Town's "Day Drinking" and Frankie Ballard's "Sunshine & Whiskey."

"This is a song about getting black-out drunk," a country deejay recently announced on the radio as he introduced Lady Antebellum's "Bartender," where the female narrator takes double shots of whiskey after a break-up.

Naturally, some wonder whether there's a link between the recent spate of incidents and this booze-heavy lyrics. (Sample comment on a story about the Urban concert: "Hmmm I wonder if there's any correlation between all these alcohol-related arrests and injuries and the fact that EVERY OTHER SONG ON COUNTRY RADIO CELEBRATES DRINKING?")

While it's an easy connection to make, it's just not that simple to point fingers at content. Various experts admit that although it doesn't exactly help that so many country stars are glamorizing boozy nights out, that alone can't be only factor that causes a group of friends to get drunk at a show.

Don Cusic, a country music historian and professor at Belmont University in Nashville, points out the trend could be a result of country consumers simply becoming younger and that demographic is more likely to act out, despite potential consequences.

"It's not the music that creates the problem," Cusic said. "It might be the soundtrack while the problem is happening, but really, it's young people who tend to get a little wild and crazy."

He added that similar accusations were made against rock-and-roll, along with rap music; and there have been plenty of bar room fights since the honky-tonk days.

Other experts agree that you can't quite draw a line directly from lyrics to behavior. "I don't think anyone can be inspired by a song to drink too much. But the question is, what kind of message is it portraying?" said Sherry Gaba, a licensed clinical social worker at the Soba Recovery Center in California. "I don't think they'll have a drink just because of a song, but it does put out a message that it's okay."

In other words, it isn't quite fair to blame newer country artists putting their "stamp of

approval” on lyrics about Jack Daniels or how great it is to drink all the time.

“I think maybe country music always reflects a culture more than it creates it. I’m not saying there’s no connection — it’s certainly an encouragement to drink and party — but I can’t

say it’s the reason,” Cusic said. “If country music didn’t exist, people would still be getting drunk and arrested.”

Source: <http://www.washingtonpost.com>