

Do you have what it takes to be country's next superstar? Get your audition videos ready

By Brock Weir

Just one year ago, Mac Shepherd was simply going through his paces as a high school student in Keswick but those 12 months have been transformative for the 16-year-old.

Now, when he's not hitting the books, he is hitting the stage and hitting the recording studio with established country music stars as he makes significant inroads on the country music scene.

From a simple video audition strumming his guitar and showcasing his "buttery" voice, he was crowned the 2016 winner of the Hoedown Showdown in front of thousands of country music fans.

Now, Magna International is looking for their next country superstar and applications are being accepted.

"If you believe you can sing, you're the next country music rising star, you dream of performing in front of thousands of fans and you want your career to be in country music, this is the competition for you," Magna's Erin Cerenzia said. "We have a fabulous grand prize that will kick-start anyone's career in the music industry and we encourage you to apply."

Since Magna revived its annual tradition just a few years ago, the Hoedown Showdown competition has grown by leaps and bounds every year, both in terms of the talent it attracts, but also the prize pack.

This year, the winner will receive a grand prize pack valued at almost \$25,000. The prize pack includes a full Yamaha guitar, amp and case package, two full days of recording at Metal Works Studios where the winner will have a chance to work with industry professionals as they record and produce their songs, as well a cash prize. New this year is the Ultimate Artists Package, which brings in a component of industry management and song writing.

"PR is a big piece we have added to our package this year to really help once the song is written, recorded and produced," Cerenzia observed. "It will help take that song to market and hopefully get it playing on the radios. But the best part in my mind is the winner gets to come out and perform at Hoedown on Saturday, September 16 in front of thousands of country music fans."

The Hoedown Showdown is an Ontario-wide competition, and anyone with a love of music as long as they are 13 or older by the time applications are due are welcome to step up. Last year, their youngest contestant was 13 and the eldest was in his late 70s.

"From the contestants, we have heard nothing but positive feedback for our process," Cerenzia said. "It is not a hokey, karaoke talent competition; this competition has real substance. We put a lot of time and effort into it. If you come to the Hoedown on Friday and see the finals, you might not realize that there are two other stages of the competition prior to that."

Once applications are received July 21, the Top 40 will meet in Aurora, home of Magna, for the preliminary round. From there, the Top 20 semi-finalists will have a chance to perform for the crowds Aug. 26 as a highlight of Aurora's Ribfest. From there, the Top 10 are bound for Hoedown, York Region's largest annual party Sept. 15 and 16.

"We bring them in the week before the Hoedown and they get to rehearse and practise with the showdown band, have one-on-one time with Beverley Mahood, who is a country music professional and star, as well as industry professionals and management who really give finalists the opportunity to perform to the best of their ability," Cerenzia commented. "We try very hard to give the competitors as many opportunities as possible to be successful and to also produce an amazing show."

"Last year, Alan Doyle (Great Big Sea) was our headliner on Friday night and he actually said he was nervous after hearing the performances of the Hoedown finalists, he was nervous to play after them and they all produced a high quality show for everyone who was there," she added. "It is not just that you think small, rinky-dink talent competition. This is a big deal talent contest."

With just more than a week to get applications in, Cerenzia said it is always an amazing experience to get to know all the competitors involved. It is also an emotional process, she observed, because all the contestants are working so hard with a lot of stress.

"You get to know the people and the personalities in these scenarios and situations," she remarked. "I love getting to meet and work with all these different people and watch them grow through this competition. We have people who come to us in the preliminary rounds and they are incredibly talented and by the time they get through to the finals, you feel like you are watching a true country music headliner."

Those who think they have what it takes can head over to hoedown.ca/showdown for rules, eligibility, and the application form. Applications close July 21 at 4 p.m.