

Hoedown Showdown finalists named at Town Park



By Brock Weir

Local country music lovers proved a hardy bunch last week as they braved the rain to see Canada's next country star move onto the next level.

On Wednesday, Aurora's Concerts in the Park summer series was handed over to the Top 20 semi-finalists vying for the crown in the 2019 Hoedown Showdown talent competition. Representing communities from across Ontario, contestants, who had passed through the audition process earlier this month, entertained an enthusiastic crowd of nearly 500 fans at Town Park with country music selections, ranging from the classics to modern country pop.

Wowing the judges ? previous winner Mac Shepherd, philanthropist and television personality Joan Kelley Walker, and Magna's Steve Hinder ? the first 19 contestants played to enthusiastic crowds and relatively friendly skies. Come the final contestant, however, Mother Nature brought on the rain and lightning and the concert took on a more intimate feel when, as judges retired to deliberate, crowds gathered under the shelter of the bandshell for an acoustic performance from 2017 winner John Anderson.

Once they emerged, the judges rendered their decision. The Top 10 Contestants who will face off in the finals at the 2019 Magna Hoedown on Friday, September 13 are:

Dustin Bird (Stirling)

Sarah Campbell Mills
(Burlington)

Evan Farrell
(Whitchurch-Stouffville)

Annie H. (St. Catherines)

Dayna Reid (Elmvale)

Derek Reilly (Queensville)

Katie Sacco (Toronto)

Hannah Thomas (Stratford)

Jacqui Verellen (Toronto)

Dylan Wallace (Holland Landing)

There are so many impressive performers, and honestly, this was the toughest one ever to go from 20 contestants to ten, Ms. Kelley Walker told The Auroran as the on-stage jam session continued. Everyone had something that made themselves sparkle and shine, so it was really difficult. The ten we picked will be just so great on that stage. Some of them are [returning] and for some of them it will be their first time and they are getting all this coaching and mentoring (in the lead up to September 13). Tonight, we were listening for potential, we were listening for confidence and, of course, the voice is the primary thing. It is going to be exceptional.

For Ms. Kelley Walker, it all comes down to comfort, personality, and making the songs as personal as they can.

They can take on any iconic song, but just perform it as if they have written it themselves, she said. That's what really speaks to me when I am listening and I think that's what's going to win a competition like this.

That's what made 16-year-old Hannah Thomas stand out from the crowd when she stepped up to perform I Will Always Love You, the country standard written by Dolly Parton and given a completely different spin by Whitney Huston.

This is the first time I am seeing you and when I heard that was your song choice, I thought it could go in a lot of different directions, Ms. Kelley Walker told Hannah following her performance. But, honestly, I got goosebumps. We were all sitting here waiting for the key change and you just totally nailed it.

Dayna Reid, who has previously competed in the competition, was another contestant who tackled a classic, putting her own spin on Garth Brooks' Thunder Rolls.

I thought I would go out of my comfort zone and try something new, Dayna told judges.

There was nothing

uncomfortable about that," replied Mr. Hinder. "You had the audience in your hand up there. You're so versatile. You had us all in a bit of a coma here and then, all of a sudden, boom! Watching you grow, as we have seen you now over a couple of years, it is really cool. It's cool to see that you take what you heard and what you learned. You're working on it and just getting better and better."

Choosing a song off the beaten path was mom-of-two Annie H., who tried her hand at Jessica Mitchell's Grown Up Things.

"One of my absolute favourite things about country music is storytelling," she told the judges. "I absolutely love music that is raw, real and honest. In particular, this song talks about time and how, as we grow older, time goes by really quickly and we learn the importance of focusing on things that matter in our lives, especially the people that we love."

This aspect of storytelling struck a chord with Mac Shepherd who praised Annie for the way she conveyed the lyrics.

"By big thing about story songs is pronunciation," he said. "We could understand every single word that you sang and that is something I love, especially with a song like this where the story is so important. The other thing with pronunciation when it comes to singing is sometimes you lose emotion ? but you didn't lose that emotion."

To see the Top 10 sing it out after mentorship week and take that final step towards the 2019 Hoedown Showdown crown, come out to the Magna Corral on Friday, September 13. For more information on this year's Magna Hoedown, visit www.hoedown.ca.