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SEVENDUST

They Took Control of Their Career —
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Q&A

WITH

Morgan Rose of

SEVENDUST



By Albert Vega

L-R: Sonny Mayo, John Connolly, Lajon Witherspoon, Vince Hornsby, Morgan Rose

Beginning the trek to stardom with its self-titled debut in 1997, Sevendust gained popularity with a barrage of heavy riffs, angst-ridden lyrics, and melodic flair. Ten years and several gold records later, the quintet of Lajon Witherspoon (vocals), John Connolly (guitar), Vince Hornsby (bass), Morgan Rose (drums) and relative newcomer Sonny Mayo (guitar) is living proof that longevity does not come cheap in the music industry. As Morgan Rose candidly discusses with *Music Connection*, recent years have seen the Atlanta metal act overcome failed label negotiations, the loss of an original member and, in Rose's case, a heap of personal strife. Now with their very own label (7Bros. Records) distributed through Warner Music/Asylum, the new album, *Alpha*, due in March, and a 57-date U.S. tour booked through April, the five-piece intends to exorcise some of its new-fangled demons and celebrate its tenth year with the charisma with which they began.

Music Connection: Now that you're more in control of your purse strings, did you make the new album in a different way?

Morgan Rose: This time we all came to Atlanta and set up in a space called Rehearse Too Much. We needed to think in financial terms and not do some crazy trip to Hawaii and hole up in some expensive bungalow. It was very bare-bones. We set up the gear in a little semi-circle and put the album together.

MC: What was the songwriting process?

Rose: This one was more John [Connolly] and me than anything else. John had written a bunch of riffs and songs and sent them out to us. When I got the copy I just went nuts on it. There was something going on with the melodies that [Connolly] was playing that sparked ideas in me right away. I'd be driving and listening to the CD, and I'd have songs figured out. So I just started putting words to everything and that's when the whole thing started crashing on me.

MC: How so?

Rose: Lyrically, I was just beating myself to death. I had the worst year I could ever imagine. Going through divorce, losing a family member, having my dad sent to federal prison, not to mention what we, as a band, had been dealing with. I was so depressed, I just started knocking songs out. I already had four or five songs done by the time John came into town. The whole record was about 90 percent done when we went into the studio.

MC: Did you have a label deal when you recorded *Alpha*?

Rose: No. We decided to finance this album on our own and then shop it as-is.

MC: Had there been a history of folks "meddling" with your material?

Rose: Yes. Right at the end of our third record (*Animosity*; TVT Records) is when the label started coming in and interfering with the songwriting process. And then after that record, they actually started telling us we needed songwriters to come in and write with us, because we weren't moving with the trends. We ended up abiding by the label's wishes. We all had families to feed. At that point, [TVT] was paying all the bills and we were contractually obligated to do certain things. And if you're financially stable, you can stand hard against all that. But we weren't.

MC: How did the contract with TVT end?

Rose: The TVT thing started out great; they developed us into a band that could tour and build a loyal fan base. But we were selling records and touring more than any band in the world, and we still weren't making money. And [TVT] didn't look like it was ever going to push us to be any bigger. Finally, after our fourth record, we hired Peter Paterno. He took a look at the contract and asked me if TVT had ever given us a written option. I answered no, and he said we could've been out a long time ago, since there was nothing binding us to them if they didn't pick up the option in writing. So we kept our mouths shut until the next option came around and then our manager told them we were free.

MC: What went wrong next at WineDark/Universal?

Rose: Winedark offered us a lot of money. It was outrageous. ... [WineDark] wanted the record (entitled *Next*) we had financed ourselves, as-is. And we wanted to get paid what we felt we deserved from years ago. We thought that with the amount of money they offered us, they would promote the hell out of the record, but they didn't. I believe they only ended up manufacturing about 200,000 records and then stopped printing them.

MC: How did you start your own label, 7Bros. Records?

Rose: That actually started through WineDark. They said we would have budgets to sign bands. We thought it would be a great thing for us to do when we weren't doing *Sevendust*. But it didn't happen, so we brought our label over to Warner Music and are now going through Asylum.

MC: Why did you decide to hook up with Warner/Asylum?

Rose: We had decided there was no way we were going to sign a deal where we would have to sell multimillions of records or be stuck somewhere for 10 years without making any money. We wanted some place that we could bring our label over to. We were actually looking at a few indies, but the folks at Warner had an excitement that was different from everyone else. Warner sounded sincere.

MC: What are you looking to do with your own label?

Rose: We're definitely looking at signing bands. There are already a handful of bands we're looking at. I feel good for the artists who end up with us, because we'll give them 110 percent. I've been through it all, so I know how it feels. I'll never allow anything to get in the way of giving a band their artistic freedom. I know we won't do anything to hurt them.

MC: How did the band's dynamic change with Sonny Mayo in the lineup?

Rose: We have one tour under our belts with Sonny, and I think we're really starting to vibe onstage. The last five shows we played last year really felt great. I think, subconsciously, when you're dealing with all this negative stuff like Winedark, you're happy when showtime comes, but you're also emotionally drained. So I know with the situation we're in now, we're performing better because our minds aren't on other things.

MC: Due to all the turbulence, did you ever contemplate quitting?

Rose: No. Even if I didn't want to do it anymore, I still would because the band depends on me. But yes, it did get pretty dark there. Especially not seeing the guys in the band for seven months, which is by far the longest we've ever gone without playing. I was calling my manager up saying I didn't think I had a band anymore. And with my dad in jail and my divorce, it was as if I didn't have an identity left.

MC: Was it therapeutic making *Alpha*?

Rose: I thought there would be a big release. But, when the record was finished and we went our separate ways, I realized on the drive home that I wouldn't be going back to the studio. Listening to the album, the lyrics, and remembering how difficult it was to write from an emotional standpoint, and to not be able to work more — I just fell apart. I didn't do much better until we got the tour together and played five shows. Then I realized I was going to be okay. Fact is, it's actually been more therapeutic talking about it.

MC: What advice would you give to a band looking for label interest?

Rose: With the internet and virtual marketing, the ball's in the band's court a bit more now. It used to be that in order to get your music heard, you'd have to sell your soul. But there are so many different avenues now. Keep your integrity intact. We made the mistake of giving in when we really didn't have to.

Be honest, because there isn't one style of music ruling the world right now. I mean, look at us; we survived the death march of our style. You have bands like *Disturbed* and *God-smack* still going, but there's a whole pile of bands that aren't. I don't know if we have anything in common with those bands in terms of making a statement, but I know we're survivors.

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