

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

A wild ride to fame

By Patrick Slack
Staff Writer

The only thing left was the one thing he left for.

It was 1997. Nick Hoffman was sitting at the Minneapolis Greyhound Bus Station, and he had a plan. Maybe not the most detailed plan, but the endpoint was clear.

The musical hotbed Branson, Missouri, lay about 650 miles south, give or take. Holding a fiddle and a dream, the then-high school junior was certain the city held the key to kickstarting his career. He climbed on the bus.

What came next is a story of dreams.

Going from a small-town boy to a big-city star has taken the Nowthen-born, Anoka-raised Hoffman around the world and back again, with stops he never imagined.

Chasing your dreams isn't something to be done at half-speed, though. Sometimes you just have to buckle up and hang on for the wild ride ahead.

'The rest was off to the races'

Determining when Hoffman started playing music can be more easily answered this way – he can't remember an age a fiddle wasn't in his hands.

"My grandfather was a violinist and a fiddle player," Hoffman said. "My grandmother is 97 and still a fantastic piano player. I grew up in a musical family, so they had jam sessions at their house very often. Those jam sessions are some of my earliest memories, falling asleep underneath my grandma's piano bench. Obviously playing fiddle from a young age, music was a natural progression for me.

"My family really encouraged my music from a very early age, and so it was just one of those things where I have no recollection of a time in my life not playing music. They bought me a little tiny fiddle when I was 4 years old, the rest was off to the races after that."



Nick Hoffman has gone from a 4-year-old playing the fiddle in family jam sessions in Nowthen and Anoka to a hit musician in Nashville. Hoffman, who also has a hunting show about to film its sixth season, will release his first solo music album this summer. Photo courtesy of Jon Currier

Hoffman began learning to play his fiddle and started lessons. Soon after, he was competing throughout Minnesota.

"My very first fiddle contest was at the Anoka County Fair when I was 5 or 6 years old," Hoffman said. "My grandparents used to organize those contests and I ended up going to all these different fiddle contests all over the state. Those contests led to me working harder and harder at music."

'I wanted to be Garth Brooks'

A few years went by, and it was clear that music wasn't just a phase. It was a burning passion.

The more Hoffman played, the better he wanted to become.

"I started playing in bands as a teenager – my first kind of band I played in at 13 years old or so," Hoffman said. "From there I started to realize I really liked be-

ing on stage, I liked playing music on stage. I started by playing guitar, then I started singing on stage more and more.

"When I became a teenager was when I realized going to Nashville was what I wanted to do with my life. I knew from a pretty early age I wanted to be on stage and be on the radio – I wanted to be Garth Brooks."

Continued on A7

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A wild ride to fame: Nowthen boy to Nashville star

Continued from A6

'Hey, I can make a living doing this'
Hoffman entered high school, and things were becoming more serious.

He had started playing in a bluegrass band called Crucial County with a few friends, and the musical passion was turning into solid business. And solid business spurred thoughts that dreams could soon become reality.

"We actually started making some pretty serious money," Hoffman said. "One of my first gigs was at Avant Garden in Anoka. That's when it turned into a business, and I started to realize, 'Hey, I can make a living doing this.'"

"I was going to Anoka High School at the time, and I started missing school pretty often because I was playing in the band. I was still doing well in school, but I started missing a lot of days. As I missed these days I was informed I was going to lose credit for my junior year."

A meeting ended with nothing to be done. Hoffman would need to stop missing so many days with his band and take an extra year to make up the time and complete high school. He was advised to give up on his musical dreams.

That wasn't an option.

"I said, I'm traveling with this band and that's what I want to do with my life and what I wanted to be someday was playing in Nashville," Hoffman said. "The idea of spending one more year and not getting going with it was so

daunting."

That night, Hoffman had a friend drop him off at the Greyhound station. He hopped on the bus to Branson, a place he had visited with family. Any hesitation was masked by pure excitement and confidence.

Hoffman got a job at Dixie Stamped, a place owned by Dolly Parton that put on musical shows. It wasn't the final destination of his dream, but a crucial springboard for a few years later when he would arrive in Tennessee.

"That's where I wanted to start my career," Hoffman said. "I thought, I can go down there and do that. I played for tips and ended up getting a job. I performed in that show and through that, the connections I made in Branson ended up helping me move to Nashville."

"When I think back about hopping on that Greyhound bus, now that I'm a little older, I marvel at the amount of blind ambition and pure naiveté I had. I didn't know where I was going to live, didn't consider the effects it would have on my family. I guess it was pretty selfish, really. But, on the other hand, it jump-started my entire career and I'm not sure I would be where I am now if it wasn't for my time in Branson. It was formative on so many levels. But I do think I owe my mom and dad an apology!"

Following Branson, Hoffman returned to Minnesota for a couple of years.

He completed his high school degree

and got back to work musically with a cover band named High Noon. The band thrived, touring throughout the five-state area and playing at the Winstock Country Music Festival in 1999.

Things were going well, but bigger dreams were calling.

It was off again.

This time, for good.

'It happened kind of overnight'

Hoffman had dreamed about Nashville since he was a little kid. Now, just 20 years old, here he was, arriving in the Country Music Capital of the World.

The timing was perfect.

There was a country music singer who had been doing pretty well and was in need of a fiddle player. An acquaintance of Hoffman's from Branson recommended him. Hoffman tried out and was hired.

So began a 12-year journey with Kenny Chesney.

"I was really lucky," Hoffman said. "Kenny wasn't as big at the time, playing for around 500 people. Just a few months after I moved to Nashville he just took off. Playing with Kenny Chesney was like every musician's dream and my wildest dreams come true. One night I was playing with a band in Minnesota and two months later I was playing on huge stages with Leno and Letterman. It happened kind of overnight. It was my every dream come true."

"When I dreamed of moving to Nash-

ville, I dreamed of one day playing in front of 10,000 fans. Now I was playing for 10,000 people every night. It was just a dream come true and I'll be forever grateful to Kenny for that time."

'I moved to town to be my own artist'

The Country Music Association named Chesney the Entertainer of the Year in 2004, 2006, 2007 and 2008. There wasn't anything bigger in country music.

Still, for all of the success and thrills, there was another dream waiting.

"As happy as I was playing with Kenny, I moved to town to be my own artist and have my own songs on the radio, to do my own thing," Hoffman said. "As grateful as I was, I still had that dream. That was my biggest dream."

In 2010, he started writing some music with two friends, Damien Horne and Krista Marie. It didn't take long before the trio realized they had a creative chemistry. Warner Brothers signed them. The Farm had begun.

The trio's first single "Home Sweet Home" soared the charts in 2011. A year later, "Be Grateful" was a top 40 hit as well.

"It was my biggest dream come true," Hoffman said. "We had two top songs and I toured all over the world with that band for four years."

Continued on A12

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PUZZLE BLOCK

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	
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CELL PHONE WORD SEARCH

G T S B V T K C Y R A N I B S M G I F G
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K G V U T D B E G A R E V O C H U K S W
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E C M I A M G S P W A B N T I N G S F K O
S Y D H T D I W D N A B N S G A E Y P I

Find the words hidden vertically, horizontally, diagonally, and backwards.

WORDS

ACTIVATION
ADVANCED
ALPHANUMERIC
ANDROID
APPLICATION
BANDWIDTH
BINARY
BLUETOOTH
CACHE
CAMERA
CAPACITY
CELLULAR
COVERAGE
DATA
DOWNLOAD
FINGERPRINT
ILLUMINATION
KEYPAD
NETWORK
PROVIDER
SECURITY
SERVICE
STREAMING
WIFI

CLUES DOWN

1. ___ ex Machina
2. WWII diarist Frank
3. Concluding passage
4. Supplement with difficulty
5. Title of respect
6. Cubic measures
7. Remnant
8. ___ Jones
9. Salts of acetic acid
10. Long, upholstered seat
11. Capital of Okinawa Prefecture
12. A one-time aspect of Egyptian sun god Ra
13. Prefix denoting "in a"

CLUES ACROSS

1. Cyprinids
6. Icelandic literary works
10. Break in half
14. Japanese mushroom
15. Have offspring
17. Not feeling well
19. A very large body of water
20. Witch
21. Behemoth
22. Speak negatively of
23. Absence of difficulty
24. Pampering places
26. Drives
29. Truck that delivers beer
31. Makes
32. A team's best pitcher
34. ___ Carvey, comedian
35. Seas
37. S. American plants
38. Time zone
39. Deviate
40. No longer are
41. Moving in slowly
43. Patrick and Glover are two
45. Living quarters
46. Taxi
47. Pancake made of buckwheat flour
49. Swiss river
50. Not happy
53. Have surgery
57. Formal withdrawal
58. Give way to anxiety
59. Greek war god
60. 2K lbs.
61. Word of farewell

SOLUTIONS ON PAGE 9A

16. Propels upward
18. What we are talking about
22. Prosecutor
23. Employee stock ownership plan
24. He brings kids presents
25. Burmese monetary unit
27. Hurries
28. Injury remnant
29. Tooth caregiver
30. Elvis backup singer Betty Jane
31. "The Partridge Family" actress Susan
33. Midway between east and southeast
35. Most excellent
36. Heat units
37. Possess legally
39. Food items
42. Skeletal structures
43. Challenge to do something bold
44. Blood type
46. Sammy ___, songwriter
47. Farmer (Dutch)
48. Clare Booth ___, American writer
49. Piers Anthony's protagonist
50. Malaysian coastal city
51. Hairstyle
52. NY-based department store
53. Geosciences organization (abbr.)
54. Brazilian city
55. Niger-Congo languages
56. Gesture

CRYPTO FUN

Determine the code to reveal the answer!

Solve the code to discover words related to mobile phones. Each number corresponds to a letter. (Hint: 20 = e)

A. 8 2 19 12 20
Clue: Communication device

B. 24 20 15 24
Clue: Worded message

C. 7 20 17 17 14 4 20
Clue: Form of communication

D. 4 14 7 20 17
Clue: Enjoyable activities

		4		5		
2	1				6	
9			3			
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	7 9	8				3
4			6			9

Anoka County UNION HERALD SPORTS

Making the crappie transition

By Steve Carney
Outdoors Columnist

As we enter into the hot summer months, crappies, bluegills and wall-eyes make a change to much deeper water and basically abandon the shallows for cooler water. This is very typical after the Fourth of July period. Here are some thoughts on searching and catching mid-summer crappies.

Mid-depths

I call the mid-depths of 8 to 12 about perfect for mid-summer fishing

and an area that will hold the majority of the pan fish. It can vary from lake to lake, but it's a good rule of thumb almost statewide. You can rule out the shallows (2 to 6 feet) rather easily and also rule out the deep water over 18 feet as well.

Weeds are key

I am now finding both crappies and bluegills absolutely stuffed with insect larvae, worms and bloodworms as they are foraging in these mid-depths. Leafy green cabbage has been the key, but certain other weeds such as coon-tail and milfoil also will harbor food,

thus attracting predator fish. The best growth at this time of the year is still in these mid-depths. The deeper water transitions will come later.

Presentations

I start by throwing or pitching a 1/16-ounce hairjig or maribou jig along these mid-depths and hope for contact. I cover water extremely fast, casting as fast as possible. When I pop a crappie, I throw a marker buoy and hover in that area for at least five minutes. Where there is one, there should be others.



Look to the mid-depths to find summertime crappie success. Photo submitted

A wild ride to fame: Nowthen boy to Nashville star

Continued from A7

'That's how 'Nick's Wild Ride' got started'

After a strong run, the band members ultimately went their separate ways. Hoffman's next big breakthrough would follow shortly after, but it wouldn't be in music.

While music was Hoffman's biggest passion growing up, hunting wasn't far behind.

Success in Nashville had led to hunting trips with stars and some of the leaders in the field, as well as a few outdoor TV guest appearances. That led to the idea of Hoffman starring in his own show.

"I grew up in Nowthen on a farm," Hoffman said. "I was surrounded by the outdoors. I grew up in love with the outdoors, hunting in particular. I've always hunted and been passionate about hunting. Through music, I started meeting a few different hunting celebrities, if you will. Lee and Tiffany Lakosky are hunting royalty in Minnesota, and I appeared as a guest in a couple episodes. That kind of spurred some interest."

The interest was there. Next up was the opportunity.

Hoffman had another connection, this time in the outdoor TV world, help him film a pilot episode of a show. The idea was to keep things simple: take what Hoffman would be doing anyway while traveling, put a camera on him and broadcast it to the world.

"I'm a traveler," Hoffman said. "I love culture and history and I love Anthony Bourdain. I had this idea to kind of combine my loves in an Anthony Bourdain style TV show. That's how 'Nick's Wild Ride' got started."

'It's just what I love to do anyway'

The show was a fan favorite from the start.

Season 1 was nominated for three Outdoor Sportsman Awards and won three Telly awards.

"Basically 'Nick's Wild Ride' is just following along on a journey I'm going to go on anyway," Hoffman said. "You're just following me enjoy the things I enjoy, hunting and traveling. If I go somewhere to hunt or for music, I'm the guy looking for the local beer, the local burger, the local music. I love to talk to people about their local history. It's just what I love to do anyway. It's just following a guy living his wildest dream."

Season 2 proved even bigger, with a coveted Outdoor Sportsman Award for excellence in Best Conservation for work in Africa. The show has since expanded to more channels, pulled in several more awards and brought Hoffman to more places around the world. It is at times lighthearted, such as giving curling a try in Canada, and at other times serious, like delving into Native American culture.

"It's taken me from Alaska to the Middle East and everywhere in between," Hoffman said. "Traveling to Africa was really special. I was awarded the Outdoor



Nowthen native Nick Hoffman has hunted in some of the most remote places in the world for his outdoor TV show "Nick's Wild Ride," which is about to film its sixth season. Photo courtesy of Will Fulford/Nick's Wild Ride

Sportsman Award for Best Conservation for the episodes of 'Nick's Wild Ride' I did on conservation in Namibia. I'm very passionate about African conservation, and so my trip to Africa kind of changed my life. That award was really special to me. Since then I volunteer a lot of time to support conservation efforts both here and abroad, and we use hunting in getting youth into the outdoors.

"Argentina was incredible. Alaska is obviously one of my favorite places. I've gotten to do some pretty special stuff through my TV show and music. I got to go to the Middle East to play for troops on the Fourth of July; I've gotten to go hunting in dangerous countries. Those are my wildest dreams."

'I'd have laughed in your face'

Emphasis on wild.

Traveling and hunting in remote conditions – deserts, mountains, wilderness – while carrying hunting and film equipment doesn't lend itself to big crews, so Hoffman is often filming with a single camera person. He has encountered thorny situations with people abroad, questioned for what he is doing. Not to mention he is tracking some of the world's most dangerous animals.

All part of the ride.

"I travel with a very small group, usually just me and one or two camera people and that's it," Hoffman said. "We go to these places and you have to be able to do things like climb up a mountain and hunt with a camera that you can't do with a lot of people. We also want to leave a smaller footprint wherever we go. Each episode, each destination is different. We're on location for about 10 days

to two weeks, give or take. We film one episode there, we take a couple days off and then go do it again.

"If you'd have told me six years ago that I'd be on the fifth season of my hit TV show, and that I'd be out traveling around the world, I'd have laughed in your face. I would've bet the farm against that. But here we are, about to air the fifth season and film the sixth season. It's incredible."

'I'm a Minnesota boy through and through'

Hoffman's adventures have him on the road the majority of the year. When he's not traveling, however, he has brought a slice of Minnesota to Tennessee, living on a farm with his wife, a fellow musician originally from Minneapolis, and 10-year-old daughter.

"I'm not home nearly as much as I would like," Hoffman said. "I'm gone probably nine months a year. What it does is being gone makes you appreciate the time you do have at home a lot more. When I do get home it makes things a little crazy. I have a farm outside Nashville, animals, horses and dogs and everything else I still have to take care of. My wife is a traveling musician too. Sometimes we're like two ships passing in the night. That can be difficult."

Even after tracking some of the wildest animals across the globe, Hoffman's top hunting pursuit is also an homage to his home state and his childhood days. The roots of home run deep, with a grandfather who founded Hoffman Engineering in Anoka, and neighboring business Federal Cartridge now a main sponsor of "Nick's Wild Ride."

"I've been all over the world, but being the Minnesota boy that I am, there's nothing like a good old-fashioned white-tail deer hunt. I'm a Minnesota boy through and through – you can take the boy out of Minnesota, but you can't take the Minnesota out of the boy. Nothing gives me the thrill like a Midwest white-tail.

"I'm a loud and proud Minnesotan, and I'm proud to be from Anoka, proud to be from Nowthen and I'm not afraid to let people know it."

'My final piece of the puzzle'

For all of the packed crowds, for all of the famous artists he played alongside, the dream wasn't to be an accompanying musician. His time with The Farm brought him almost all of the way to his ultimate dream, playing songs he had written and hearing them on the radio.

But this summer, the last and biggest dream will be checked off the list. Hoffman's first solo album will be released, 20 years after first arriving in Nashville. A kid who hopped on a bus to a solo artist, with plenty of thrills in between.

"I've been working on this album kind of my whole life," Hoffman said. "I started recording two years ago and finally I'm finishing up this album. It's been a real labor of love. I'm pretty excited about that."

There aren't many who have had the ability to lead with the fiddle. Hoffman is proud to follow on the path of the select few who came before him who did.

"I grew up listening to Charlie Daniels," Hoffman said. "He's one of my heroes. He's the original fiddle player front man. This music is kind of inspired by that, a modern day Charlie Daniels.

"There are so few of us out there, that's the big thing. There's not a lot of fiddle players compared to other instrumentalists. Charlie Daniels, Doug Kershaw, Roy Acuff, they're kind of the top originals. I'm proud to pick up that flag and proud to be flying that flag."

A daring decision to leave home before graduating. Fiddling in front of thousands of fans for leading stars. Starting a musical trio that delivered two top hits. Starring in a fan-favorite and award-winning TV hunting show. Living on a family farm.

And now, becoming a solo artist, his own songs on the radio.

The wildest of wild dreams, now reality.

"I moved to town to be a solo artist," Hoffman said. "That's what I wanted to be. I had all these incredible things happen to me playing with all these different artists. That happened and that was a wonderful part of my life, and The Farm was a really happy chapter in my life.

"I've been lucky enough to achieve my wildest dreams really in music, except for the very thing I moved to town for. To have my own solo album out there, my own solo songs on the radio, that's my final piece of the puzzle."

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