



Episode 147 – Walker Lukens and Rylan Keturi

Intro: This is Brand USA Talks Travel, elevating the conversation about international travel to the United States. Here's your host, Mark Lapidus.

Mark Lapidus [0:09]: Is confession really good for the soul?

Walker Lukens [00:11]: Yes, because shame and guilt are terrible for the soul. So it's good to unburden yourself. However it is you do that, it's good.

Rylan Keturi [0:20]: And we've been doing it for thousands and thousands of years, and it seems to have helped many, many people. So I think it's very good for the soul.

Walker Lukens [0:27]: It keeps staying in the toolkit. We've never gotten rid of it.

Mark Lapidus [0:29]: We've got a very unusual episode of Brand USA Talks Travel for you today, because we're mainly talking music. Of course, we'll tie it back to travel eventually, as we unpack this extremely cool story. I'm excited to be joined by Walker Lukens, an American singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist. He released his first full-length album, "Devoted," in 2013. He's been called one of the best songwriters in Texas. How do you feel about that, Walker?

Walker Lukens [0:52]: I still blush. It's very kind. I don't know that I live up to it, but it's very kind.

Mark Lapidus [0:57]: Also joining is Rylan Keturi, Band Manager at 7S Records and producer at Good Taste Society. He's been working in the music business for over a decade. Welcome to Brand USA Talks Travel. Suzy Shepard from Brand USA encountered you at the USA House at South By Southwest in Australia, told me all about you, and I'm assuming she met you just by walking up and saying hello.

Walker Lukens [1:18]: Oh, she did come say hi, yeah.

Mark Lapidus [1:20]: She's a very friendly person. Walker, please explain the Song Confessional to our listeners.

Walker Lukens [1:24]: The project is pretty basic. There are lots of facets to it, but this is the basic thing. So we collect anonymous stories, and we give our favorite ones to songwriters and bands who turn those stories into new original songs. So what Suzy saw us doing in Sydney was, we had a mobile confessional booth set up. People would come in there. Me and Ryland were taking turns being the fake priest behind a wall. So you literally can't see us.

Mark Lapidus [1:53]: Do you wear a collar?

Walker Lukens [1:54]: No, I don't wear a collar, because you don't see me. Actually, in this particular mobile confessional booth, I was able to lay down, because it was a camper trailer and it just so happened that the bed was where we partitioned the thing. It was a dream come true, because other versions of this project, I've had to sit on a milk crate for eight hours. It was really uncomfortable. This felt like a dream. But people come in there and they tell stories and it's all anonymous, we get their contact info obviously, and we choose our favorite ones and we give them to bands who turn them into songs. So when we were in Sydney, we got 55 confessions. And I think about eight or nine of them would inspire a good song. And so I gave four of them to some artists who were involved with South By Sydney, and they're currently writing songs based on them. And then we're going to have a podcast episode based on one of these songs. So on the podcast, you hear the anonymous story, you hear the song it inspired, and you hear an interview with the songwriter, and that's going to come out in February.

Mark Lapidus [2:53]: I'd like to play a clip from the Song Confessional so our listeners can really understand what it sounds like. Could you set this one up for us?

Walker Lukens [2:58]: Yeah, okay. So I want to tell you about the confession that inspired one of our most popular songs. The song is called "Going In" by Wild Child. And the confession that inspired it is almost too good to be true. This woman, she went to a party in high school, and at this party, ended up meeting her long-lost brother. Basically, she thought she was flirting with this guy, and the guy's like, "Hey, I got to tell you something. I'm pretty sure we're related. You should call your dad." Calls her dad, finds out that before her mom married her dad, he had a kid out of wedlock, and they elected to never tell her. But instead of it becoming this painful thing, they just decided to embrace each other as long-lost siblings. And the song, "Going In," as it's called, is basically about taking this potentially family-ruining revelation and just deciding to turn it into a really beautiful, good opportunity in your life. So this is "Going In" by Wild Child.

"Going In" by Wild Child [4:01]

Mark Lapidus [4:57]: That sounded amazing. I love the clip. Any common threads you picked up about the USA at South By Southwest in Australia, Rylan?

Rylan Keturi [5:03]: I didn't really hear anything on the streets, but I did notice after doing South By for many, many years with Song Confessional and other bands that we work with, you always see the Ireland House or the Australia House or the UK House or the English House or the Japanese House or whatever they're highlighting that year. It was cool to be on the other side of it, and be more of a featured event rather than just something that's local. That was a really, really nice thing to experience. And I think we got a lot of great feedback, especially working with you all. And we were able to feature Travel Texas and have a Texas Day and just an Austin-specific day, which was really nice.

Mark Lapidus [5:45]: Oh, tell me about that. How did that work?

Rylan Keturi [5:46]: We work with Visit Austin. They're the ones that initially reached out to bring us over, and they were working with Brand USA. And we've gotten to work with them quite a bit. And they essentially showcase Austin as a market for people to come for tourism. And since South By had originated in Austin, they were a big feature for this year in Sydney.

Mark Lapidus [6:06]: Are you game to work with more destinations in the United States and internationally?

Walker Lukens [6:11]: Of course, yeah. We travel all over doing this project. And for us, it's one of the best parts of the project. This is our first international thing, but we've traveled all over North America doing events and being parts of all sorts of stuff.

Mark Lapidus [6:24]: So for our listeners that are hearing about you for the first time, could you paint a picture of how a destination works with you?

Walker Lukens [6:29]: So basically, we had this mobile recording booth idea. We actually have a couple of trailers. They're old camper trailers. And we set up at events. At South By Sydney, we had some signage. One of us is always in front of the booth, and you just explain the concept and then people come in. And it works better if it's a multi-day thing because some people have to work up the courage to do it, and then they tell their friends.

Mark Lapidus [6:54]: Yeah, I could see that.

Walker Lukens [6:55]: Sometimes if it's just one day, the participation is a little less. But yeah, we set up and people come tell us all sorts of stuff. And then depending on the nature of the event, sometimes we'll turn songs around really quickly. And other times, it just ends up on the podcast in a couple of months. But that's basically it.

Mark Lapidus [7:15]: Any travel songs in the Song Confessional Library?

Walker Lukens [7:18]: Oh, yeah, definitely. One of my favorite songs is about travel. And that is a song that this woman, Libby Rodenbough, wrote last year.

Rylan Keturi [7:26]: We get a lot of confessions based on travel. That's always the more exciting part of your life. People can find themselves in weird situations.

Mark Lapidus [7:35]: Are these good confessions, bad confessions? What confessions are they?

Walker Lukens [7:39]: We use the term pretty lightly. I think for us, maybe a better term would be just a great story. People come in and tell us their best story. Oftentimes, the ones that translate the most are stories that you can tell, but they've told us before. That is a really common thing. One of the most popular songs that we have actually was about this guy who was lacking direction in his life a little bit, especially career-wise. And he decided to join this scientific expedition where they were going to sail across the Pacific Ocean. Basically, you need a certain amount of crew to do this. He had no scientific training, so he was just going for an adventure. He went out there, and they encountered an absolutely terrible storm on a sailboat in the middle of the ocean. He got off this journey as quickly as he could, so he gets to Hawaii and he bails. He went back home, immediately got back together with the woman that he had broken up with, and they got married. So for him, it was a really clarifying experience, this near-death experience on the sailboat in the middle of the ocean. And we gave that confession to a band called Houndmouth. And Houndmouth made a pretty incredible song out of it. That's one of our most popular ones.

Mark Lapidus [8:50]: How do you select the bands to record?

Walker Lukens [8:52]: Rylan, unfortunately, has to carry that weight more than the rest of us. But at its core, most of the artists that we've worked with are one or two degrees removed from our music community. We've worked with a lot of artists that are just friends and then friends of friends and friends of friends. That tend to be how it works.

Rylan Keturi [9:11]: Yeah, like Walker said, it's working within our networks, but we have a pretty vast network, which is nice. With Walker based in Austin, and after touring for many, many years around the US, he's met a lot of people. Then I'm out in Denver, and we have about 60 artists on our roster as well here at 7S. So that just helps spread the net. And then we work with Jim Eno from Spoon. He helps with the music production and stuff. So he obviously has a vast network as well. So we just tap into who we know. And then when we do this at South By in Austin, we actually do the research and figure out who's going to be in town and where they're from. And we start pitching that way as well, to try to get some international artists involved. As you can tell, it's a pretty interesting and out there project. So there's a lot of explaining to do at the beginning.

Walker Lukens [10:01]: Yeah, it is never simple.

Mark Lapidus [10:03]: Yeah, people go, "What? What do you want me to do?"

Walker Lukens [10:06]: Some artists, it's just not their style. The project was born out of this dirty little secret, which is that you're a songwriter and you have- you're a performer. When you have that, you tend to start writing songs in a particular mode about certain stuff, like not all subjects are on the table, right? So it gets exhausting when you're an artist and you're just living in this same world, playing the same songs, doing the same stuff over and over. And the project was born out of this idea of like, let's just force people to write songs about something they would never write about. We give these stories to songwriters, and it's not something they would ever hear about. So from that context, there are just some artists who they cannot do it. I actually reached out to an artist about one of these South By Sydney stories, and he listened to them and he goes, "Man, I thought about this all day, and I wouldn't even know where to begin writing a song." And it's just, for some people it's too out there, but for most, I think they really enjoy the challenge. And I like to tell people that you're going to write someone's absolute favorite song no matter what. Whoever's story inspired the song will love this forever. And I think that tends to get people going.

Mark Lapidus [11:13]: Well, this takes everybody out of their comfort level, doesn't it? Not just the people that are confessing, but also the artists that are doing it. That's the fun part.

Walker Lukens [11:21]: Yeah, definitely. Early on in this project, we used to make them do it in a day. You just threw them in there for 12 hours. I was like, "Hey, you got to write and record a song." Nowadays, we give the artists more time.

Mark Lapidus [11:31]: And after the songs appear on Song Confessional, do they then release them in their own fashion, like on their own Spotify playlist?

Walker Lukens [11:38]: We release the songs as singles in conjunction with the podcast.

Rylan Keturi [11:42]: If you go to The Song Confessional on all digital platforms, that's the music side of things, and then just Song Confessional as the podcast.

Mark Lapidus [11:50]: So how can people tell you their story?

Walker Lukens [11:53]: So we have a couple of ways. We have two permanent confessional booths. One is at the Mishawaka Amphitheater near Fort Collins, Colorado. It's this beautiful venue up in the Canyon. We have a permanent booth at the Long Center. It's a performing art center in Austin, where you can tell us your story. So in this permanent booth, there's an app and you do it all alone. Other than that, you got to come find us at these events. We're going to be at South By Southwest Austin. Right now, we're going to be at Artsposure in Raleigh, North Carolina, in May. And the rest of our year is filling out. We are available. So if you're interested in bringing us out, get in contact with us and we can figure that out. We really have been all over. We've been to tons of music festivals all over the country and stuff.

Rylan Keturi [12:38]: Business conferences and companies of treats and weddings, and we do it all.

Walker Lukens [12:43]: Actually, one of the best events we ever went to, on the face of it, seemed like it was going to be the most boring event, but it ended up being so amazing. It was a conference for event planners in San Francisco. It's called a PCMA conference, but all these people in their nice business attire being very professional.

Mark Lapidus [13:00]: Hey, those people know how to party.

Walker Lukens [13:02]: Oh, they do. And they came and told us some really crazy stories. It was awesome.

Mark Lapidus [13:06]: How do destinations get in touch with you if they want to work with you?

Walker Lukens [13:09]: You can email Rylan, you can email our agent, Jesse Rosoff, at Mint Talent Group.

Rylan Keturi [13:14]: Or you can just email at songconfessional@7sngmt.com.

Mark Lapidus [13:19]: And on social, I guess, you're on all the platforms, right?

Walker Lukens [13:21]: Yeah, you can find Song Confessional everywhere.

Mark Lapidus [13:23]: Before we go, we've got to hear another song. Set this one up for us.

Walker Lukens [13:27]: Why don't you listen to "Some Paradise" by Houndmouth, which is the song that was inspired by the crazy sailing adventure this guy went on.

Mark Lapidus [13:35]: Here it is.

"Some Paradise" by Houndmouth [16:26]

Mark Lapidus [16:58]: The title of that track from the Song Confessional was "Some Paradise" by the band Houndmouth. Thank you so much for joining me today at Brand USA Travel, Walker and Rylan.

Walker Lukens [17:08]: Thank you so much for having us.

Rylan Keturi [17:09]: Yeah, thank you, Mark.

Mark Lapidus [17:10]: If you'd like to hear the Song Confessional, you'll find it on your favorite podcast platform. It's co-produced with KUT and KUTX Radio in Austin, Texas. And that's it for Brand USA Talks Travel. I'm Mark Lapidus, thanks for listening.

Outro [17:23]: Your feedback is welcome. Email us at podcast@thebrandusa.com or call 202-793-6256. Brand USA Talks Travel is produced by Asher Meerovich, who also composes music and sound. Engineering by Brian Watkins. With extra help from Bernie Lucas, Nthanze Kariuki, and Casey D'Ambra. Please share this podcast with your friends in the travel industry. You may also enjoy many of our archived episodes, which you can find on your favorite podcast platform. Safe travels!