

Lajon Witherspoon:
"We're about to
come out and whip
everyone's ass"



WITH THE PUNISHING 'ALPHA,'
VETERAN HARD ROCKERS

Sevendust

HOPE TO RECAPTURE THE FURY —
AND FLAVOR — OF THEIR PRIME



SHORTLY AFTER RELEASING THEIR SELF-TITLED

debut in 1997, Atlanta-based Sevendust seemed well on their way to becoming wealthy rock stars. Their music combined enticing thrash riffs, powerful grooves, and soulful melodic vocals, and the band had a knack for penning the kind of heartstring-pulling ballads that make radio programmers giddy. And, indeed, *Sevendust* went gold, as did the group's next two albums. And while the band's sales dipped after 2001, even their least successful disc, 2005's *Next*, moved a respectable 170,000 copies. Yet, by early 2006, the band was nearly bankrupt.

Sevendust's label, WineDark Records, had imploded, leaving them without distribution, tour support, or promised advance payments. The band owed money to crew members and other staffers and had a mounting credit-card debt. In April, they expected that a tax return from Uncle Sam would help ease the burden. Then they found out their accountant hadn't paid their taxes and they owed \$120,000 to the government.

"We were beyond broke," says drummer and lyricist Morgan Rose. "We had a debt load close to a million dollars, and we were in a position where, no matter how much money we thought we were making, we were still having to pay and pay."

But before the members of Sevendust could even think about recouping their losses, they had to sort out their family lives. Vocalist Lajon Witherspoon had a fiancée and a 7-year-old daughter to reconnect with; guitarist John Connolly had a new baby girl to help raise; and Rose was in danger of losing everything he cared for. The drummer was in the middle of finalizing an ugly divorce with his ex-wife, onetime Coal Chamber bassist Rayna Foss-Rose, and in trying to gain custody of their 7-year-old daughter, Kayla, he agreed to what he describes as an onerous settlement. In the end, he says he was deep in debt and needed a place to live. "I almost had to turn around and stay at my mother's house so I could wait for a check to come in, so I could go get an apartment. It was *that* bad."

And things only went from bad to worse. Rose lost his grandfather—and was arrested in a drug raid. "It's an interesting situation when you're sitting at someone's house watching a basketball game, and 40 or 50 SWAT guys come in with machine guns," he says. "I thought it was a robbery at first. Then I realized there wouldn't be that many people robbing the house. I kept telling them I don't do drugs, and they were like, 'You're a rock star. Of *course* you don't do drugs.'"

Rose spent two days in jail before being cleared. His dad wasn't so lucky. In a separate incident, he was busted and sentenced to five and a half years behind bars.

"That's the hardest thing I've ever dealt with because I'm infatuated with my dad," Rose says. "He was my biggest inspiration growing up and is still my best friend. We used to talk every day on the phone for an hour or more, and suddenly I'm getting one 15-minute call from him a week."

BY JON WIEDERHORN | PHOTOS BY ANGELA BOATWRIGHT

TO COPE WITH HIS ANGER and frustration, Rose started drinking more heavily than he had in years. "It seemed like that was the only way to get through the evening and sleep," he says. "I alienated myself from everybody. I wouldn't answer the phone because I didn't know what to say, and when I talked about my shit, it wasn't therapeutic. It just made me feel sorry for myself."

Fortunately for the group, while Rose was drowning his sorrows, Connolly was writing new songs at a rapid pace, and they were filled with the heaviest riffs he had come up with in years. When he finished enough for an album, he sent them to Rose, who found that his hostile mind-set matched the savage tunes. At first, Rose's new lyrics were personal and violent. But then he decided he didn't want the songs to be blatantly autobiographical, so he devised an overarching concept that he compares to the underground pugilism classic *Fight Club*.

"The main character is fighting this battle within himself



Alpha comes almost exactly a decade after Sevendust's first album, which was released several years after the band came into existence. Rose, who started out in a group called Stiff Kitty, practiced in the same building as bassist Vince Hornsby, who was in Bum's Rush. After months of planning to jam together, Hornsby finally quit his band in 1994 and hooked up with Rose in a new outfit called Snake Nation. Joining them was Connolly, who had just picked up the guitar after leaving his group, Peace Dogs, in which he was the drummer.

"[Rose] and I lived in the same apartment building, so I went over to his place, and the first-song I heard was 'Black,'" says Connolly of the track that would later become one of

Six months later, Sevendust ditched their second guitarist and hired Clint Lowery, whose old band Still Rain used to play with Snake Nation. They changed their name to Rumblefish but switched to Crawlspace after finding a cassette by another Rumblefish at a 7-Eleven. TVT, the first label to express interest, signed the band and put the song "My Ruin" on the *Mortal Kombat: More Kombat* soundtrack in 1996. Not long after, they received a notice from an obscure progressive rock band called Crawlspace, who wanted \$50,000 for the rights to the name. And thus Sevendust, named after the



From left: Sonny Mayo, Vince Hornsby, John Connolly, and Morgan Rose

and is slowly deteriorating until the end of the record, when he looks at himself and goes, Okay, there's a good side and a bad side here," explains Rose. "And he kills off what he thinks is the bad side, but then he second-guesses himself and says, Wait a minute. Which side did I kill off?"

There's no question which side of themselves Sevendust have killed off with their new CD, *Alpha*—caustic and confrontational, it easily could have followed 1999's *Home*, if the band had not chosen at the time to follow a more accessible sound. Gone are bittersweet ballads and sugary melody, replaced by crushing rhythms and churning guitars. And yet, Connolly says that the anger in his new tunes didn't stem from any personal trauma.

"I was actually in a pretty good spot," he says with a smile. "I'd spend half the day rolling around on the floor with my dog and my daughter. Then the other half, I'd be writing this record. I think it came really naturally and was easy to write because I didn't stress over it."

Sevendust's best-known songs. "He didn't own a guitar strap, he didn't know how to stand up and play, but he sounded cool as hell, so we all started jamming out."

With a core lineup in place, Snake Nation recorded a demo, with vocals by Connolly and Rose, but they weren't happy with the singing. They went through a variety of singers over the next year before they saw Witherspoon performing in the funk-metal band Body and Soul, and asked him to join. "I couldn't believe it, because I was in the front row every time Snake Nation played," recalls Witherspoon.

pesticide Sevin Dust, were born.

In 1997, TVT released Sevendust's self-titled debut, which sold a disappointing 311 copies in its first week. But the label was determined to push hard to make things happen, so it submitted a 30-minute concert video to local public-access cable channels across the country and kept Sevendust on the road for almost two years.

By the end of the tour, the album had gone gold (partly on the strength of "Black"), but the band was still nearly broke. It would be easy to blame this on the fact that their manager at the time, Twisted Sister guitarist Jay Jay

French, was being paid a large percentage of earnings, but even the bandmates themselves admit that their own frivolous spending—mainly booze and drugs—was a huge factor. “The amount of overhead we had left us in the red for \$500 every day,” Connolly says. “You do that for a year, then you get a bill saying, ‘Yeah, you owe \$180,000.’ And we’re like, ‘How? We made a bunch of money, right?’ Nope.”

Shortly after returning from the road, the band released its second album, the more streamlined *Home*. And Sevendust’s ascension continued: Eight months after its release, the disc was gold. Soon the band was headlining shows, with acts like Kid Rock, Godsmack, P.O.D., and others as support (see sidebar). Inevitably, the bigger profile resulted in bigger parties. “We would usually try to do an eight ball of coke each,” says Rose. “It became a game to see who could do the most, and whoever ran out knew that he was gonna be able to do whatever was left over from whoever didn’t finish theirs. We thought that



was about the craziest thing we could do until we ran into someone that had a bunch of X, and we realized that we could buy a sack of it for the same price. We went through about 160 hits in three days.”

Few escape such rampant excess without repercussions, and Rose definitely flirted with disaster at times. The third day of his X binge, he was still hallucinating onstage in Dallas, and after the show he grabbed some more coke and retreated to a bar next door. “I opened up the bag and started dumping the coke on the bar. I was so out of it, I thought, Well, I’m doing this to myself, so this is nobody’s business and I can do it in public. Fortunately, there were no cops there, and they kicked me out before I did something even stupider.”

The indulgence continued through the writing and recording of Sevendust’s third album, 2001’s *Animosity*—

LEFT IN THE DUST

If SEVENDUST haven’t had a whole lot of good luck in their 12-year career, maybe it’s because they’ve given it all to their support acts on tour. Just check out the number of bands that have opened for Sevendust, then skyrocketed past them up the pop charts.



Kid rockin’

KID ROCK

YEAR TOURED WITH SEVENDUST: 1998
HIT IT BIG IN...: 1999, when his fourth LP, *Devil Without a Cause*, went seven times platinum. “Nobody had heard of them when he played with us,” notes Sevendust’s John Connolly. “They were just dudes riding around in their RV.”

GODSMACK

YEAR TOURED WITH SEVENDUST: 1998
HIT IT BIG IN...: 1999, when their self-titled debut, rereleased by Universal the previous year, went gold. By 2000, it had sold more than 3 million copies. “Me and [Godsmack frontman] Sully Erna grew up together,” Connolly points out. “So we booked a tour, did a handful of shows, and those guys take off.”

STAINED

YEAR TOURED WITH SEVENDUST: 1999
HIT IT BIG IN...: 2001, when *Break the Cycle* climbed to No. 1 on the *Billboard* album chart. The band has since racked up sales of more than 15 million units. “Me and [singer] Aaron Lewis are real good buddies,” says Sevendust singer Lajon Witherspoon.

DROWNING POOL

YEAR TOURED WITH SEVENDUST: 1999
HIT IT BIG IN...: 2001, when their debut, *Sinner*, went platinum six weeks after its release. “That was the first band we took out on the *Home* record,” Connolly recalls. “They didn’t even have a record deal at the time.”

P.O.D.

YEAR TOURED WITH SEVENDUST: 1999
HIT IT BIG IN...: March 2000, when *The Fundamentals of Southtown* was certified gold. By that November, it had hit platinum. And that was just the beginning: P.O.D.’s 2001 CD, *Satellite*, went triple platinum.

NICKELBACK

YEAR TOURED WITH SEVENDUST: 2000
HIT IT BIG IN...: 2001, when *Silver Side Up* sold a million copies. By early the next year, it had tripled that figure. (The band has since moved nearly 20 million albums worldwide.) “We took them out a couple times before they had a record deal, and now, good God, there ain’t nothing slowing those guys down,” Connolly marvels.

3 DOORS DOWN

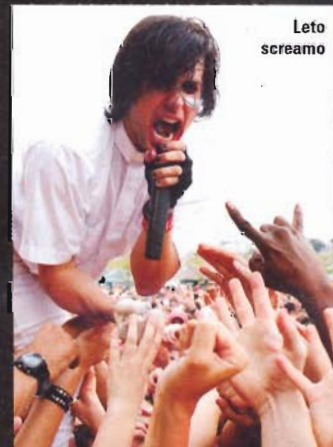
YEAR TOURED WITH SEVENDUST: 2000
HIT IT BIG IN...: April of that same year, when their major-label debut, *The Better Life*, went platinum. By June 2001, it had sold 5 million records. “When we were out on tour, we watched these boys play their first show ever in front of 15,000 people,” says Connolly.

DISTURBED

YEAR TOURED WITH SEVENDUST: 2000
HIT IT BIG IN...: November 2000, when *The Sickness* was certified platinum; by October of 2001, it reached the 2-million mark and has since gone triple platinum. Both of the band’s follow-ups, 2002’s *Believe* and 2005’s *Ten Thousand Fists*, are also platinum sellers.

30 SECONDS TO MARS

YEAR TOURED WITH SEVENDUST: 2002
HIT IT BIG IN...: Well, it depends on how you slice it. Fronted by actor Jared Leto, the band was arguably well known the moment it was formed in 2002. But it wasn’t until Mars’ sophomore disc, 2005’s *A Beautiful Lie*, that the group caught on with listeners. Just this past January, the record went platinum.



Leto screamo



“We would usually try to do an EIGHT BALL OF COKE EACH. It became a game to see who could do the most.”

MORGAN ROSE



Sevendust in 2001 (left) and today

perhaps explaining the band's departure from soulful thrash to melodic alt-metal, which, at its mellowest, wasn't far removed from Creed fare. According to Sevendust, TMT strongly encouraged them to write radio singles, and—wanting to maintain their standard of living—the group didn't put up much of a fight.

“We had kids at home, which puts a different spin on things,” says Rose. “That's a nice way of saying we sold the fuck out.”

While on the road for *Animosity*, Sevendust were as wild as ever. Rose recalls numerous nights when the band members would party after a show, wake up sick the next day, and vomit in buckets at the side of the stage right before going on. Halfway through the tour, however, Rose had finally had enough. “We went home for a few days, and I looked at my daughter and went, I can't keep doing this.”

With Rose off drugs, the other band members eased up as well, and Sevendust got along better than ever, both on and offstage. Then disaster struck. On the evening of November 9, 2002, before a show in St. Joseph, Minnesota, Witherspoon called his dad and found out that his 21-year-old brother, Reginald, had been gunned down by gang members in Nashville. “He was ambushed by twin brothers and their cousin at a stop sign, and they shot him nine or 10 times,” says Witherspoon. “To go that way, such a beautiful person. Not a troublemaker at all. It was the hardest thing I've ever dealt with, and I still think about him every day.”

Witherspoon's dad told them to play that evening's show in honor of Reginald, and the singer made it through three songs before bursting into tears. The next day, Sevendust flew to Nashville for the funeral. “When I was on that plane, I was wishing I would have died,” Witherspoon says. “But I remember being there in the church, and I turned around and my father was standing in front of me and the band, and he was preaching to us, saying that he lost a son, but how we were all his sons—everyone in the band. And for my brothers to be there with me through that hard time, I think that made us strive even harder. I want to make [Reginald] proud because I know he's watching me.”

After recovering from the tragedy, Witherspoon entered the studio with Sevendust to record their fourth and most commercial album, 2003's *Seasons*. But while the disc sounded slick and energized, discontent was bubbling within the band. A week before the end of Sevendust's

2004 tour, Lowery quit to focus on Dark New Day, a new group he had formed with his brother, Corey (ex-Stereomud), and former members of Creed, Doubledrive, and Škrape.

“He left on my birthday—‘Happy birthday. I quit,’” recalls Rose. “That was brutal because we were always tight.”

“I think Clint decided he needed to be with his brother,” adds Witherspoon. “I don't know if my little brother dying had something to do with it, but he did what he had to.”



When Sevendust returned home, they hired ex-Snot and Amen guitarist Sonny Mayo to replace Lowery, then wrote the follow-up to *Seasons*, which they recorded on their own dime before looking for a new label. They negotiated with several well-known major and independent record companies but decided to sign with WineDark, which was founded by established industry executives. The company had distribution through Universal Music and agreed to provide Sevendust with their own imprint, 7Bros. Records, on which they could make extra money signing bands. A few months after the October 2005 release of *Next*, though, it became clear that WineDark would not live up to the band's expectations.

“I had people come up to me and say, ‘When is the record coming out?’ And it had already been out for five months,” Rose grumbles. “Basically, the main person that was in charge of the whole thing fell off the face of the earth. There were no more checks coming in, and the money had not been paid in full.” (WineDark did

not return *Revolver's* calls or emails requesting comment.)

Hobbled by the lack of support, Sevendust cut their tour short after just three months and began a seven-month hiatus, the longest they'd ever spent off the road. Afterward, with Morgan back on terra firma, they recorded *Alpha*, using credit cards and what little cash they had left, then shopped for a new home. Only this time, they found labels less eager to embrace them. After lengthy negotiations, Independent Label Group, a small offshoot of the Warner Music Group, made an offer for Sevendust and 7Bros., and the band signed because all the other bids were unacceptably low.

“When we started showing the record to people and saying, ‘What do you think?’ they asked, ‘Well, what did you sell on your last record?’” Rose recalls. “All of a sudden, we were being punished for selling a considerable amount under what we were used to. And when we said, ‘Hey, the last label didn't print any records, and we sold almost all of what they *did* print,’ they didn't care to hear it.”

While Sevendust may not have gotten an impressive advance, they secured the creative control they've long desired. Moreover, they've learned from past mistakes and now take an active role in all business decisions. And they're more fired up than they've been in years.

“I feel like a 21-year-old kid again, jamming with my boys in the rehearsal room,” enthuses Witherspoon. “I think God has a plan for us, and whether the industry has a plan for us or not, we're about to come out and whip everyone's ass.” 🍌