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Interview: One-on-One with Chuck Ragan

Once in awhile you come across an artist that scratches the musical itch you didn't know you had. For me, [Chuck Ragan](#) is that artist. Armed with an acoustic guitar & harmonica and his massive voice, Ragan (along with his bassist Joe Ginsberg and fiddler Jon Gaunt) are an anomaly in my otherwise hard rock-filled playlist. Where another trio might use the exact same instruments to put you to sleep, these guys are so charismatic that they can get even the biggest metalheads dancing to their soulful country/folk revival music. This past autumn, the trio played to packed houses in the UK and Europe on the highly successful Revival Tour which also included Dave Hause, Dan Andriano of Alkaline Trio and Brian Fallon of The Gaslight Anthem. Last week they joined Social Distortion for a second round of touring (they also opened for Social D [earlier](#) this year) and played the Sherman Theater in Stroudsburg, PA where I sat down with Chuck to talk road life, film scoring and whether or not he really is the "manliest man in the world."





Chuck Ragan at the Sherman Theater

Lorraine Schwartz

Lorraine Schwartz

You just got finished with [The Revival Tour](#) in Europe a few weeks ago. It sounded like a pretty unique experience.

Well what I can say is the most important element or essence of the Revival Tour is the camaraderie that basically makes up the entire group. That's what we're all there for. Also, that's what all the people come to see and be a part of. Not only just to see and hear, but all the fans and supporters of the Revival Tour, you know, they're welcomed there just as anyone else. I think it's kind of a common bond that we have with each other and that we also share with the supporters. That said, every single tour that we've done has been totally different since the lineup has changed quite a bit. But the overall vibe and energy is totally the same. It's that unconditional love and camaraderie that everybody has for each

other as well as a respect for each other's music and work.

Do you have a favorite memory that you walked away with from that tour?

One memory was when we were in Wiesbaden (Germany) we played an old church, which was actually still a working church where they have services. They've been having a lot of indie shows, punk shows and acoustic performances there. It was absolutely astounding acoustically. I mean this place was built far before PAs existed. The acoustics were just amazing and it was extremely ornate.

There's a song I wrote called "On The Bow", which is an a cappella number that we were doing on the Revival Tour. On this particular show, early before the gig started, we were all walking around the church and exploring the basements and attics, looking at how these people built this thing. It was just amazing. I found this balcony that the choir normally goes up into. If you're in the crowd on the bottom floor, you can't even see where the choir sits. It's above the altar, where the big pipe organs were and all that stuff.

At the end of the night, we did The Gaslight Anthem's "American Slang" and then we all took off and left the stage. When we got backstage, we ran up the stairs to the balcony. As soon as the crowd quieted down a little bit, we started singing this a cappella song. At first people had no idea where we even were! The sound that came out of all of us friends together in a row, just singing with nothing but voices—no instruments, no nothing—in this church that

was hundreds of years old...it just felt like it was the hugest sound I'd ever heard in my life. It definitely was kind of a moment frozen in time for me. And awkward too in that the visual perspective that we had was awkward. Once everybody realized where we were, we had the entire crowd looking upward. I'd never seen that perspective in all the years that I've played in my life, where we're up in a balcony performing and everybody below was checking us out. (Watch the performance [here](#))

Currently you're back on the road with [Social Distortion](#), who you've mentioned as an influence. What was it about them that got your attention when you were younger?

They've been a band I've listened to for 24 years. I was a young skateboarder when I first found them. They had this air about them that was super dangerous and rebellious, but at the same time really cool and just catchy. The melodies were timeless and just stuck in my head. Have you ever heard a song for the first time, where even though it's new to you, before the singer gets to the chorus you can almost imagine exactly where they're gonna go? And when that chorus comes, it almost feels like you've heard that before and you're immediately drawn to it and you love it? To me that's what makes a good song. What makes a timeless song, is when someone taps into that.

I can say as a young kid I loved their melodies and also loved the fact that they were just raw, dirty, and angry. I related to that completely. I felt like I was an outcast and was a rotten little kid for awhile when I was young. I mean, I was a runaway and was just

kinda a mess. I was really drawn to that music, those lyrics and what that band was about.

Years later, when I look back on it now and listen to their music, even the old stuff, I feel like I can take pretty much any Social Distortion song, slow it down and strum it on an acoustic guitar, and it's just a straight up honest to goodness folk song. The music they were writing and that I was listening to, even if i didn't know it at a young age, was just simply timeless rock and roll. To me, Social Distortion's one of those bands who is gonna be just as good if not better years from now.

Some of my favorite stuff is from their latest CD (Hard Times And Nursery Rhymes).

Yeah it's great!

So you're in the middle of touring at the moment. Road life is always challenging and can put a strain on relationships. How do you and your bandmates Joe and Jon keep from getting defeated by the downsides of this lifestyle?

We don't really fight but I mean everybody gets frustrated. When you live in close proximity to anyone or living in an environment where there's little or no personal space, you get to know everybody so well. And sometimes if you're having a bad day, the littlest things can set you off; the sound of somebody breathing or even their distinct smell. I mean truly, I'm not even kidding! It's kinda the little things you get to know. It's not like any other life. I mean, most people have a circle of friends, and you'll give 'em a high five,

shake their hand or give them a hug and you say "Alright, I'll see ya tomorrow" or "See ya next week!" or "I'll see ya when I'm lookin' at ya!" This is different. I mean, these guys are my roommates. It's kinda messed up and it's kinda sad in a lot of ways. I'm a married man and I miss my wife dearly. The sacrifices you make on the road are immense and it's really brutal. A perfect example is the fact that this year, I've spent more time in the same room with Joe and Jon than I have my own wife.

It's basically like a second marriage.

It is. And it's tough! I mean, I'm already married! I have a wife and that's who I want to spend all my time with. But years ago I chose a path of playing music and doing it as a career. What a lot of people don't realize is that we do love doing this and we have a massive passion for it, but it's also our livelihood. And it being our livelihood— being on the road, selling t-shirts, selling records, not getting any sleep, eating terrible food, having near-death experiences...that's part of making a living at doing what we do. No security, all of that. But we all get along and we're like brothers. You do end up being like a family.

When you're not touring, do you stay away from each other? I know some bands have an agreement where once they get home from tour they pretty much say to each other "Look. We're cool and I'm not mad at you, but please don't talk to me for awhile."

Completely! Especially the situation I'm in now. I live in Northern

California, Joe lives in Southern California, and Jon lives in Florida. With the Hot Water Music guys, Chris and George live in Gainesville while Jason lives in Seattle. Then our crew is scattered all over the place. To me it's cool that way though.

I remember what it was like when I lived in Gainesville and I was touring 7-10 months out of the year where I was with all the guys in Hot Water Music the entire time. Then we all go home, and they're the last people I wanna see. But then I'd walk down to the coffee shop and run into one of them, and it was like "Oh..hey man. Long time no see." I mean there's pros and cons to all of that. We were in the same town, so it's easier to write and it's easier to make plans, etc. But to me at the age that I'm at, and as much as we travel, it doesn't matter where anybody lives.

These days the world can seem kind of small.

It just keeps getting smaller!

Being that you interact with your fans at almost every show, do you find they have any misconceptions about you? For example [@chuckraganfacts](#) has declared you the "manliest man in the world" who might have the strength to take on a great white shark.

laughs Me and my buddies follow that account just cus it's so funny and ridiculous. We've always joked "What would really be funny is if we posted the REAL [Chuck Ragan](#) facts." But it was like "No. No one would ever want to know these things."

Eh. Let them keep the Superman image going.

Really though, I feel extremely flattered and very honored that people would even care to put much time into something like that.

Is there any kind of music that you listen to that's completely out of your musical neighborhood that might surprise people? For example, are you a closet hip-hop or metal fan?

Well I don't listen to a whole lot of hip-hop but I've listened to a little bit of it. I love Afro-Cuban music and I love a lot of Flamenco music. (pauses) I'm trying to think of music that people would think of as completely different.

I think if you came out and said you were a huge Poison fan, that might be shocking.

Nah, I don't really listen to metal. When I was a kid I liked old Metallica though. A lot of people get the wrong idea that I like a lot of hardcore music, but I don't. When I was younger I listened to Judge, Gorilla Biscuits and stuff like that cus I was a skateboarder and grew up with a lot of skate and punk rock. For some reason, for years, Hot Water Music crossed paths with so many hardcore bands that were part of hardcore scenes. Over the years, so many people, bless their hearts, have given me hardcore records. I try to listen to everything that people give, but I just don't really listen to that kind of stuff. I like Willie Nelson, Gillian Welch, Creedence Clearwater Revival, and Leatherface. I still like a lot of punk rock,

but nowadays the more relaxed, the better it is.

Recently you scored Scott G. Toepfer's film "[It's Better In The Wind](#)." How was it scoring a movie?

I was honored that he even asked for a song. I sat down and ended up writing a bunch of stuff. So I called him up and said "Look Scott. I am SO into this and I'm enjoying it. I'm just going to keep writing until you tell me that you have enough and tell me to stop."

Originally his film was going to be like a 4 or 5 minute short, almost like a video. Then it kept growing and I kept writing. I said to him "Send whatever thoughts you have—footage, images that you would want to hear in the song—and I'll do my best." We just kept going from there. I would send him stuff and he would send me something back. I would love to do more of that. If I could just wake up, have my coffee, work on the house, play with my dog, spend time with my wife and then go into a little cave and write music? I'd do that all day long. I love it.

I read that you have a chocolate Lab. Are you the type that ends up referring to the dog as if it were a baby?

Oh yeah! I mean, that's our little girl!

Before we part ways, is there anything else you'd like to promote?

Sure. We just put out the [Covering Ground](#) record and will be touring quite a bit on that. The vinyl looks really good. It's awesome.

We always have vinyl at the shows, but I want to encourage people to remember your local record stores. I know it's tough and money is hard to come by, but it's those businesses that once that goes away, it may really go AWAY. I definitely want to thank everybody who has supported in that way. If people want to find it all digitally, that's fine too.

We're also in the works of putting together the 2012 Revival Tour and we're extremely excited about that. So you can check their [website](#) and follow us on Twitter and you'll be the first to hear any updates and cool stuff that's around the corner. We're going to do our best to get it here soon and it'll be worth the wait!

I'm sure it will!

For photos from the Sherman Theater show click [here](#) (additional photos [here](#)).

Follow Chuck Ragan on Twitter [here](#), bassist Joe Ginsberg [here](#) and The Revival Tour [here](#). Follow me at [@concertexaminer](#).