



For Hunter Hayes, complacency is the enemy. After being nominated for a handful of GRAMMY Awards, snagging a collection of CMA's and touring the world behind a pair of critically-acclaimed albums, it would be far too easy for the revered singer-songwriter and top-notch musician to rest on his laurels. But Hayes wants more. "I had to get in the mindset of 'I'm starting over,'" the 25-year-old says boldly of a rigorous two-year process during which he wrote more than 100 songs; made a Nashville studio his personal playground and, most important for his development as a category-defying artist and musical innovator, flipped convention on its head. "I'm starting from scratch," Hayes declares with equal parts excitement and nervous anticipation of the mindset behind cooking up some of the most bold, hook-heavy material of his career with a heavier emphasis on band-based arrangements and live drums. "It's about who I am and where I'm going."

The initial returns on Hayes' focused pursuit of the bold and new are a trio of songs released direct to fans via his social media: "Yesterday's Song," "Amen," and "Young Blood." "It was so good for my soul," the singer says of the no-holds-barred, loose atmosphere of writing, recording and cutting the new tracks with his trusted band. "It was all heart and soul and laying it all out on the table." Written with Barry Dean and Martin Johnson and produced with Dann Huff, "Yesterday's Song" is a sonically boisterous stunner; a rollicking, breakneck rock jam that, at its lyrical core, is a no-nonsense breakup song -- a kiss-off, Hayes says, that doubles as "a joyous celebration" of moving on and never looking back. "It's like 'I'm gone and going so fast you'll never catch me!'" he says of the song's flavor, adding that breakup songs like it, off "life-changing" albums like Rascal Flatts' *Me and My Gang*, Adele's *21* or John Mayer's *Continuum*, have long been essential to his life.

"Amen" and "Young Blood" also mark exciting new territory for the singer. The former finds Hayes embracing his spiritual side without neglecting his big-throated pop melody, and is what the singer describes as "a lonely man's prayer." "It's hoping you'll find someone that completes your image of your future," he says of "Amen." "It was very personal for me," he adds of a song he and his band road-tested this summer to rapturous reception. "It was a lesson in conviction and knowing how I felt about the song and how important it was to me to have it on the record." "Young Blood" might very well be Hayes' most full-throttle guitar assault yet, not to mention his most lyrically mature. The song, written with Solomon and Lauren Olds, details what Hayes calls "the spark and firework of a new exciting relationship" and finds Hayes embracing his reckless side. "It was a different thing for me to write about," he says with laugh. "Letting your guard down for the first time when you're so comfortable around somebody. There's no way I would have written about that even a year ago." The song was also entirely self-produced by the musician: "That was nerve-racking and scary," he admits. "I'm so used to having

Dann Huff in the room; I go off on my musical tangents, and I splatter paint all over the canvas musically, and he cleans up the mess. This time I couldn't second-guess myself. It made me pay attention to the only things that mattered: 'Does this feel good? Yes. Done.'"

Whereas previous albums like his Double Platinum-certified, self-titled 2011 debut and 2014's *Storyline* were cut in relatively rapid succession, Hayes had the freedom this go-round to explore every musical avenue of his intrigue. Initially moving out to the country and living at his friend's house, he dove headfirst into the writing process. "I wanted the space, freedom and the time to make this new music," he says. Soon after, he returned to Nashville and transformed a backyard studio into a funhouse laboratory of his own design: he set up instrumental stations he could hop back and forth between whenever inspiration struck. "I felt like a kid that had just been let into a giant toy store," he says of a process he likens to assembling his earliest demos. "Every morning I walked in, flipped two switches, hit record and played. I knew there was nothing in my way."

Hayes recognizes such increased hands-on creativity and a newfound wizened humility is essential for any top-notch artist. "I had to trust the people around me to tell me the truth," he explains of the oft-brutal process of narrowing down his new songs to the most essential fare. "You can think your way through a lot of things," Hayes concludes of his recent creative outburst that's just beginning to reveal itself, "but the stuff that really comes from the heart is what's distinct."