

# The Press Democrat

## TIMEOUT

### COUNTRY SUMMER FESTIVAL



ANTHONY BAKER

Country star Dustin Lynch, 29, says country artists can thrive due to the "fact that rock has kinda gone away a little bit."

## Field is wide open for country

Young stars set to perform at fairgrounds feel their genre is becoming the mainstream music

By DAN TAYLOR

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American country music dates back at least a century or so, yet somehow it remains remarkably fresh.

Today's hot current country stars, many of them in their 20s and 30s, remain true to the country spirit with good-timey tunes, romantic ballads and story songs about life in the good ol' U.S. of A.

But they also produce stylish (and sometimes tastefully sexy) music videos, often with a back-beat that would've been called pure rock 'n' roll a generation ago.

This weekend's County Summer music festival at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds features some of the best of this contemporary crop, including Hunter Hayes, Dustin Lynch, Joe Nichols and the Eli Young Band.

The lineup also includes Darius Rucker, a 21st-century country star who had an earlier pop music career with Hootie and the Blowfish.

"I think I'm part of a new group that has come in," said Dustin Lynch, 29, speaking by phone from Nashville. "For country artists, it's an opportune time to capitalize on the fact that rock has kinda gone away a little bit."

Lynch's current hit, "Where It's At," has a rock beat in the back-

## COUNTRY: Today's stars boast rock beat, stylish videos

CONTINUED FROM PAGE D1

ground, but the video is full of classic country icons, including a red pickup truck and a Pabst Blue Ribbon beer can.

"We've got a lot of fans out there searchin' for something they can hold onto, and that's why country music is growing so much," Lynch said. "We can tell that, because there's 18 to 20 more country music festivals this year."

Drinking songs are part of the country tradition, but the Texas-grown, 30-something quartet Eli Young Band has a current hit called "Drunk Last Night" that is more of a social commentary than a rowdy party song.

Country music's ongoing movement into the mainstream seems to be accelerating, said the band's drummer, Chris Thompson.

"A few years ago, we were too rock for country. Now we're almost too country, it feels like," Thompson joked.

"It seems like there was a strong trend some years back in country music, where artists were trying to make it more of a rock sound, and that really opened up a lot of doors."

The Eli Young Band is one of the contemporary country acts that has gained momentum from the style's growth and change.

"Country is more like pop music now, so it's really a wide-open genre, which is great for bands like mine, which always has tried to do something different," Thompson said.

Joe Nichols, 37, an Arkansas native who now lives in Texas, strives to balance country tradition with a modern sound.

"It feels like country is the mainstream music now. It sure has exploded," said Nichols, dubbed "one of the sexiest men in country music" by People Magazine.

Nichols, whose current tune "Yeah" is rising on the charts, has had number-one hit singles with "Sunny and 75"

and "Tequila Makes Her Clothes Fall Off" — a classic country song title.

"The way to go out on the edge of country music now is to be traditional," Nichols said.

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