



Joshua Ray Walker – *What Is It Even?* Biography

The catalyst of Joshua Ray Walker's new album, *What Is It Even?*, was sparked on the patio of the Tulsa, Oklahoma music venue and dive bar Mercury Lounge, a fitting origin story for any country record. But this is far from an ordinary country record. It was on that Tulsa patio, deep into tour, when Walker and drummer Trey Pendergrass were half joking about what their gospel jump blues version of Whitney Houston's "I Wanna Dance With Somebody" would sound like, wondering "what if the Blues Brothers covered a Whitney Houston song?"

At that point, it was still unclear how the Dallas native would follow up his trio of critically acclaimed interconnected albums, all of which were packed tight with character-driven songs that put multiple national tours worth of crowds on the precipice of staining their shirts with either beers or tears, depending on the song. The third of the trio, *See You Next Time*, led to Walker appearing on *The Tonight Show* and *CBS Saturday Morning*, brought with it performances at Ryman Auditorium in Nashville and Gruene Hall in Texas, landed him on *Rolling Stone's* "Best of 2021" list, and prompted *SPIN* to call him "one of country's most exciting storytellers."

Those stories about dive bar dwellers running out of last chances made listeners feel a gauntlet of emotions. *What Is It Even?*, a 11-track cover album consisting of songs made famous by female pop acts, produced with John Pedigo and arranged alongside bassist Billy Bones, pedal-steel player Adam Kurtz, and his touring band of Pendergrass was born out of wanting to make people feel joy.

"I just wanted to make something that was fun," Walker says.

While his audience had grown and he was reaching the sort of success he'd hoped would result from his first three albums, it had been a difficult few years for Walker. Coming out of COVID-19 lockdown, the country artist was dealing with the passing of his father, as well as the flooding of his home. Beyond just lost memories, the flood made the house unlivable for months on end, meaning that Walker, who spent 200 days a year touring, would return home only to live in an extended stay hotel, as if he were still on the road.

Career success wasn't an immediate conduit to happiness, as many artists have learned. Walker wanted to get in the studio and have fun and record the sort of songs that are familiar salves to millions of people. The kind of music that can cheer you up.

After having such a clear vision for what he wanted out of “I Wanna Dance With Somebody,” Walker and his band finally got in the studio and manifested it, an experience he compares to needing to sneeze for a month and finally getting it out.

“I realized how influential female pop records and artists have been on me as a person, even more than in a creative sense,” Walker says.

To say the album zigs and zags would suggest that it even lets the listener establish a solid footing. The genres covered and Walker’s interpretations are equal parts familiar and jarring. There’s a country version of Cher’s “Believe,” a sort of grunge/country adaptation of Q Lazarus’ “Goodbye Horses,” a mostly straight version of Sinead O’Connor’s “Nothing Compares To You,” and a type of bluegrass adaptation of Beyonce’s “Halo” that builds with vocal momentum like the original.

For someone who has made waves in country music for his vocal range, from energizing yodels to astonishing falsettos, Walker admits that what was required from this covers album was the hardest he’s ever pushed himself as a vocalist in the studio. Before this album was even an idea, these women – with their ability to create instant ear worms with their voices – helped Walker realize his vocal gifts when he used to sing a Beyonce or Sia song in the kitchen or the shower. He did what all of us do, only, unlike most of us, he discovered he could actually hit the notes.

Indeed, the album’s version of Lizzo’s “Cuz I Love You” is a vocal showcase that was recorded after all the other songs because Walker worried he might not be able to pull it off. Rather than rapping, Walker quickly sings the verses before channeling Lizzo to belt the chorus, reaching peaks that are likely to astonish live audiences, similar to how the superstar and fellow Texan took the scene in 2019.

“I think ‘Cuz I Love You’ is about as close as you can get to a perfect pop record,” Walker says. “She’s probably the number one person I’d like to collaborate with. She’s the whole package.”

Walker attacked the vocals for Sia’s “Cheap Thrills” with similar ambition but put a slightly Merengue, Latin beat to his take, calling it a “Spaghetti Western version of the song.”

Seemingly unafraid of whether it strips him of the “standard bearer of authentic country music” label that some circles have tagged him with, Walker says *What Is It Even?* is a specific snapshot of some of Walker’s inspirations. In previous press cycles, Walker told reporters that it was Texas songsters like Guy Clark and Hayes Carll who inspired his writing, but he now admits that he had been only referring to songwriters in the country realm. Regina Spektor’s “Samson,” covered in the album, was actually the first song that made Walker “care about the lyrics,” as he says. “That was an important moment for me on the path to becoming a songwriter.” Recorded in one take on *What Is It Even?*, hearing Spektor’s lyrics come out of Walker’s mouth, accompanied by piano, an

unexpected picture is painted of how a song like “Samson” might have inspired some of his most critically acclaimed past ballads like “Flash Paper” or “Voices.”

The song choices make the album feel something like an *Alice In Wonderland* version of your most fun-loving friend’s iPod shuffle dug out of their closet. A traditional country take on “Blue” by fellow Dallas native LeAnn Rimes and a rendition of The Cranberries’ “Linger” with Kyle Gass of Tenacious D on the recorder are both pure nineties nostalgia, in dramatically different ways.

But a powerful sort of catharsis runs through every track on *What Is It Even?* that raises it above a night of karaoke. In October 2021, Walker performed the national anthem at the Formula 1 United States Grand Prix, an event with a massive global audience. The performance wowed millions, but it came with an unexpected type of negative feedback: many online commenters, mistaking Walker for a trans woman, used their keyboards to express their prejudice toward the trans community.

Walker – a cis straight man who is baby-faced with long hair – has been periodically misgendered since he was in high school, a source of confused insecurity as a youth in Texas and tension as an adult on the road, even to the point of being threatened in road stop restrooms. The aftermath of the F1 performance, especially online, was a mere snapshot of the vitriol many in the trans community are exposed to constantly.

“I was able to ignore it, which is a privilege for sure,” Walker says.

At 32 years old, Walker has recently conquered his self-consciousness over how people feel about his vaguely androgynous appearance. The album cover of this new project features Walker dressed in pink fur, a seemingly extreme hat tip to the way his wardrobe on the covers of the previous three albums became increasingly flashy with each subsequent album. The title *What Is It Even?* was a question lifted from the comments section of his F1 performance on YouTube.

“It became kind of a thesis of the record.”

Rather than attempting to speak for or represent a community he can’t claim, *What Is It Even?* is something of a broad endorsement for personal liberation from judgment – a call to be who you feel you are. It happens to be couched in a reimagining of some of the catchiest and most beloved songs of the past 30 years.