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Interview with rock photographer Ryan Russell

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Whether it's shooting a local concert or flying out to document his favorite band's life on stage and off, music photographer [Ryan Russell](#) is a walking example of what many would consider to be "living the dream." Based in Birmingham, Alabama where he was born and raised, Russell has shot the likes of Paramore, Taking Back Sunday, My Chemical Romance, The Gaslight Anthem, Tegan and Sara, Death Cab For Cutie, Foo Fighters, Matt & Kim, Thursday, Mastodon and Jimmy Eat World among others. Besides photographing his favorite bands from the pit as well as behind the scenes, he has launched a brand new online project "[Nervous Energies](#)", where he posts privately filmed acoustic sessions for the site with artists he's had the chance to work with.

Last week I sat down with Ryan during some downtime on his tour with [Against Me!](#) (who were opening for Dropkick Murphys) to talk about what it's like to be him. What I found out is that above all else, he is a diehard music fan. The passion and respect he has for the bands he listens to is what drives his success but also helps keep him humble in an industry where other equally lucky photographers might become jaded. Read on to find out how a shy "Big bearded burly dude" from Alabama ended up living the life many music fans only dream of.

Are you from Birmingham?

Always lived my entire life there.

Why stay there as opposed to relocating to a big city such as New York, Chicago, or even nearby Atlanta?

I love where I grew up. Also, there's however many photographers in L.A., Chicago and NY,

and there's not that many Southeastern photographers. So you're that guy when it's like "I got a band in the Southeast. Oh, we got that guy down there, so let me call him." Plus, it's a lot cheaper down here.

Many people still have a bad impression of Birmingham because of the focus on the negative parts of the city's past. Is there something positive or surprising you can tell me about Birmingham people might not know?

Just like any city, there's always going to be jerks or whatever, but there's a lot of people in Birmingham that look out for one another. Though the Civil Rights thing was a large part of the city's heritage, the fact that those events happened... I hope in some way it helped bring cause to the movement back then. A lot of people remember that stuff and there are a lot of people that were proud to be involved in the (positive events of the) Civil Rights movement in the 60's. So that's cool that you have so many people that have all these stories about marching with King and all that kind of stuff.

Being from the Northeast, there are times I've felt it sounded like a different world.

It is and it isn't. It just depends on where you go. Nowadays, it's pretty boring! It's got its ups and downs. If you love college football, you are in the right place. Just football in general, besides professional. Even with the high school games it's kinda crazy how people follow players. Everybody has a really relaxed attitude to a degree. I've had people think that like "Oh Birmingham. Where do you have shows? The BARNS?" Atlanta's only 2hrs of a drive, Nashville's only 2 1/2 hours. So any show is gonna come through one of the three cities.

How did you end up going on tour with Against Me!?

Against Me! toured with Mastodon and These Arms Are Snakes in 2007. I was really good friends with both those bands. I had never seen AM! and I wasn't a huge fan. But then I saw them play. One night I was like "I'm gonna go watch one song." It was so good I literally ran back to the dressing room, grabbed my camera and shot one whole roll of film. Their A&R at the label was the same as Taking Back Sunday and My Chemical Romance who I had worked with already. I ended up mailing a print of one of the photos saying "Hey I shot this cool photo of one of your bands!" Their manager at the time saw the photo and showed it to Tom. Tom was like "Dude! We love this! Can we buy this for a poster?" I was like "Of course! I would love that." Three months later, like Fall '07, they were like 'Hey man, you wanna go on tour for a week?' and I said 'Hell yeah. Let's do it.' Ever since then, they've been the band that I've toured with the most.

So by now you have a real comfort level.

Yeah definitely. There is not a single band that I would rather see live every night than Against Me! Because every single night, it's so good. I told Tom before that when I'm

watching them play, it's like watching the Clash and nobody knows it's the Clash yet. That's how I feel about the band. So I'm glad that we've gotten to build the relationship to where it is. I have different interests with each member of the band. So it's just kinda cool how everyone can just get along and have a good time.

You're shooting day to day ordinary stuff as well as the live show?

Yeah, everything. This year we're working on a photo project (info on that will be posted later on). I went down and photographed the rehearsal, and I was on last tour. I'm doing a week on each tour and just taking as much stuff as possible just to kind of tell the story of this year.

How did you form relationships with the bands you work with?

When I started out there was a band in Birmingham called Haste, and I did their website. We didn't have any content, so I was like "Oh, I'll buy a camera." So I shot photos of them just to have it for the website. But they would start opening up for bands like Bad Brains and Thursday. I would get them to ask the bands if I can shoot their set. So that's how it spurted up. But now at this point, a lot of people know my name and my work and will contact me that way. Like Lemuria. I never met them until January '09. I e-mailed them and was like "Hey, I really like your band. You're gonna play here in a month. Let's do some photos." From those photos, I ended up having a great relationship with them and ended up doing their new album artwork. So there's little personal connections. Against Me! is on tour with Dropkick right now, so I'm sure at some point I'll shoot some Dropkick photos. So if those guys see the photos and like them, they might be like "Get us that guy!" But there are also random people who will contact you. Like if a band likes your work or if there's someone at the label. I've worked with Paramore, so if there's another band off Fueled By Ramen that they need photos of, they'll be like "We've got Ryan, he did work with Paramore."

Are you ever nervous when you're the one asking the band to work together?

Oh yeah, there's a lot of awkward moments. For example, My Chemical Romance. I was on the Projekt Revolution tour in '07 with Taking Back Sunday, who I am about as close with as I am to Against Me! The My Chem guys had seen my photos and wanted me to shoot. I shot every show that they were on that tour with them. Those dudes came to me later on and said "These are the best photos that anybody's ever taken of us." I'm eternally gracious for someone to make that kind of a comment. But at the same time, I've never toured with them. So us being around each other...they have a level of respect to let me do whatever I want because they know it's going to be done right and it's going to come out great. But since I don't know that much of them on a personal level other than just randomly seeing each other, it's a little bit more of a nervous situation. You have to respect the people you're

working with and know what that particular person will and will not let you do and what they want and don't want.

Is there anyone you'd like to work with in the future?

I love Rise Against. That one's getting pretty close. I talked to their manager a week or two ago and I think at some point I'll e-mail a bunch of my photos for them to see. If they like them, hopefully on this tour, I'll get to do it at some point. Bands that I really care about, I want it to be on a personal level where the band really enjoys the work. I want them to want you to shoot them, not because it's scheduled and we have to do it. I would love to shoot somebody like Kanye or Jay-Z. I've never gotten to shoot that style show before. I've shot Ciara and the Dream but it was all press shots, it wasn't a live situation. I'd just like to see what I could do.

How did Nervous Energies come about?

I always saw [Peel Sessions](#), etc. back in the day where people would do different versions of their songs. I watched a video of John Vanderslice [performing](#) outside of Pink's Hot Dogs in L.A. He was just standing there. He didn't get permission. He's just playing his song and had a guy film it. I had seen tons of things like that before, but that one video I was like "That's really cool man. I think I could do that." I had a friend, her name is Katie Crutchfield. Her main band is PS Eliot but she also plays in a bunch of other bands that are local Birmingham acts. She had a new project called [Waxahatchee](#) and I heard a 5 song demo of it. I said "I love these songs Katie. You play it, let me film it. It would be cool just to post on YouTube." They came out so well that I started doing it more. It became like, "Fake Problems is here this week. Let's do it with them as well." It got so many views so quickly, that I thought "Wow I can do this and people actually care. Let's start doing it every week!" So now I post one every single week. On this tour, I've done a session every single day I've been with them just so that when I go home I don't have to find one every week, I have a backlog of stuff.

Are the sessions spontaneous or planned?

Well, for example Against Me! [played](#) the Mercury Lounge yesterday. There's a band that's called Slingshot Dakota I know. I called and said "Alright we're gonna be at the venue around 10, come down." We hopped in Against Me!'s van that was parked outside and just recorded it in the van. Luckily [Rode Microphones](#) saw the videos and they were like "These are awesome, we love these. We wanna give you a mic to use." So the quality of the recordings have definitely gotten a lot better where you can hop in a van like that and do something that sounds great.

Where do you hope to take Nervous Energies? TV? Would you like it to stay where it is?

I want it to stay where it is. I'm going to have Nervous Energies Releases, where if a certain session is really good we're going to put it on cassette or 7-inch. I had a logo and stuff made for it over a year before the videos ever started. I never wanted my photography to be under a weird label. I just wanted it to be my name; I don't want it to be like a company. I just wanted it to be "You're just a dude taking photos." But I thought if I ever do have a company, I wanted to call it Nervous Energies. "Nervous Energy" is from an Against Me! song, but NervousEnergy.com was taken. So when I bought it a year and a half ago, I was like "I'll make it plural!" I want to be able to have a lot of 7" come out once there's monetary backing. All the bands I'm doing are bands I'm a fan of, so it's cool to be able to record something with them and have them like it so much they would want it on a 7". I'm gonna put out a couple non-band photo books as well, only 50 or 100 made. I don't know what else is gonna come out.

The "Under Pressure" video with Terrible Things was pretty cool, with the Coke bottle.

What's funny is there were two glasses and Josh shattered one of them and the water went everywhere. So we were like "OK. Let's get a Coke bottle!"

Do you have an opinion on the recent articles on AOL and Rolling Stone.com about how Lady Gaga wants total control over the photos that are taken of her at her live show by professional photographers in the pit?

I think there's always situations where both sides (photographer and artist) are appropriate. Her show is so art directed that she's building an experience for people. I'm not trying to say that as a pro or con musically. It's an aesthetic that she's creating. If they're giving you the opportunity to shoot her, and you get to experience this thing, I think they should be able to have a little bit of right of saying what can and can't be done. I think it's weird that all of the sudden people are writing an article about it like it just started with her. It's all based on your past experiences. If nobody else has told you you can't do something and all of the sudden someone does, a photographer can feel put off, like "Oh well, then I don't want to work with that person." At times people just have to get over it. You're getting to go do stuff that's a series of once in a lifetime opportunities and you get to do it all the time. I mean there's gonna be a lot of unreasonable artists. But you should have a level of respect for artists that if they wanna have certain guidelines, you should abide by it if you want to work with that artist, and not complain about it later on.

Some photographers are upset because other big artists do not require such a contract, so they feel they shouldn't have to sign for the selection of artists that do require a

signature before shooting a show.

No band is going to be like any other band.

(Ryan turns to Against Me! drummer Jay Weinberg, who sat in on the interview with us)

Against Me! lets me do anything I want right?

*JAY: *nods and smiles* I let him do anything.*

(Ryan continues) There are bands that are way smaller than Against Me! that have had way more restrictions. It's all how that band views the world. Either go along with it, or don't complain and don't work with that person. A lot of times the artist can't even say otherwise if they're under a contract. (If I am a huge fan) and my imagery helps support that band and make people like that band, then I don't care. You're going to get so many shoots because of that credit that you can't harp on that stuff. If you don't want to sign the contract, then you probably don't care enough about the band you're shooting anyway.

What have been the most memorable moments of your career so far?

There have been a lot. Getting to see the Foo Fighters was a really big deal. Going on tour with Death Cab For Cutie is pretty much up there. Death Cab and I connect on a lot of levels. We're worlds apart as people though. They're a lot more cultured than I am. I'm just a dude from Alabama with a camera. The fact that I'm one of the few people that they've allowed to go on tour with them for multiple days, and that they're my favorite band...it's a huge honor. But the fact that I was able to do a really good job and try to hone my craft to where somebody who sees literally thousands of photographs of them wants you to work with them is kinda cool. All that was definitely a big deal and it still is. I love touring with Against Me! because they're really like a family. You'll never find a nicer crew and band as Against Me! That's not to say that other bands aren't nice. It's just I feel like I fit in with them more. The bass player's from Alabama so we make jokes all the time about each other. Jay does too. Also a huge deal, I met Max Weinberg *(who happens to be Jay's Father)* at the first New York show and that was a really big deal for me. He was a nice guy. It was really cool to meet him.

JAY: And he loves Ryan's pictures too.

How have you been enjoying Dropkick Murphys?

I hadn't heard of them much growing up. What little I've seen of them on stage is insane though. I don't drink alcohol at all, but if I did, I would love that (environment)! Not that you have to be drunk to love it. But it seems like there's a built in culture with it, and it's

awesome! From what I've seen at the two dates at Roseland, it's a type of camaraderie that is kinda a new thing for me to see.

What are the most common questions you find that people ask you?

They always ask about my camera gear. I hate answering about it. I'd much rather be talking about bands or video games or any other subject. People legitimately think "If I go buy his lens and camera I can do that." That can happen. But it's not because you bought that camera, it's because you're actually good and it's just unlocking your ability to do it. I learned to shoot the way I shoot by literally just making mistakes. I only ever shot Canon. I don't use anybody else when it comes to SLRs. I don't have any endorsements. But there's a company in New York, but based out of Europe, called **Lomography**. Anything that's not an SLR, I got from Lomography. They have amazing cameras. A lot of them are toy cameras. They have a camera called an LCA which is an old USSR camera that they bought the rights to and started reproducing again once the Soviet Union fell. That's the one camera that every single person, no matter if you're a photographer or just on tour, etc. should have.

What are the misconceptions people seem to have about you and your chosen career?

On the personal side, lots of people are surprised that I never drank ever. If I woke up tomorrow and wanted to, I would. They also think I'm gonna be a small little nerdy kid. But I'm 6'5", big bearded burly dude. I'm very shy around people I don't know. I've walked around at a venue and sometimes someone stops me and I say hi and keep walking. Later on I'll get a comment like "You were such a jerk." It's not that, it's that I just don't know what to say. Also there's a lot of times that with the way Twitter works (*Ryan has over 14,000 followers*), you can't relate emotion when you type so people take things the wrong way sometimes.

(Turns to Jay and jokes) Do you have any misconceptions about photographers? Something where I break through that and I'm awesome?

JAY: Sometimes photographers don't go the extra mile to get to know the band or actually become part of the band. With Against Me! there's four members. Ryan's kinda like the 6th member (manager Jordan being the 5th). Once you get to know the band and get to know the aesthetic value of what the band is trying to do and how that works with what something like what Ryan does, then it becomes kind of one cohesive vision. Everyone's on the same page and everything is working towards a common goal. Whereas if you just had a hired gun who just kind of stood there and pressed a button on a camera, you don't get that cohesiveness that you get with somebody like Ryan. That's extremely hard to find. Obviously the band trusts Ryan's art and his direction. So it totally fits in the same vision.

(Ryan continues) One misconception (about this career) is that all photographers will just shoot anybody because of who they are. I have had the one rule where I will not shoot a band unless I like the band. The only exception to that is if a band comes to me and says "We really like your photos, will you work with us?" I will absolutely do that. Because that's somebody telling you that they enjoy your work, and I respect anybody who would come to me and tell me that they like my work. Of course I'll work with them. I mean, who am I to be a pompous ass and say "Well I'm not gonna work with you." But it's different when a band does that versus when some random label dude does that and the band's never even seen your work and don't really care. I want every band knowing that when I shoot photos of them it's because I respect them.

To view Ryan's past work visit <http://www.ryanrussell.net>. To check out the Nervous Energies video library, visit <http://www.nervousenergies.com>. Follow him on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/xryanrussellx>.

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