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## Interview: Rascal Flatts' Jay DeMarcus talks Country LakeShake and Portillo's



In 2009, Rascal Flatts made history as the first country music group to play at Wrigley Field. The group, composed of Gary LeVox, Jay DeMarcus and Joe Don Rooney, is now returning to Chicago to help headline Country LakeShake on Northerly Island, Chicago's biggest weekend of country music.

We chatted with DeMarcus, the group's bassist, about Rascal Flatts' 18 years in the music industry and what fans can expect during LakeShake, the weekend of June 23-25.

Your most recent album, "Back to Us," was released on May 19. What did the three of you pull from to appeal to your long-time fans while still reaching new audiences?

We went back and scoped our body of work and tried to pinpoint areas that we felt were our strong suits and hone in on those types of songs that fans fell in love with. We tried to not regress, but push ourselves forward with the production, but also go back to the well that had been so good to us for so long. We went back to some of our foundations that made people fall in love with us in the first place.

You guys have been around for almost 20 years now. How have you seen your fan base change over time?

Well, now we're seeing a multigenerational fan base. Kids come with parents; grandparents come to shows. We've always prided ourselves on the fact that we're a band that the whole family can enjoy together. We write songs that hit different people at different ages where they live.

Chicago isn't necessarily a "country music" town. What do you think it is about Chicago that makes a festival like LakeShake so successful?

I think because it isn't exclusively a country music city, Chicago draws so many types of fans that love different types of music. And when you put a bunch of music loving people in one place, it turns into one big, giant party. It doesn't necessarily feel like all country music, it just feels like a big party for music lovers.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of playing a festival versus a tour?

A festival is a bit different because you don't get to take everything with you, production-wise. We're all flying by the seat of our pants because there are so many acts that plug-in, play, unplug ... but they're among the most fun events to play because you never know what's going to happen.

It's a weekend-long event of people tailgating and partying, so they're revved up for a weekend of fun. And our fans in Chicago have always been some of the best. We've been everywhere in Chicago and the fans are always fired up when we get in front of them.

What do you three have in store for fans during LakeShake?

I think it would be a bad thing to just do all new music ... there are certain songs people expect to hear every time: "Life is a Highway," "What Hurts the Most," "God Bless the Broken Road." We want people to hear their favorites, that's what they pay to come hear.

What's your favorite part of playing a festival like LakeShake?

I try to see as many artists as I can. Whoever's taking the stage, I'll wander off my bus and sneak on the side of the stage to watch. I love watching new acts find their footing. It's fun to watch them early on in their careers and get a gut feeling about who's going to be a superstar.

You guys have been doing this for 18 years. How do you keep your passion for your music alive when you've been doing it for so long?

You know, I think it's just the thing of appreciating where we are and feeling blessed for what we've been doing. So many people in this world get up every day and go to their nine-to-five job they hate for 12 months a year for 30 years. I kind of do a self-check and evaluation to realize I'm very blessed and grateful to be where I am.

Where are your go-to spots in Chicago?

D: Portillo's—I have to get my Italian beef sandwich. I always love to sink my teeth into some deep dish, too. But one place I really loved and I really miss dearly was Demon Dogs. I loved that place.