

# B TWIN COUNTY LIVING

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BRANDI CARLILE



TANYA TROTTER OF THE WAR & TREATY



KACEY MUSGRAVES

## FLOYDFEST

### FIERCE, FANTASTIC FEMALE PERFORMERS WERE HIGHLIGHTS OF MUSIC FESTIVAL

By **BRIAN FUNK**  
 Staff

**FLOYD** — It's really, really difficult to find anything negative to say about FloydFest, infused as it is with such positive vibes.

At the massive festival just down the road from Galax, the music from the 100-plus artists — from punk to bluegrass to blues to folk to hippy jams — is all so good; and the staff, fans and performers are all so chill and welcoming. Offering even constructive criticism feels kind of rude.

If there was any critique to be made of last year's stellar lineup of artists, it was that 2018's headlining acts skewed almost entirely male — still diverse both stylistically and otherwise, mind you, but lacking that particular voice and life experience that a female artist can bring to the stage.

Not to say it was in any way intentional; you can imagine the logistical challenges the festival organizers face when coordinating the touring schedules of all the artists so you get the mix you want.

But this year, whether by design or coincidence or just a karmic balance asserting itself, many of the performers on the main Dreaming Creek Stage and beyond were fierce, fiery, female and fantastic. FloydFest got some much-needed gender diversity this year, from headliners like 2019 Grammy winners Brandi Carlile and Kacey Musgraves; to rising stars like Margo Price and Becca Marcari; soulful vocal fireworks

from Tanya Trotter, one half of husband-and-wife duo The War & Treaty; and band front-women like Melody Walker of Front Country and Caitlin Krisko of The Broadcast.

Nestled in bucolic farmland amidst the Blue Ridge Mountains, tucked among the verdant forests of the Parkway, and populated by a tribe of modern day Flower Children, it's easy to feel welcomed back into Mother Nature's loving embrace at FloydFest; and this year you had to believe "Mom" was smiling down on the festival grounds.

(Was it a coincidence that the weather was absolutely perfect for five whole days, following a soggy spring and early summer?)

The 19th annual FloydFest — held this year from July 24-28 — drew fans from all over the world to an outdoor festival that's equal parts five-day party and family reunion; a mecca for fans of musical styles ranging from the Grateful Dead to Hank Williams. It's a place where you'll find hippies and hillbillies happily dancing together to an eclectic mix of everything from fiddlin' to funk.

That everyone-welcome atmosphere was reflected in this year's theme, "Voyage Home," which festival co-founder Kris Hodges said "speaks to returning to the source of where we all come from, Mother Earth. It is there where we find ourselves most at home."

And FloydFest, whether it's your first time

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BECCA MARCARI

Gazette photos by Brian Funk



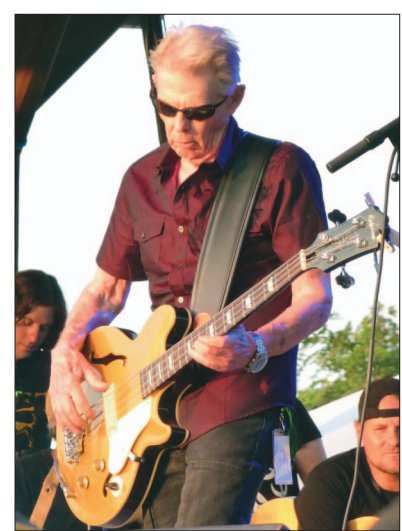
CAITLIN KRISKO OF THE BROADCAST



MELODY WALKER OF FRONT COUNTRY



MARGO PRICE



FROM LEFT: Tyler Childers made a triumphant return to the main stage this year, the crowd shows nothing but peace and love for The War & Treaty; Fantastic Negrito rocks the Hill Holler Stage; Hot Tuna performs at the Dreaming Creek Stage.

Gazette photos by Brian Funk

# FloydFest

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or your 19th, does feel like you've sailed into your home port. You can find friendly faces everywhere, from the dreadlocked dude with feathers in his top hat parking cars to the noodling dancers in front of the small stages; from the girl dressed like a mermaid and twirling a lighted hula hoop to the enthusiastic crowds, a tie-dyed tidal wave of humanity.

Everywhere, you feel like you're in a "SpongeBob" fever dream, with pirates, sailors, mer-people, jelly-walking squid-men, lighted rubber jellyfish on poles dancing above the crowds and a full-size wooden pirate ship in the center of the field, surrounded by a little "beach" where kids are building sandcastles.

On Friday afternoon, Acoustic Syndicate is offering up cosmic bluegrass jams on the main stage, as the crowd sways and grooves. They're one example of the very lively genre of Grateful Dead-style bands that land at the crossroads between '60s psychedelia and progressive bluegrass. Other popular practitioners of this trippy mix this year are Hot Tuna, Leftover Salmon and Phil Lesh & The Terrapin Family Band.

On the aptly named Pink Floyd Stage under the trees, Kentucky band Driftwood Gypsy breathes new life into this well-worn genre, along with classic rock and a crowd-pleasing mashup of Floyd, the Dead and the Doobie Brothers in one song. They bring a spoons player named Milkman on stage for one song, and end their set with a harmonious rendition of a gospel song.

Perhaps feeling the feminine energy of this year's 'Fest, Driftwood Gypsy's guitarist David "Chill" Napier is rocking a pink dress with a rainbow-hued cat on the chest.

Their style is like all of FloydFest and summed up in one band, and they're great.

But the event is so much more than Five Nights of the Living (Grateful) Dead. The lineup is wide-ranging and nothing — from the Eastern European punk-folk throwdown of Bella's Bartok to the disco glitter ball soul rock of The Motet — feels out of place when you stumble onto it right after hearing a bluegrass band.

Speaking of more traditional bands, the young pickers in Circus No. 9 are thrilling the tipsy crowd gathered at the backstage VIP tent this afternoon. The band has virtuosic chops and a banjo player who conjures sounds out of the instrument you've never heard.

"They're so good, and they have no idea," says Caroline Abercrombie of Johnson City, Tenn. "I almost hope nobody tells them, because they're so young. I don't want it to go to their heads."

Abercrombie is there scouting and recruiting performers for the Blue Plum Festival she helps organize in Johnson City. She marvels at the amount of talent in the Virginia-Tennessee area, and the number of festivals that thrive, with new ones sprouting each year.

Later that night, Jerry and Donna Mink of Galax are waiting at the festival entrance for one of the Boy Scout school buses for a ride back to their campsite. They've been coming for years, camping out and enjoying the wide array of acts.

"You look at the schedule, and can't pay attention to just the big acts," says Donna. "So many of these smaller groups are so good."

On the main stage this evening,



DRIFTWOOD GYPSY



THE MOTET



LUKAS NELSON



THE YAWPERS

Asheville, N.C., band The Broadcast — one of the Minks' favorites — is tearing through a set influenced by '60s Motown and '70s rock with primal intensity. Caitlyn Krisko shakes a tambourine as her earthshaking voice evokes Janis Joplin, Robert Plant and Stevie Nicks.

They're followed by rising star of folk-alt rock, Becca Mancari; a stylistic shift from the bombastic Broadcast, with her deeply personal lyrics about maintaining a long-term relationship and coming out to her dad; and "Tear Us Apart," which she says is about the deep social divisions in post-2016 America. And, she does it all with some serious electric guitar chops.

Mancari tells the crowd she's thrilled to be part of a predominantly female lineup on this particular evening, "and of one two queer women playing back-to-back," referring to Carlile, the night's headliner.

A few days later, country superstar Kacey Musgraves will also proudly fly the rainbow flag as an LGBTQ ally, ending her show with air cannons unleashing a barrage of pink-and-white confetti that showers the appreciative crowd like millions of cherry tree blossoms.

One particular color of the rainbow is very popular at FloydFest — green. There are numerous industrial hemp producers and CBD oil vendors with booths; and some of the healthiest, bushiest, greenest (legal) cannabis you've ever seen decorates a backstage tent.

On a hot afternoon, country-folk artist Margo Price advises the crowd to stay "hydrated, high and happy" during her set on the main stage. The crowd whoops in agreement.

In her flowery dress, white heels

and big sunglasses, Price looks like she just got out of church. But if so, given the weed-friendly atmosphere, you wonder what's baked into those communion wafers.

Later, Price will join Lukas Nelson for a few songs during his set at the Hill Holler Stage, singing backup on "Lotta Fun" and others.

When you're the son of a country legend and national treasure, and when you call your band "Promise of the Real," you have a lot to live up to. Luckily for Nelson, they deliver on that promise with pure jam rock grooves and socially conscious, thoughtful lyrics. You know he's making ol' Willie proud.

With his hair pulled back in a single long braid, perhaps a tribute to his dad, Nelson builds intensity like a gathering storm as he ends his set with a blistering guitar solo on a cover of Neil Young & Crazy Horse's epic "Cortez the Killer."

Fantastic Negrito puts on a great show at Hill Holler on another night, exhorting the crowd to "don't just dance to it, think to it," as he sets his social commentary songs to funky, Prince-ly guitar work.

Passing by the Throwdown Tent, situated at the midway point of the festival grounds, you hear something raw and feral coming from inside the small, domed amphitheater.

Sure, there's rock in the lineup every year, but you haven't heard anything like this at FloydFest. This is pure, uncut ROCK from The Yawpers, a Colorado trio that only needs two guitars and a drum kit to make an immense sound.

Their mix of punk and blues — think Jack White, but with a irresistibly danceable beat — combines surf

rock and electric slide guitar with Nate Cook's expressive vocals and commanding, high-energy stage presence. At one point, he puts down his instrument and smokes a cigarette during Jesse Parmet's guitar solo, taking in the spectacle along with the audience.

Their life show is like a runaway locomotive; you just jump on and hang on for your life while it barrels downhill with the brakes on fire.

The Yawpers might be nothing else at the festival, but they share the authenticity and passion of their fellow FloydFest acts.

None are more authentic than Tyler Childers, the Kentucky singer-songwriter who's returning this year for another set on the main stage.

Childers has grown into a more confident performer this year, backed by a band that can keep up with the emotional and musical territory his songs traverse. It's a journey from the mountains ("Whitehouse Road") to the mines ("Coal") to the metaphysical ("Born Again"), always delivered with a whiskey-honed rasp that tells you he's been there, done that, and lived to tell the tale.

If he seemed a bit daunted by the main stage in 2018, this year Childers fully embraces his status as the standard-bearer for his genre of traditional country, folk and bluegrass.

As good as Childers' performance is — and it's very good — the real rock star of the show is Brandi Carlile. She's returning to FloydFest following a career-defining performance of "The Joke" at this year's Grammy awards — where she took home three awards — and the crowd welcomes her back with open arms.

"I was driving in on that dirt road [into the festival] and I felt the weight

lift off my shoulders," Carlile tells the audience. "I was coming home," she confesses, before singing "Wherever Is Your Heart."

She also jokes about the festival's anything-goes offerings, asking the crowd: "Can somebody get me an organic popsicle, a tapestry and a whisky?"

Her show sums FloydFest and its "Voyage Home" theme up perfectly — a world-touring, award-winning artist at the top of her game, who feels most welcome in a field full of loving, accepting friends in Southwest Virginia.

Just as the Virginia Tourism Corp.'s big light-up "LOVE" sign next to the stage begins to glow in rainbow hues, Carlile ends her encore of "I Am Yours" by flashing a peace sign.

The crowd responds with their own fingers in V formation, and you realize it's not just a symbol for peace.

It's a V for victory.

*Making plans for next year? FloydFest is held Wednesday-Sunday on the last week of July, and next year it's the landmark 20th anniversary. The festival grounds are located just off the Blue Ridge Parkway at Milepost 170.5, or 894 Rock Castle Gorge Road in Floyd. It's about 40 miles from Galax, via U.S. 58 and the Parkway. For more information, visit [floydfest.com](http://floydfest.com) or follow the festival on Facebook*