

2018 Elkhart County 4-H Fair Summer Concert Series

LANCO with special guest Walkerhayes Tuesday, July 24 at 8 p.m.

Grandstand is free with paid fair gate admission

Reserved track seats on sale Monday, March 26 at noon

Walker Hayes uses the word often. “It just felt right,” the breakout country singer says of the title for his highly-anticipated new album. It’s a celebratory sort of thing, he’ll tell you. A new radio station adds his buzzing single, “You Broke Up With Me.” *boom*. He links up for a national tour with Thomas Rhett. *boom*. That rowdy performance at CMA Fest — the one that had the crowd singing every word of his music back to him? *boom*. It wasn’t always this way. Not by a long shot. Lately, though, Hayes has had occasion to bust out the word often. And he’s not complaining.

A confessional, no-nonsense singer-songwriter, and one whose voice and perspective brims with relatability, Hayes is a tried-and-true Nashville standout. He’s an original in a town all-too-often rife with mimicry and compromise. And, now, he has audiences flocking to him in a major way. Conversational, honest and real in song, Hayes’ forthcoming debut album is the voice of a grinder laying it bare. It’s the stories of a man who realized the songs he couldn’t help but write — about family, struggle, vices and the sacrifices we make for a dream — were his and his alone. “It startles some people. Like, ‘Wow, he’s really putting out there,’” Hayes says of the raw songwriting that characterizes *boom*. and last year’s two break-out *8 Tracks* releases. “But, that’s what my heroes did,” he says referencing the Willie’s and Waylon’s and Merle’s of the world. “I can only write something if I truly feel it.”

And if the Mobile, Alabama native has learned anything over more than a decade spent in Nashville, it’s that he can *only* be himself. His music — from the unflinching and honest “Beer in the Fridge,” to the spare and tender love song “Beautiful,” to “Craig,” *boom*.’s gripping album closer that documents a friend who came to his family’s aid in a time of need — is entirely Hayes’ own, even if it’s not always pretty. Hayes knows only he can sing, or yes, sometimes rap his songs. Nothing thrills him more than having no rules and no restriction on his creativity. “As an artist that was so freeing,” he says of the flexibility from his label, the recently revamped Monument Records, to be his own man. “That was like somebody telling you to write for no other reason than to just write,” he says alluding to the freedom to pen attention-getting songs like “Shut Up Kenny,” his ode to songs like Kenny Chesney’s on the radio that can immediately snap you back into *those* memories. “No one was saying, ‘Your song has to go on this radio station.’ They just said, ‘Go, do what you love and love doing it every day.’”

He’d long had it drilled into his head that there existed finite rules that comprised a successful country song. So, Hayes is the first to admit it caught him off guard when listeners responded so passionately to the personal music he was writing. The singer says that, in time, he realized simply, “people want to hear the nitty gritty of life and the honesty and the authenticity. Just because there is something that typically works on radio right now doesn’t mean there’s not listeners out there that are craving that personal experience that they can relate to.”

“When I didn’t settle for anything but the one-hundred percent truth in a song,” Hayes continues, “listeners were intrigued the most.” This father of six, who moved to Nashville on a hunch 12 years ago and for years and struggled to make it work, relishes his current moment. He’d been dropped from multiple record labels and admits there was a time he wondered how he’d feed his growing family. Not until he began peeling back the layers

to his own life and subsequently documenting it in song did everything fall into place. “A song should move people like a conversation but be prettier and more memorable,” Hayes says of his current attitude toward songwriting. “For me, it’s just therapeutic to write.”

Hayes has always been the type that had to be cajoled into doing what always came natural to him. The son of a real estate broker, Hayes loved music — piano recitals, noodling on his guitar — but figured he’d stick around home and log a normal 9-5. However, after constant needling from his father, Hayes finally agreed to perform at a local bar, if only to get dad off his back. It was a tiny stage, he remembers with a laugh — “a small crowd, but there was applause after my songs” — and it felt incredible. “For some reason, when I left that show that night I knew right then that’s what I wanted to do,” Hayes recalls. He called his wife, asked her if she wanted to move to Nashville, and she said yes without hesitation.

He instantly fell in love with songwriting, landed a job with a publishing company, and even got a record deal. But, things in Nashville aren’t as easy as they seem and soon Hayes’ deals fell through. For years he grinded it out: writing songs for other artists where he could, working odd jobs to pay the bills, lying in bed at night trying to convince himself to not love writing songs anymore “because all it does is mess me up. It makes a fool of me. It strings me through all this up and down and eventually breaks my heart.” But, of course, he’d wake up the next day and want nothing more than to write another song.

In due-time he linked up with ace songwriter and GRAMMY award-winning producer Shane McAnally who signed Hayes to his SMACKSongs publishing company and soon released two volumes of Hayes’ music for free online — *8 Tracks, Vol. 1: Good Shit* and *8 Tracks, Vol. 2: Break the Internet*. As if without warning, the music quickly attracted a massive swell of popularity.

“It’s when you almost lose that you really realize that maybe you were born to do this no matter what,” Hayes says. “It’s not about success or anything — it’s where you belong.” And now, with *boom.*, Hayes is ready to pull back the curtain entirely and give all of himself to his music, his fans, his family — everyone who has stuck with him on this long and sometimes painful journey.

Just like his songs, Hayes’ live show is completely inimitable. Having long played showcases in the round — ones where he’d sit on a barstool and tell stories before performing a tune; he now distinguishes his shows using a loop, he beatboxes, and he incorporates a backing band of musicians into the mix. “The show is growing on a weekly basis,” Hayes says. “When a crowd is so electric that you can feed off their energy you feel kind of invincible up there. It is amazing.”

Hayes isn’t one to predict what comes next. All he’ll tell you is that he’ll be heeding his own