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What's on 'Horizon' for Lawless

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Julian J. Ramos/Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, March 24, 2009 12:00 am | (0)

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Terry Lawless, keyboardist for U2, plays in his Santa Maria studio. The band just spent five nights on the "Late Show with David Letterman."//Bryan Walton/Staff

Just days ago, Terry Lawless was on stage in New York City playing keyboard for U2, one of the world's biggest rock bands.

And the Santa Maria man will soon begin rehearsals for U2's world tour that begins in June - Lawless' third with the band.

"It's like a circus," he said of the huge concert sets that take days to assemble, and the long hours of checking and rechecking equipment.

During their 2009 stadium tour that kicks off in Barcelona, Spain, U2 will perform songs

from their new album, "No Line on the Horizon," while on a 360-degree stage.

Lawless traveled the world with the band for both the "Elevation" and "Vertigo" tours. His reputation as a renowned keyboardist is what caught the attention of the band, who recruited him into their ranks.

Before jetting off for the "Horizon" tour, Lawless is home in Santa Maria preparing to play with local musicians into April, including at the Santa Barbara County Vintners Festival.

When he's not touring, Lawless enjoys playing with local bands or individual musicians.

"I just love to play," he said. "I love it when the phone rings."

'On the horizon'

During the first week of March, U2 performed on the "Late Show with David Letterman" five times in one week and once on "Good Morning America" in support of "No Line on the Horizon."

Released in February, the album is the band's 12th.

Lawless performs on the lead single "Get on Your Boots" and other songs.

"Late Show" appearances are "always a great time," the keyboardist said. The atmosphere is laid-back and the stage crew at the Ed Sullivan Theater, where the show tapes, is top-notch.

Letterman was humble and appreciative of the band's performances, according to Lawless.

Every show they played, Letterman mentioned the band's success of selling more than 145 million albums worldwide, and winning

22 Grammy Awards - the most by any band.

U2 spent about three years recording "No Line on the Horizon" across Europe and North Africa.

Portions of the album were recorded in Morocco, London, the south of France, and in the band's hometown of Dublin, Ireland.

As famous and rich as they've gotten, U2 has stayed close to their roots in Dublin where the album wrapped up, Lawless said.

The sessions in London were held at a pair of legendary studios, Abbey Road and Olympic Studios.

Abbey Road is the fabled home of The Beatles and Olympic Studios is where the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin and The Who recorded.

One thing that many might not know about U2 is their fondness and knowledge of older American music, from Tony Bennett and Frank Sinatra to the big-band era, Lawless said.

Although, he doesn't spend a lot of time around the band, Lawless said the band members are fun to be with, and have a dry sense of humor. They are critical of themselves and intelligent in their decision-making.

Lawless said U2's humanitarian work and drive to move their music forward through innovation sets the band apart from other musicians.

Lead singer Bono has led a campaign for debt forgiveness and pediatric AIDS in Africa among his humanitarian work, which has earned him three Nobel Peace Prize nominations.

"A lot of artists don't think about it," he said.

'Golden, world-class ears'

Playing with U2 is Lawless' way of reaching his goal of going back to making a living playing the saxophone in bars and clubs close to home.

From his back yard studio, Lawless writes music for radio and TV commercials, and movies. He also produces music for others using a soundproof, live recording room and state-of-the-art computer recording and sound equipment. In his career, Lawless has worked with some of the most well-known artists and bands in the world. The long list

includes Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, Cher, Phil Collins, Janet Jackson, Paula Abdul, Don Henley, David Bowie, the Doobie Brother and Hanson.

Lawless can play all wind instruments, keyboards and guitar, and is a master at the Hammond organ - a staple of rhythm and blues music.

Lawless said he is blessed with exceptional ears and the ability to transcribe music, such as chord changes, to paper in one take.

"I have golden, world-class ears," he said.

Jim Heintz, founder and lead developer for software company Way Out Ware of Pismo Beach, said Lawless is a keyboard legend and a "go-to guy" in the music business.

During a U2 concert, Lawless draws upon his 30-year background to run extra sound effects that are used to make the live music sound exactly like what is on the album.

With the rise of digital music and the proliferation of free file-sharing Web sites, the importance of live shows is more important than ever, he said.

Music education proponent

A native of Iowa, Lawless credits "who he is" to his public school education in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Lawless described himself as a "big believer that knowledge is power," and said the value of an education with music is priceless.

"I wouldn't be where I am if it wasn't for the public school system," he said.

Music programs that are on the chopping block or already cut because of budget cuts, Lawless said is "a terrible mistake."

He is a supporter of the Orcutt Children's Art Foundation, which works to sponsor the visual and performing arts in the Orcutt Union School District.

Lawless also works on writing music with David Rackley, a local music teacher, in his back yard studio.

The walls of the 750-square-foot studio are decorated with sheet music and photos -

each with a story.

Some of the photos are from his travels around the world with U2, including one that shows a donkey in Fes, Morocco, strapped with crates of Coca-Cola bottles on its sides that he described as a "delivery truck."

Home in Santa Maria

Lawless and his wife Melinda have lived in the Santa Maria area for almost 20 years.

Moving from Northridge, they first settled in Tepusquet Canyon in 1990 before moving to Santa Maria in 2000.

Melinda, his wife of almost

22 years, said her husband being away on tour has "gotten easier over the years."

She joked about being a single parent with a generous stipend that has allowed her to be a stay-at-home mom. Trips to the airport were so common that their children thought it was where their father lived, she said.

Together, they have two children, a 17-year-old daughter and a 10-year-old son. Terry also has two daughters, 30 and 23.

People can reach Lawless through his Web site

www.terrylawless.com.

Its not uncommon for him to receive 300 to 400 e-mails a day - many from U2 fans.

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