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Programmed for success

Terry Lawless brings musical might to Santa Maria

BY BRETT LEIGH DICKS



Business as usual

Formed in 2003, Unfinished Business has sensibilities that revolve around classic rock'n'roll

PHOTO COURTESY TERRY LAWLESS

When it comes to significant moments in recent musical history, the current record-breaking U2 *360° Tour* must surely rank right up there near the top. So must performing at both the Lincoln Memorial for the inauguration of the 44th U.S. president and a succession of Grammy Award ceremonies. Bruce Springsteen's reunion tour with the E Street Band would also get an honorable mention, as would Cher's *Living Proof* tour, which was the most successful tour by any female artist. And, for sheer cool factor, you surely have to throw in David Bowie's 50th birthday celebration at Madison Square Garden.

The one musician who has been a part of all those musical experiences is Santa Maria's Terry Lawless. Currently the keyboardist with U2, Lawless has lived in Santa Maria for almost 20 years and has not only accompanied many of contemporary music's elite, but has also been an intricate part of the local music scene—reflected by the fact that Lawless will soon join the ranks of Jackson Browne and Jim Messina when he's honored by the Orcutt Children's Arts Foundation—an organization he's passionately supported for a number of years—at the group's 2010 Gala.

When not recording or touring with the biggest rock band in the world, Lawless can be found either working out of a local recording studio he operates with David Rackley or playing around town in various musical incarnations. One of his regular musical guises is with local purveyors of classic rock'n'roll, Unfinished Business. Lawless has been playing with the band for almost five years and its annual New Year's Eve celebration—which this year takes place at the South County Regional Center in Arroyo Grande—encapsulates what both the night and the band are all about.

"About four years ago, we decided to quit working for someone else on New Year's Eve," Lawless recalled. "It's the biggest entertainment night of the year, and we just got tired of someone putting on an event [who] usually doesn't. We thought we could do it better because we know what's important to people when they go to a party. We base it around good, nonstop music in a genre everybody seems to like. It's our way to show people what a party should be."

A big part of Unfinished Business' celebratory sensibilities revolves around classic rock'n'roll. Formed in 2003, the band also comprises David Hollister, Jim Witt, Ben Davis, and Ed Miller—all veterans of the '60s music scene. Lawless' recruitment into the band's ranks came when Miller turned to him to recommend a replacement keyboardist. The authenticity of the band's sound convinced Lawless to fill the void himself—that, and the fact that the music of the '60s resonates with him the deepest.

"Music seemed to matter a little more back then," Lawless mused. "Today's music has lost its value a little for a couple of reasons. With the ease that it can be stolen, music means nothing more to a lot of younger people than just a download. And, instead of having a moral or deeper value, music has become the background to working out at the gym. The '60s were about the last time that music was all we had. None of us had a TV set, but we all had a great stereo. It was the center focus of our lives."

And music has long been the center focus of Lawless' life. His early days in his native Iowa pointed the way. In high school, Lawless excelled at both music and math, to the point where, in 1971, he was not only credited in the top one percent of students in the U.S. National Math exam, but also occupied a place in the Iowa All-State Band and Orchestra and the McDonald All American High School Band. By the time Lawless arrived in Los Angeles a decade later, he was brandishing degrees in both disciplines.

His migration to the West Coast coincided with digital synthesizers and programming sweeping through the medium. Lawless found the burgeoning landscape the perfect calling for his combined skills. When an opening arose on Barry Manilow's technical team, Lawless dove in, and the experiences he forged have subsequently afforded him a succession of enviable musical experiences with the likes of U2, David Bowie, and Bruce Springsteen. Lawless' technical prowess has certainly been utilized, but his roots in classic contemporary music have also been widely embraced.

"There are a hundred guys that can program like me, and probably a million that can play as well as me, so I try to bring a lot of things to the table," Lawless explained. "One of those things is that as fast as a band can play and sing, I can write it down. That's one thing that has endeared me to U2. When we did the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, they called me that morning and said, 'We're doing "Gimme Shelter" with Mick Jagger and "Because the Night" with Patty Smith and Bruce Springsteen, and they're coming in 45 minutes. Could you have charts for us?'"

There are, of course, two sides to every coin. The ease with which the digital revolution has afforded musicians access to recording has also crossed over to the distribution of music. Never before has so much music been so accessible to the populace. But that access has come at a cost to those making the music. While Lawless' musical dexterity has helped him navigate one of the most dynamic periods of musical history, he's also been conscious to heed a little advice along the way.

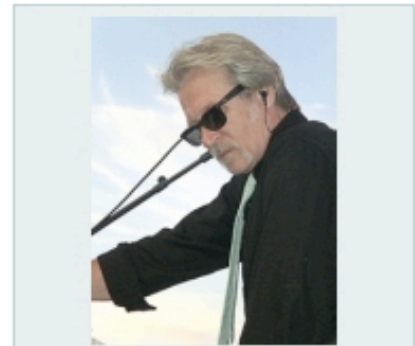
You, too?

Unfinished Business' 1960s Rock'n'Roll New Years Eve Dinner and Dance Party, at South County Regional Center in Arroyo Grande, includes a buffet dinner by Alphy's Broiler, door prizes, and a Champagne toast. Party from 8 p.m. to 12:15 a.m. Tickets cost \$75. For more information, call 929-5211 or visit unfinished-business.org.

"In the late '90s, David Bowie hipped me to the fact that recorded music was going to have no value because it was going to become so accessible," Lawless recalled. "And what a foresight that was. Twelve years ago when he talked to me about this, he said the only value in music is going to be from your live performance. And I took that to heart. So I go out and perform with anyone I can. If someone throws some beer cases down with a sheet of plywood on top of it, we'll go out and play."

Whether he's playing to tens of thousands of people with U2 or a Friday Happy Hour at a local winery, Lawless finds the musical charter as one and the same.

"It's completely the same," he said. "What I've learned from being in bands for the past 40-some years is that it doesn't matter if there are 10 people in the room or 110,000 people there. Your show isn't going to change. If you've got a better show for the 110,000, then you cheated those 10 people."



Him 2

Terry Lawless, the keyboardist for U2, said the music has lost the importance it had in the '60s when people may not have had a television set but did have a great stereo.

PHOTO COURTESY TERRY LAWLESS

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