

SEVENDUST'S SECOND ACT

BY JOHN B. MOORE

ELEVEN YEARS AFTER BURSTING onto the scene in a barrage of distorted guitars, machine gun drumming and thunderclap bass riffs, Atlanta-based hard rockers Sevendust have managed to be radio-friendly, selling millions of records without sacrificing their heavy metal heritage.

There have been some missteps along the way. The band left longtime label TVT a couple of years ago to sign with Winedark Records just before that label imploded, forcing Sevendust to self-finance their fifth record. They've also trusted their careers and money to others, and wound up exploited on both ends.

Frontman Lajon Witherspoon is quick to admit that the band has made mistakes, but he's just as resolute when he insists that they are finally in full control

of their destiny. Now working with a new Warner-distributed label, the band is about to release their sixth album, *Alpha*, with an aggressive sound that harkens back to their earliest efforts. Calling in from Wisconsin just days into their headlining tour, Witherspoon was remarkably candid, ruminating on past mistakes, the inspiration behind the album and the future of Sevendust.



When you guys first got together, had you been playing in other bands around town?

I had been in a band in Georgia called Body and Soul. We played around Atlanta and were pretty big. We had a following and I had some really cool players. We were the youngest cats on the scene. Morgan (Rose, Sevendust's drummer) and them would come out and see my band. You know, I always felt like I was destined to do something in music, but I never would have thought it would have been like this and lasted so long.

Really? What did you think it would end up being?

I don't know, man, because I started doing kind of R&B stuff, and rock 'n' roll was always my passion. We've definitely gone through some trials and tribulations, some hard times and some loss. When people say, "Man, you guys have had it bad," a lot of times I say back to them, "You know what, man? We don't have it that bad because we're still able to do it." Even in the worst of times, not having any money, I've still been able to survive, so it hasn't been that bad.

When you first got together with this lineup, did you think you'd still be doing this 10 years later, playing this kind of music with this same band?

You know, I didn't. It's been such a long time now. But I wouldn't go anywhere else. Right now it's like we're at the beginning again. We're signing this new venture with Warner Music Group, and what we're doing is like a new start. The single, "Driven," is in the Top 20 and the album isn't even out yet. It feels great.

Let's talk for a minute about what's been going on recently with your label situation. Was your split with TVT amicable?

We were able to make a move, and it was time. TVT was great. Thank the Lord we had them at the beginning, because we sold albums. They put us on the map. But I think, as with anything, it was time to change. Like when you change to a new job [because] you feel like you might need to get a promotion. That's where we were. We were able to make this change when we thought we had a great deal with Winedark. But it was too good to be true, and we knew it. That fell through and put us in a situation where, "Oh my God, now we don't have a label again!" So we really had to focus and figure out what we wanted to do. In that time we had off—seven months to a year—we needed it. We were able to get home to our families and be dads, and that's what helped this album. We were just determined, and look at it now! We're back, we've got a label behind us and it's time to go.

With the recent signing of your label to the Warner Music Group, it would seem like you have the best of both worlds—a small independent label funded by a major label.

There you go! It feels like home again. Everyone's excited, and it looks like things are going to be good.

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Was there a time after the Winedark deal fell apart when you guys said, "Let's think about whether or not we want to move forward with this band"?

Oh, no. Sevendust has made a career out of this. For us just to stop... what the hell am I going to do now?! It just made us work harder, because ultimately it's all about the music. But I do have to say this to all the young artists out there: Be an artist and love your passion, but you have to also be a businessman or businesswoman in this industry, because it's so jaded. That's something that took us a while to learn. I was 21 when we signed our record deal and I was like, "Who cares, man? We get to leave Atlanta and go to other places!" When they put us out [on the road] for two years straight, we didn't think anything about it.

That's just something you should always keep your hands on. It just makes it better for everything in the end. With this venture [with Warner Music Group], we have Seven Brothers Records. In the future, we plan on signing bands and not putting them through the hell that we went through for so many years. Actually letting them see that you can do this the right way.

Can you talk a little bit about the negative stuff that you went through?

We were on the road so much and had different people at organizations who were handling things, be it bad financial handling or management. We just had to clean house and get the right people in there. A lot of things were overlooked until it was too late, and then it was like, "Damn! So that's where he got that lake house..."

So you feel good that you're in a situation now where that's not going to happen again?

Shoot yeah! We know where every cent goes. "Who just bought that hat? How much was it?" We're in control of everything now.

Let's talk about Alpha. It definitely has some dark themes to it. Was there anything in particular that inspired this?

I can tell you that the song "Driven" was written about Morgan's father, who was sent to prison. There are definitely a lot of personal things that are going on. We can't write about anything else but what's real to us. When we do that, we find that we're not different from anyone else going through things in their lives, and people interpret songs the way they need to. A lot of times they are so close to what the song is about that it's awesome. We all go through the same shit. We are able to put this all on this album. The people who we don't like, we talk about, and I'm sure a lot of people will know exactly what the hell is going on once they hear the whole album.

Did it take a while to write?

It was pretty effortless. We came in prepared. That makes everything easier.

How does this album compare to your others?

I feel like you can't help but grow in the music industry, as long as we've been playing. This album, even though I think it goes back to the heavy stuff, it's definitely more mature. We've grown. I'm very impressed and excited about it. People love the heavy stuff, but I still put the melody on it, so we're all happy.

Was that a conscious decision to get back to your more heavy sound?

Oh yeah, definitely. What's cool about it is that the fucking catalog now is a thousand damn songs. Each night we're able to paint a different picture, and that to me is the most important thing. We're not just a heavy band; we're a rock 'n' roll band. We can play with a band like Creed, then go out with Slipknot. That's what I like.

For a metal band, you guys have made an effort to always include some melody into your songs.

That's what songs are about. Everything doesn't always have to be the heaviest in the world. I've got a 7-year-old daughter, and everyone in this band has little girls. We're nice guys!