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Laine Hardy! American Idol winner draws thousands for homecoming bash



BY JUDY BERGERON and ROBIN MILLER | Staff writers

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American Idol winner Laine Hardy has photos taken with fans before he performs at the Laine Hardy Homecoming Bash Saturday in Denham Springs.

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Laine Hardy's fans, more than 5,000 of them, crowded into Denham Springs' North Park on Saturday for the American Idol's daylong homecoming bash, capped when he took the stage at 9 p.m. to loud cheers from the adoring

crowd.



Robin Miller



As pumped in fog enveloped the dimly-lit stage for effect, Hardy opened the show with the Marshall Tucker Band's "Can't You See," followed by Hardy's own song, "Louisiana Lady" and The Band's classic, "The Weight." Fans cheered and sang along.

Earlier in the day, many shielded themselves from the sun with umbrellas as they listened to warm-up acts, while others waved cardboard fans provided courtesy of political candidates. A few teens tossed a plastic flying disc back and forth. Older members of the crowd sat underneath a large tent with a good view of the stage.

"You're going to hear some new stuff," Hardy told *The Advocate* minutes before taking the stage. "And you're just going to see Laine."

As for when the new music he's been writing with a team in Nashville will be released, he couldn't give a specific date, but did say "soon."

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Meanwhile, Hardy's gotten to spend a lot

of quality time at home in Louisiana lately.

"Just hanging out, a lot of time on the river," said the avid fisherman.

Hardy's hometown show kicked off a nationwide, 16-city tour in which he'll share performance dates with country stars Toby Keith and Jimmie Allen.

Nineteen-year-old Livingston native Hardy captured the "American Idol" singing title in May and has amassed a faithful following from near and far.

Take Tammy Baker, of Emmett, Idaho. She and husband, Jim, flew to Louisiana last May for Hardy's hometown visit and hoopla the week preceding his winning the ABC reality show. They loved the area and the people so much, not to mention Hardy's singing, that they returned on Saturday, bringing friends from Maine, New Mexico, Utah and Indiana, all of whom they met via one of Hardy's Facebook fan pages (he has several).

"We arrived at 6:40 this morning," Tammy Baker said. "I told my husband that I wanted to be the first one here."

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"I've never been a fan of anyone, but when Laine sang on 'American Idol,' I became a fan. I was walking through the living room, and when he started singing, I had to stop the program and back it up.

After it was announced that he made the top three, we bought our tickets on Monday, and we were in Louisiana on Monday night," she said of their first trip to the state in May.

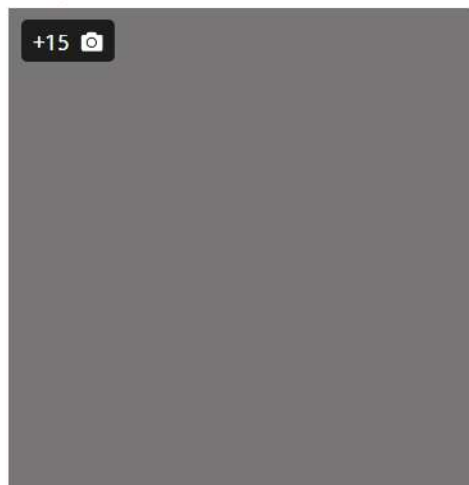
The Baker entourage set up just behind the pit in front of the stage on Saturday morning. At 9:30 a.m., they made a new friend, 17-year-old Lacie Lee, of Thibodaux, who settled in with her friends on a blanket next to the Bakers.

"I'm 17, and I not only love his singing, I think he's cute," Lee said. "I met him during the homecoming parade and got pictures with him. He was so nice."

Jim Baker, meanwhile, said his group had a four-pronged approach to keeping cool on this sunny, 91 degree afternoon.

"Cooling towels, which my wife thought of; lots of water; shade when you can; and make friends to watch your spot while you take a break," he said.

Photos: American Idol' winner Laine Hardy spends time with fans ahead of homecoming Hardy Fest



Josh and Lauren Stevens, of Watson, were going to get a babysitter so they could bring their oldest daughter, Aubrey, 9, to the concert. But when the babysitter canceled, they also bought tickets for their daughters, Allie, 6, and Avery, 2. But it doesn't end there. Laura Stevens made sparkly, one-of-a-kind "Laine" shirts for the girls to wear.

"I used a Cricut to cut the names out in vinyl, and I let the girls choose what color they wanted theirs to be," Laura Stevens said.

"Our oldest daughter is the real fan," Josh Stevens said.

"I like (Laine Hardy) because he sings good," Aubrey added.

Brenda and Harold Hardy, of Livingston, arrived just before 10 a.m. to get a good spot under the white tent to wait for Harold Hardy's third cousin's 9 p.m. performance.

"Our grandson Trent Thibodaux is the drummer in Laine's band, Brenda Hardy, said. "He's (Laine's) come a long way. We've watched him come out of his shell. He's a nice young man," she said.

EMAIL JUDY BERGERON AT JBERGERON@THEADVOCATE.COM.



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theacadianaadvocate.com
203 W. 3rd Street
Lafayette, LA 70501
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