

## El Dorado, Arkansas's New Boom

Why the Murphy Arts District, a multimillion-dollar development in the middle-of-nowhere, is betting 2Chainz and Toby Keith can bring a struggling town back to life

By [SARAH GRANT](#) 



Crowd watches Migos playing Griffin Music Hall in El Dorado, Arkansas.

Jay Paul Photography

“Welcome to the city of El Dorado, Arkansas, U.S.A.” reads the banner on a collapsible stage where a local band is plugging in their instruments. It’s a clear September weekend in a quaint patch of southwest Arkansas. The town’s name became allegorical in the 1920s when a prodigious oil well was discovered, making it the epicenter of the Arkansas oil boom. By 1930, El Dorado was the wealthiest town in America, a cosmopolitan respite in the vast flatness of middle America. The only hint of that glory today, is the opulent top half of an obsolete theater that peaks out from behind a tall, chain-link fence.

These days, MusicFest is El Dorado’s bright spot. For 31 years, the local fall fair is a time when people gather by fountains and in vine-strewn squares listening to locals sing Chris Isaak covers and pass around tip jars. Bleachers are set up to sit and nurse an oversized lemonade. Girls wearing Miss MusicFest sashes and tiaras line up by the stage. Vendors in portable tents hawk all the things you’d expect: mood rings, woodland animal sculptures and fried pies. Last year, there was no evidence that the biggest hip-hop band in the world, **Migos**, was playing in five hours.

Suddenly, Quavo and Takeoff were dangling over the nose of a catwalk, gold chains dripping over the foreheads of charged-up teenagers. Offset looked like he'd arrived from a *Matrix* movie in a long black coat, bug-eye shades and a thick lion's mane of dreads. If that wasn't surreal enough, **Brad Paisley** performed earlier, his smile was plastered across sixteen-wheeler trucks parked around El Dorado like freighters docked in a tide pool. At one point, Paisley signed the body of his electric Fender and gave it to a young boy in a white cowboy hat sitting on his father's shoulders. Paisley probably does this at every show. But in El Dorado, he really was a golden god.

"You're spoiled," Paisley said onstage, wagging his finger at the blanket of twinkling iPhone lights. "In my hometown, we had a drive-in movie theater and Ponderosa steak house. If I had all this, I don't know if I ever would've left."

The country star was referring to the just-unveiled Murphy Arts District, a \$100 million project aimed at making El Dorado a vibrant destination for arts, culture and music in the south. The crown jewels of its first phase of construction are two state-of-the-art concert venues: the MAD Amphitheater, where Paisley, **ZZ Top**, Smokey Robinson, X Ambassadors, John Hiatt, Robert Earl Keen, Lyle Lovett, Robert Randolph and others played that weekend. It accommodates 7,500, which is about half of El Dorado's total population. Adjacent is the Griffin Music Hall, an indoor venue that holds a more modest 2,500. That's where Migos, Train, Natasha Beddingfield and Ludacris performed.

Entering the Murphy Arts District, you pass a real 1940s oil derrick. It's oddly beautiful, like a miniature Eiffel Tower. Water bursts through the ground at its base — resembling an oil gusher — that kids jump to catch while adults file through metal detectors. The 50-acre complex is named after the local oil magnate who worked alongside a team of local business leaders and politicians to build the district. It intentionally spells "MAD" because, even to him, building a music city in the middle of nowhere is, well, insane. The catchphrase? "No one used to know where Woodstock was either."

MAD plays up the ridiculousness of its own existence by selecting huge mainstream acts you'd never find playing a town like this, from wildly different genres, in a way that eschews any desire of fitting into the norm. This year's MusicFest, **October 18-20th**, has dedicated one night to straight up funk (George Clinton and Parliament Funkadelic, Morris Day and the Time, Sheila E.), another to straight up hair metal (Sammy Hagar and the Circle, Bret Michaels, Lita Ford) and another to big, chest-beating country (Toby Keith, Justin Moore and Carly Pearce). The official headlining artists? Gucci Mane and 2Chainz.

This unique programming strategy has yielded some interesting results in its first year. El Dorado will go weeks without a booking, then get routing calls from the Beach Boys about wanting to play a show, says MAD's CMO Bob Tarren. One of MAD's biggest sold-out crowds also came from a routing call by a popular Christian group called Casting

Crowns. MAD has waved through a miscellany of performers throughout the year – from the Shanghai Acrobats to Kiefer Sutherland’s band, *Shopkins! Live* to Hank Williams Jr. But there is a method to the, excuse the pun, madness.

“Success isn’t just financial, it’s about our reputation,” says Tarren. In other words, it’s not about big names. MAD metes out its funds by locking in acts that will provide a variety of monthly entertainment to people of different ages and ethnicities. It would rather bring a Shakespeare theater company in multiple times a year than, say, blow everything on one epic Bruno Mars concert. Then, the pressure is on to ensure everything runs smoothly. “It really means something when someone like **Jason Isbell**, after he performed in November, **goes on Twitter to tell other artists to consider El Dorado**,” says Tarren. “We didn’t ask him to do that.”

Getting to El Dorado at all is a big ask. “The joke used to be we were two hours from anywhere,” Madison Murphy says a touch defensively. Clearly, the joke’s worn thin. Little Rock is a two-hour drive north. The closest commercial airport, in Monroe, Louisiana, is a two-hour drive east. There are some scenic parts, but mostly, it’s a long drive through abandoned fields punctuated by burned-down meth labs and towns that are only identifiable by an AutoZone and a traffic light. And all that empty land is a constant reminder of where El Dorado is headed if MAD doesn’t work.

“Obviously, infrastructure is an issue for us,” says Murphy. “We don’t have a major airport. We’re not a music-tour hub. We don’t have a downtown hotel. We don’t have a major university – or even a minor one. Northwest Arkansas is probably in the top five growing NSAs in the country. We’re not.” He cuts himself off with an abrupt pause, as if searching for a succinct way to bypass a lengthy justification he’s tired of repeating. Investing in art and music is a noble endeavor. But doesn’t history tell us that scenes take time to coagulate? Can you install an arts scene like you would a generator?



El Dorado, Arkansas. Photo credit: Jay Paul Photography

**Jay Paul Photography**

It's a big bet to make especially since there was no model city they replicated in figuring this out, Murphy says. "I'm not sure there is a one-size-fits-all way for how to do something like this," he says thoughtfully. "Comparisons are odious and generalizations are dangerous." He leaves it at that.

Madison Murphy is a reedy figure with a gentle demeanor. Dressed in blue jeans, talking about getting together with his El Dorado pals to knock out covers of B.B. King and Led Zeppelin at dive bars around town, it's easy to forget he's one of the wealthiest men in the state. Despite his uncommon means, Murphy never left El Dorado. He lives in town with his wife Suzanne, whom he met when they were lab partners at El Dorado Middle School. He'd fallen in love, he explains, so he attended Hendrix College, a small liberal arts school just a few hours away in Conway, Arkansas.

El Dorado hasn't changed much since he was a kid, he says. But there are subtle indications the town is in transition. A Daughters of the Confederacy statue stands opposite a thrumming PJ's Coffee. A dilapidated monument to the oil pioneers lies in the shadow of a tall, tan building where the new MAD offices are located. The historic Rialto Theater, dormant off-and-on for decades, is adorned with "Under Construction" signs. Murphy plans to re-open it in 2021, fully restored.

Murphy's grandfather was a young banker who settled in El Dorado in the early 1900s before the oil boom. So when it hit, the Murphy family — worth over a billion dollars today — was well positioned. In 1950, Charles and his three sisters formed the Murphy Oil company. Despite other companies and industries leaving in the intervening years,

Murphy Oil stayed. “We’re a bit of an anomaly, with corporate headquarters in a town of 18,000,” says Murphy. He grasps the weight of the company’s history in El Dorado; that the connection is more symbolic than symbiotic. Relocation would have been costly and unproductive for the company, he says. Worse, it would’ve removed the town’s rudder.

Others understandably have a hard to prioritizing the identity of a town where there is no work. El Dorado is plagued by job scarcity and population decline. Over the years, Murphy was involved in efforts to reverse those trends. In 2007, Murphy Oil funded a full college tuition scholarship for students who attended El Dorado public schools for 12 years called the El Dorado Promise. In 2011, a new conference center was built for business meetings and conventions. “I didn’t notice any hockey-stick trajectory upward after them,” Murphy says. “They simply stemmed the decline. Something else needed to occur.”

El Dorado hired Roger Brooks of Destination Development International to develop an action plan to address its retention problem. In 2011, Brooks and his team revealed comprehensive research proving that bolstering its tourism industry was the answer. And the best way, according to the study, would be to create some kind of arts and entertainment district. It could provide fulfilling jobs, enliven the community, create new pathways to education. Sounds like a no-brainer, until you look at a map.

When Murphy Oil’s chief executive Claiborne Deming heard Brooks’ speech, he turned to Murphy, who was sitting next to him and asked: “What about a concert?” Nothing like it existed in El Dorado or, for that matter, anywhere nearby. It was a bold idea. Ostensibly an unwise one. But with full confidence of the Brooks study results – and maybe thinking that they’d tried everything else – the El Dorado **Festival** and Events Initiative began collecting public and private funds. The eclectic music programming evolved much later.



**ZZ Top playing MAD Amphitheater at MusicFest 2017. Photo credit: Jay Paul Photography**

**Photo credit: Jay Paul Photography**

Votes of confidence rolled in. The city of El Dorado kicked in \$11 million and the state of Arkansas gave another \$5 million. Madison and Suzanne Murphy gave through the private Murphy Foundation and Walmart founders, the Walton Family Foundation, also donated early on before there was any real concrete plan. Murphy Oil and Murphy USA gave the largest shares. “I was pleasantly surprised at the receptivity that both boards approached this,” Murphy says. “But these are smart, astute people, who know the issues we face.” By the end, there were well over 100 donations. MAD was underway.

Murphy needed a chief executive with music industry connections, leadership experience, and – given this odd undertaking – someone who was a little bit scrappy. That person was Terry Stewart, a southerner at heart, who served as president and CEO of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland for 12 years. His instinct was to bring more urban genres like hip-hop, soul and R&B to cater to young people as well as El Dorado’s African American population. MAD’s programming needed to serve everyone in the community. It wasn’t enough to put on another rock and country show. Stewart also made sure El Dorado had services like Airbnb in advance of the opening weekend. “Uber told us they wouldn’t be here,” Stewart says. “But then these local guys figured out how to create their own presence under the Uber name.” So now El Dorado has Uber, or at least some bootleg version of it.

Murphy hired a former El Dorado resident, Austin Barrow, as MAD’s president. When Barrow got the call, he was working as a Theater professor at a small college in Georgia. Barrow attended El Dorado High School 20 years ago and had no plan of moving back. But his performing arts background and his more recent knowledge of the town was key.

Barrow signed on, understandably leery he'd just made a huge mistake. "We are, by default, not only a venue that has to produce excellent content, we're also marketing for the city just to get ourselves on the map for what we've created," he says. "So my skepticism comes from, well, is it possible for one entity to take on all those things?"

One of Barrow's first hires was another El Dorado High graduate, Joanna Benson, as MAD's social media and marketing coordinator. "If we had a Target, a Sephora and a Chick-fil-a in El Dorado, my life would be made," she says with a laugh, flicking back her wispy pink hair as we're spiraling down the highway. Technology has made living in remote areas like El Dorado a bit easier. Most people use Amazon now, she says. But for entertainment lovers like Benson, the region had few options before MAD. The one big concert she remembers from her childhood was when 69 Boyz came to town and, being 12 years old at the time, she wasn't allowed to go. The next time a big act came through, the kind she actually liked – that would be MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice in 2012 – she proudly jumped onstage to dance.

Putting El Dorado on a touring route is an obvious challenge. But it can be tough convincing tours to come through Arkansas period. "No band is going, 'If we don't play Arkansas our career is over,'" says Michael Marion, General Manager of the Verizon Arena in North Little Rock, where he's booked shows for over a decade. That's partly because the live music scene in Arkansas is altogether pretty new. The Verizon Arena, which seats 18,000 – Arkansas' first, largest and only year-round concert venue – only opened in 1999. The next largest music venue, the Walmart Amphitheater, is even newer. It was originally called the Arkansas Music Pavilion, located in a mall parking lot. In 2011, the Walton Arts Center reopened it in a more suitable area.

It's surprising that Arkansas doesn't have a deep music history since it is surrounded by so many places that do, like Memphis, Jackson, Birmingham, Dallas, Tupelo and Tulsa. The hallowed blues enclaves of Beale Street were literally on the other side of the Mississippi River. Johnny Cash was born in Arkansas, even though the Johnny Cash Museum is in **Nashville**. Sister Rosetta Tharpe was also from Arkansas. So is Ne-Yo. Given all this, it feels as though Arkansas should be further along. Whatever mysteries held Arkansas back in the past appear to be fading away. El Dorado is hitting the tide at the right time.

"Arkansas is a phenomenal place for music and people absolutely don't realize it," says Jim Green, a veteran concert promoter in the mid-south and Memphis area. "The public perception is that it's a bunch of hayseeds who are barefoot and wearing overalls and don't have a clue as to how the world works. It's such a bad misconception." Green was in a similar position to El Dorado when he was a talent buyer for the Walmart Amphitheater. He spent years shuttling between sleek offices in New York, Los Angeles and Nashville trying to convince people in business suits to put an Arkansas date on the tour. Most of the time he was unsuccessful. He still gets a little heated talking about it.

"When people asked me why should they play Arkansas, I'd say, 'well do you want to sell tickets?' People in places like Arkansas have never had the opportunity to see some of these bands," he paused. "It's a big deal. They're gonna buy the T-Shirt. They're gonna buy two T-shirts."



The new owner of Brad Paisley's guitar, standing in the crowd at MAD Amphitheater at MusicFest 2017.

Photo credit: Jay Paul Photography

Jay Paul Photography

By the end of 2018, MAD will complete its first phase with zero debt. The outside private capital world is biting. El Dorado will open its first boutique hotel downtown. "We wouldn't have gotten those things if MusicFest wasn't as successful as it was," Murphy says. In **July**, **MAD even announced** that the headliner for this year's MusicFest was hip-hop's reigning queen Cardi B. Ticket sales flew. No one could believe it. Little El Dorado had done it again.

The excitement quickly turned to panic when the very pregnant rapper canceled the majority of her live performances a few weeks later. Given the circumstances, it would've been completely understandable for MAD to book a country or rock act in her place. But MAD held onto its commitment to deliver a rapper worthy of Cardi's bloody shoes. Maddening? Positively. The clock ticked. Six weeks out, they were able to replace her with 2Chainz, who will **now headline the event**.

The health of the touring industry may be working in El Dorado's favor in an unexpected way, explains Princeton economist Alan Krueger, who studies the touring industry. "With the concert industry becoming as saturated as it is, bigger bands are veering off

into more unlikely cities,” Krueger says. “When a top band plays those smaller markets, they shut down the whole city.” And whether you’re a road-tested veteran like Toby Keith or topping the *Billboard* charts like 2Chainz and Cardi B, the personal reward may be worth the extra travel.

As Toby Keith’s booking agent, Curt Motley, explains when asked about MusicFest. “The people [at MAD] just gave me a call one day and the timing worked out. When you’ve been doing this as long as he has, it’s good to mix up markets.”

Experiencing live music is a gift. And, as Dr. Krueger suggests, one that is easily taken for granted in cities where the options are manifold. Concerts can be life-altering and transcendent. That’s even more true in places like El Dorado and throughout the rural South, since they’re so rare. During these miniature pilgrimages, fans’ perseverance is tested as they’re crammed in a car or a bus, committing hours, maybe even days, on a road trip for an event that will typically last two hours at the most.

This might have felt like the case for an 11-year-old **Tom Petty**, the day he hitched a ride with his aunt and uncle, making a five-hour trip from his home in Gainesville, Florida to Ocala. It was all to stake out Elvis Presley, who was filming a movie. Petty talked about that day for the rest of his life. “He stepped out radiant as an angel,” **Petty remembered in 2005**. “He seemed to glow and walk above the ground.” The anecdote comes up in interviews because it was the day he started to care about music. But for all the times he’s repeated the story, he never fully elucidated why. Maybe seeing the King as just a man subconsciously showed him that rock & roll wasn’t reserved for a preselected or privileged group. You didn’t need to live in some big city. You could just be a kid from Florida named Tom. Literally anyone could do it.

The evening before Tom Petty died, Smokey Robinson and the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra performed what later felt like a symbolic ending to MusicFest. It was a free show on a balmy Sunday afternoon. But as the Motown star glided and flirted in the imperceptible breeze, a flicker of the impossible happened. For the first time that weekend, a diverse audience stood beneath the stage — from elderly women to mothers with babies in carriages — waving and singing along. Something just clicked — as if the whole town soaked up his effortlessness and reflected it right back.

“It was the diversity that I wanted so badly,” Benson explains later by phone, moved by the town she almost gave up on. “I saw white families; I saw black families; I saw kids, young, old, just having a great time. I was like, ‘This is great. This is how it’s supposed to be.’”