

THINGS TO DO &gt; MUSIC + CONCERTS

## Stagecoach 2019: Festival is 'Country Strong' with song and performance dedicated to Route 91, Borderline victims

Country music fans are turning to each other to triumph over tragedy.



Festival goers take part in "Country Strong," a song and dance honoring the country fan community and celebrating those who dance on despite tragedy, took place in the Honky Tonk Dance Hall at the Stagecoach Country Music Festival at the Empire Polo Club in Indio Saturday, April 27, 2019. Many Route 91 and Borderline bar survivors were in attendance. (Photo by Will Lester, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin/SCNG)

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PUBLISHED: April 27, 2019 at 7:17 p.m. | UPDATED: April 28, 2019 at 10:36 a.m.

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On Nov. 7, the night of the mass shooting at the Borderline Bar & Grill in Thousand Oaks, the country trio Honey County was playing a club in Anaheim. Founder Dani Rose came to a realization.

“It could have been any bar. It could have been any festival.”

Rose and thousands of other people are bringing that knowledge to the Stagecoach Country Music Festival in Indio this weekend. Among them are members of the Borderline community, where 12 people died, and the Route 91 Harvest Festival on Oct. 1, 2017, where a shooter took the lives of 58 people and wounded 489 more in October 2017.

At Stagecoach's request, Rose and bandmates Katie Stump and Devon Jane wrote a song for healing and unity called “Country Strong,” a term adopted by survivors.

The song declares “nobody loves harder than we can.”

Honey County performed a special version of the song Saturday in Stagecoach's line dancing tent called the Honkytonk Dance Hall with a remix by DJ Hish and steps for 150 line dancers created by Stagecoach dance captain Anne Marie Dunn, who is based in Rancho Cucamonga, and Kristal Lynn Konzen, a dance teacher at the Borderline.

Thousands of concertgoers watched the performance and after Honey County and dancers performed the routine, they did it again, inviting the members of the public who learned the steps to join in, with moves that included hands in the shape of a heart and fists to the sky.

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Dunne has been dancing at Stagecoach for six years and said in a backstage interview that every year the festival chooses a line dance theme. After the Borderline shooting, she chose "Country Strong."

"We wanted to show respect for the lives that were lost as well as show honor to the survivors."

Dunne said she and Konzen worked out the steps in about a day.

Konzen said the dance steps were easy to learn but brought out the meaning of the lyrics, which include, "We'll hold our heads and our drinks high, rising like the sun in a hometown sky."

"In the beginning we kneel down, and again that is to show respect for the lives that were lost and honor and respect for life," said Dunne.

Brian Hynes, the owner of Borderline, attended the performance and thanked the audience for being there and said, "I love you."

The dancers wore black T-shirts with orange ribbons and the hashtag #CountryDanceStrong. A number of them were survivors of Route 91 or Borderline.

Before the performance, hundreds of survivors gathered in front of the giant Ferris wheel on Stagecoach grounds for a group photo. Some were selling orange Route 91 wristbands to raise funds for a Las Vegas shooting victim who had lost a son.

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These observances continue what began last year at Stagecoach, which was the first major West Coast festival after Route 91 and was attended by as many as 2,000 Route 91 survivors. Some were overcoming a reluctance to go out in public, and many sought out each other.

The Route 91 community was quick to reach out to Borderline, said Julie Craig, a vendor with a booth called Countryfied that sells a large selection of Country Strong merchandise.

Craig had her booth at Route 91 and was in the crowd while Jason Aldean's set was closing out that event when the shooting started, followed by chaos and anguish. Aldean will close out this year's Stagecoach on Sunday.

Craig enjoys the hugs she gets from other survivors at events like Stagecoach.

"We're still kind of messed up, but I think we're better," she said. "We've come a long way.

"Country people are good people. They're amazing. And they're going to help us."

Rose said country music "has a way of bringing people together as a community that really no other genre has, "especially in California. Here in California, when you're a country music fan, everybody knows each other."

She said Honey County struggled to get the lyrics of "Country Strong" right with collaborator Kalie Schorr, who "made it better." Rose said the band has received many thanks since the song dropped at midnight Friday.

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In some ways the country music scene was permanently changed by the shootings, said Rose.

“I’ve certainly noticed security changes. We played the Orange County Fair with Brett Eldredge just last July and there were so many more security people there. And it felt really secure. You go to a festival and you’re expecting things to have a little bit of looseness, but not anymore. And I’m fine with that.”

But the song has a different message.

“We’re going to keep rising up in spite of darkness in everything that we do,” said Stump. “Any tragedy that comes our way, we’re going to keep holding our heads high. We’re going to keep enjoying life and exceeding our own expectations of who we are and what we want to accomplish.”

Craig said she has been able to rise above and is smiling more than last year’s Stagecoach. She said her staff members cautioned each other, “Be careful, Julie cries a lot.

“But no, I’m not crying like I used to cry. It’s like, there’s my family, and we hug. So it’s a good thing. It is.”

To preview or purchase “Country Strong”: <http://smarturl.it/k6o60a>