

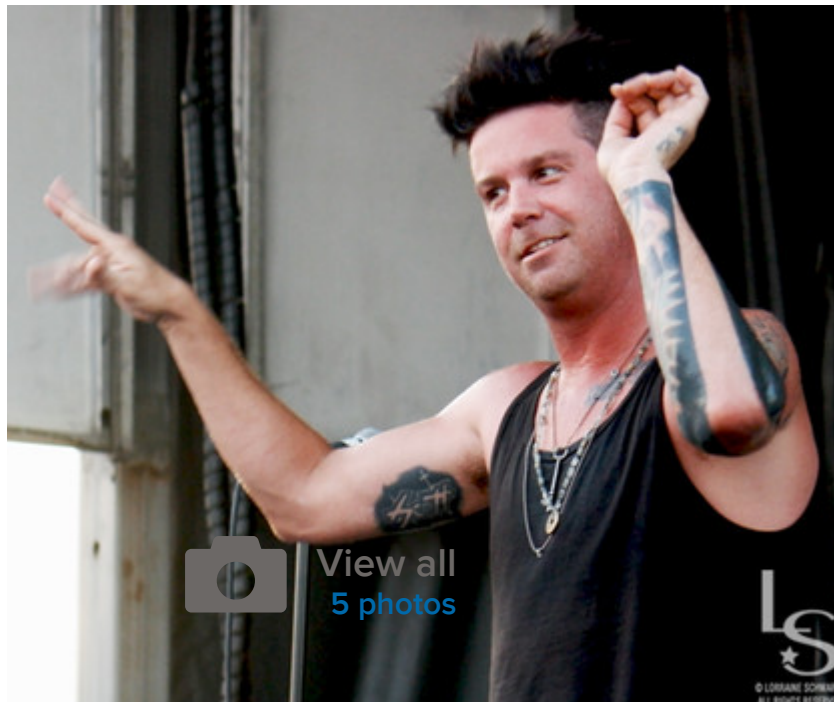
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Interview: Scott Russo of Unwritten Law on "Swan", Warped Tour & setlist science

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Unwritten Law at 2011 Vans Warped Tour

Lorraine Schwartz

After clearing up the story behind the abrupt exit of guitarist Steve Morris and bassist Pat "PK" Knight in [part one](#) of my interview with [Unwritten Law](#) singer Scott Russo, we moved on to sunnier topics. Besides literally talking about the sun (the festival was taking place smack dab in the middle of a massive New York City heat wave), we spoke about the making of the band's latest CD. This year's "[Swan](#)" (their first full length studio album since 2005's "[Here's To The Mourning](#)") contains some of the catchiest hooks you'll hear all year and serves as a perfect soundtrack for the Summer. The first video single, "Starships and Apocalypse", was chosen to be part of MTV's Indie Music Month this past Spring, and has

easily become yet another favorite live singalong song, along with past hits "Seein' Red", "Save Me", and "Teenage Suicide." We also covered [Unwritten Law's](#) approach to their live show, which will hopefully make its way back to the East coast during their upcoming Fall tour across the U.S.



Lorraine Schwartz

LS: So...Swan is probably my favorite album that you've ever made.

Thank you. It's easily hands down the best of our records.

LS: The original intention going into this album was that it was going to be the band's last. You've stated that you actually scrapped the first round of songs intended for the album after not feeling it was the band's best work. Realizing you could (and needed to) do better, you gave the album another go. How did this all happen, and what did you do differently going into the second round?

I write most of all the music for all the Unwritten Law records, and write all the lyrics. While I collect all the publishing for the records, I always gave the guys (Morris and Knight) some of the publishing so that they stayed happy enough to continue on. But because this was going to be our last record, we were going to split the publishing equally. It was going to be "OK, you write four songs, you write four songs, you write four songs and I'll write four songs. Then we'll split the record. That means music and lyrics... so, go ahead boys."

We got about six songs into tracking the record, all the boys' songs, and the record was weak. During the band's five year hiatus, I had been writing and producing for other artists which is my other job. So I couldn't come out with all these B-sides on it. Unwritten Law is my business card, my calling card. So I told them "Look. Either we're gonna scrap this record and I'm gonna go back and f***ing handle it, or ['The Hit List'](#) is gonna be our last

record and that's gonna be it. The choice is up to you guys." They were like "No, let's rewrite it." So I'm like "Cool." I scrapped those first six songs and went back to the drawing board. I threw out everything that wasn't f***ing smashing, rewrote it and re-recorded the whole thing. Then about nine songs in I realized that I didn't wanna call it "Swan Song." I didn't want it to be the end. I wanted it to be shortened, so we called it "Swan." And the rest is now history.

LS: How do you decide whether a song is weak or awesome?

My chest can feel it. These are things I personally like but other people might not like. For instance, the guys (Morris and Knight) didn't like "Starships and Apocalypse." They didn't like certain things I was writing. But my chest feels warm when it's f***ing right. And when it's not right, my body literally regurgitates it. So if I'm sitting there working on a song I know doesn't feel right and they're going "No, it's cool, it's cool." I'm going "Man, that s*** is NOT cool."

This is what it comes down to: usually I'll write the music first, then I'll write the lyrics according to how the music makes me feel. If that music doesn't make me feel anything, I can't write to it. And that's what was happening so I was like "This is all s***. It's all B-sides." And this isn't about a publishing paycheck. This is about the rest of my life as a writer for other artists too. So I felt either we're going back to the drawing board, or this is a f***ing wrap right here. We actually fired the people we were recording with and everything else. So that's what's up. My body literally regurgitates stuff that isn't good and it heats up when something is awesome. That's what's up. That's what Swan is. Every song is f***ing fire.

Was there a freedom when you thought of it as your last CD or did you feel it was a heavy responsibility?

It was a lot of responsibility, and all the responsibility on me. They had tracked their instrumental parts in two months. I went and had all the Pro Tool files in my house and I went there and reworked it. In Pro Tools, you know you can manipulate anything. So, I reworked the whole record and manufactured it into what it needed to be and wrote lyrics accordingly. That whole process took 14 months. So they spent two months on it and I spent an additional 12 months, which came to 14 months total.

Moving on to your stint with this year's [Warped Tour](#)... first off, bless everyone on Warped for putting up with this heat. How do you get through a tour in these conditions?

You gotta be smart about it. You gotta pick and choose what you wanna do for the day, and you gotta do that in the morning. So you kinda have your whole day mapped out. You gotta stay hydrated. For me, and it might look kinda lame, but I have an umbrella, cus you know it's ten degrees cooler underneath the umbrella in the sun. So for me, you pick out those

things you wanna do and it's very pre-meditated. The rest of the time you're trying to find air conditioning. You're sitting on your bus, going on another homie's bus or having drinks with whoever.

Since you have a shorter set time as opposed to when you're headlining a regular tour, how do you pick what songs to play for your set?

With a new band, we wanted to keep it fresh. On most tours that Unwritten Law's done, we've had the same setlist every single night. On this tour, we're switching it up basically daily, so we have about four or five setlists. Now that we're feeling more comfortable together, we'll pick and choose which setlist to play. In cities like this, where there's gonna be kids here today and there'll be kids there tomorrow (since Jersey's a 2 hr drive), we'll flip the setlist up. With only a half hour and a catalog as long as ours, you can't give everyone what they wanna hear. These fans here are a whole new demo for us. They're between ages 14 and 18. A lot of them don't even know who Unwritten Law is. So for us it doesn't matter if we're playing a song like "CPK." We're putting songs in the set we know really hit. So if you're a new listener and you're watching, you'll be like "F***, this band's gnarly!"

Some bands are stubborn about changing setlists each night. Is it really that difficult to switch things up?

It's not that it's that hard, it's just that it's easy to get into a groove. And it's also even more powerful to actually have that s*** so wired that it's clockwork. I mean a setlist is an art form on its own. Like, how a set flows is very, very important. I's gotta have dimensions. It's gotta have lows then it's gotta come back up and then it's gotta peak at the end. That being said, when you have those powerful songs that bring it down, and the songs you need to end it with, that really can't change a lot. So you gotta keep the formula that works. You gotta craft it until it's coming out swinging, plateaus, drops down, comes back higher for a climax and then end it. Plus, you wanna come back for another swoop if you're headlining with an encore. It's a science. But music is that way, especially playing in a live band or even DJ'ing. Anything like that. It's a science.

So what's up next for the band?

We have eight shows on the way home, then we have ten days off. After that we have a couple one-offs in California, then we start a Fall tour across the United States. Then after that, we have Japan in October and November in Australia.

Check out part one of my interview with Scott [here](#), and a slideshow of the new Unwritten Law lineup at Warped Tour [here](#).

SUGGESTED LINKS

- [Interview: Scott Russo of Unwritten Law explains departure of longtime members](#)
- [Concert Review: 2011 Vans Warped Tour at Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum](#)



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