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Road Warriors: Warpaint's 'Fifth Member' Robin Laananen

Photographer and tour manager Robin Laananen shares her tips for staying safe (and sane) on the road.

Words by **Darren Levin**

Photos by **Robin Laananen**

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Warpaint • Rock

IT all began at a house named **Deathcamp.**

It was 2006 and Robin Laananen had just moved to Los Angeles from Seattle, where she worked as a freelance photographer for local papers such as *Seattle Weekly* and the iconic label Sub Pop.

When Robin arrived at Deathcamp – and she's still not sure why it was called that – there were four guys from North Carolina living there: a rapper, a writer, a guitar player, and a drummer. And then one day **Warpaint** bassist Jenny Lee Lindberg moved in.

Jenny only lived at Deathcamp for two months, but it was enough time to strike up a close friendship with Robin, whose fascination with rock's mythical road saw her jump in the bus with the likes of **Refused**, **A-Trak**,

Simian Mobile Disco, and Broken Social Scene.

“The more you prepare, the more enjoyable your time will be on the road.”

Four years later and Robin was on the road with Warpaint as their tour manager and official photographer, kickstarting a seven-year journey that’s been documented in a book of beautiful imagery called **US/THEN**.

“It’s difficult to put into words,” she says of her relationship with Warpaint. “Aside from their inspiring talent and captivating shows, we’re more of a family than a band with an employee. There’s a bond between all of us, which makes traveling together that much more meaningful.”

Robin is quite literally on the road – about three hours outside of Paris – when we’re finally connected. She’s on tour (this time with her photographer hat on) with Mexican garage rock act **Le Butcherettes**, who have been battling some dire weather conditions as they wind their way across Europe. She describes the experience as inspiring.

“Not only are they undeniably very talented musicians but also wonderful

people who are such a joy to spend time with,” she says. “Despite any long travel or extreme weather conditions endured, they’re always ready to play their best show. They truly love what they do.”



for the uninitiated what does tour management involve?

Tour management involves taking care of all logistics once the tour is booked. We do and oversee the rest. We book and approve flights, hotels, the bus, and any other ground transport or gear movement.

We oversee the production for the show with the band's crew and local crew, schedule timings for the day, schedule press with the publicist, guest lists, take care of the needs of the band/crew such as doctor visits, family arrivals, and the hospitality rider. All the while, trying to keep everyone happy, healthy, and in a perfect world, laughing. A tour manager has to be prepared for anything to change at any point, to remain one step ahead.

Is it anything at all like its depicted by [*Almost Famous/Roadies* director]

Samaron Crowe?

[Laughs] There are some aspects that continue as staples of tour, but it's changed since the earlier years. Though I can't speak from personal experience from the '60s and '70s, I feel that now, artists tend to be more professional, striving for career longevity and desiring the best of both worlds, which includes a steady home life. There is more knowledge available to musicians these days, more awareness as to what works and what will sabotage a career.





How did you get into photography in the first place, and what prompted the shift into tour management?

I took a few classes during high school and began shooting punk shows in basements. I was immediately drawn to capturing the energy, the chaos, and I wanted to find a way to make a living with doing that.

While photographing artists and bands for magazines, I kept hearing stories about time on the road which peaked my curiosity. I decided I wanted to travel with bands, to document what goes on behind the scenes, and the one position bands take everywhere with them is their tour manager.

Who was the first band you tour managed, and what was that experience like?

I had toured as a merch seller for **The Blood Brothers** and **These Arms Are Snakes**, during which I was learning the ropes of tour managing. The first band I tour managed was The Locust in 2007, and it's difficult to describe the experience though "eye opening" and "educational" come to mind.

It was the first tour I was personally responsible for, to not only [have it] run smoothly but to make sure those involved were safe and taken care of. I was fascinated by the contrast as to what went on during the day and the excitement of the show: the ultimate reason anyone would travel so extensively.

Did your career as a photographer stall when you started tour managing, or do the two career paths work hand in hand?

The two career paths can compliment each other often, and I would continue to shoot editorial between tours. I do end up sacrificing work with my absence, which means I need to find other ways to continue with photography work. A prime example is my book of photography on touring with Warpaint, US/THEN, published last year by Setanta Books. I wanted to show the more authentic aspects of a tour, to share the documentation I've done these past few years. I am very grateful to the band for their collaboration and ongoing support of my photography.

What lessons did you learn in the early years?

I learned to take care of myself – one's body is vulnerable to getting sick with the lack of sleep, steady diet, etc. And once someone gets sick it spreads quickly.

I learned to remember to breathe, despite any unforeseen problems. Things will work out, and they'll work out better with a [sense of] calmness

There is so much that goes on beyond the show that music fans are unaware of, and I continue to have a growing respect for the musicians who power through. After all the music and the fans are what makes the rest worth it and they prove that daily.

What are some of the major challenges of being a tour manager?

Always being ready for something to go unplanned, and to always be the one who's "on" despite everything else.



Do you relish the responsibility of having everyone's lives in your hands
to speak?

I've found that I truly enjoy taking care of others. I find what's happening off-stage to be wildly interesting, and I continue to be fascinated of the contrast between that and the show.

What's the most gruelling place to tour?

I think its less of a place than a span of time and how many shows are crammed within that time. In 2014, Warpaint and I traveled to five continents within a period of six weeks.

With travel like that, you slide into survival mode meaning that you eat when you're hungry, you sleep when you're tired. The time of day has less to do with your actions (aside from show scheduling, of course).



Tell us about your recent [December 2017] Australian tour with Warpaint.

What was the experience like?

We love touring Australia, it truly is a special place. Not only are the fans awesome, but it typically runs smoother than elsewhere in the world. On the most recent tour supporting **Alt-J**, their band and crew were very kind and accommodating. It doesn't hurt that their drummer, Stella [Mozgawa], **is an Aussie.**

How was the Victorian leg of the tour, particularly the trip up to Meredith from Melbourne?

I had been told that Meredith is a special festival, unlike any other festival, and I'd have to agree – even with our brief time spent there. The festival cares about the artists, and that's felt immediately upon arrival. The festival adores their fans, and I can tell they try to make it a memorable experience

It was unfortunate that we had to leave straight after their set due to an early flight the following morning. We'd all like to spend more time at Meredith the next time around, but we always enjoy going to the city of Melbourne – for the cool people, delicious food, and snob coffees.

Do you typically research a place before you visit it?

I don't research as much as I'd like to, unless it's a place I haven't been in the past or an approaching day off. That's due to knowing there won't be much time during a show or travel day. The more realistic approach is the quick research the day we arrive, depending on how I feel and what time is permitted. Most days, there is only enough time to hunt for snob coffee and see the inside of the venue.

What's the general vibe like on the road with Warpaint?

The vibe is chill. Structure has to be followed or things would unravel with a domino effect, but we've all learned how to make the most of this odd groundhog's day life. Whether it be trying to make each show different or the days off involving exploration, working on our own projects, relaxation and wining/dining. It's important to continue to enjoy what you do, to be present, and the ladies of Warpaint are fantastic at that.

Do the band consider you a fifth member? Do you consider yourself that?

The band has called me their fifth member, and I have definitely felt it from them! It takes a village. A crew is important to a band, not only for logistical purposes, but the sight of familiar faces as support can make for a better show. They genuinely appreciate all that the crew does for them, and they show it. I'm happy to feel that I'm making a contribution to their career, to try to make it as enjoyable and smooth as possible.

"With travel like that, you slide into survival mode meaning that you eat when you're hungry, you sleep when you're tired."







With a job where you are responsible for the schedule of so many people, what steps do you take to ensure they stay safe despite the hectic imetable pressures?

I use my best judgement to make the correct decisions to keep everyone safe and to keep things on time. Luckily, I do tour with experienced musicians who know how to handle themselves despite the location. We all have each other's backs.

How do you combat things like fatigue?

I sleep wherever I can, I eat as healthy as I can – I've been vegan for the duration of my touring years which helps with not getting sick, and my energy level. Movement through exercise, even as basic as taking long walks or swimming at the hotel pool, can help with fatigue.

I try to use every minute of my days off doing what makes me happy. The one steady activity is to explore a city with my camera, even if I've been there a few times, to have a different view. On a perfect day, it would also involve pilates, a successful hunt for delicious vegan food and coffee, maybe a swim and sauna session. And a good night sleep.





Do you have any examples of how excessive drinking, a lack of sleep, or generally poor planning has derailed a tour?

I can't give specific examples, but I have experienced the close derailment

of tours due to excessive drinking and generally not taking care of one's self. Once someone catches the flu, it spreads like wildfire, and next thing you know, you have a singer who's lost their voice because of a shared illness. Not only that, but excessive drinking leads to horrible hangovers which means there can be mistakes made, and you have a negative aspect leak into a day. Everything in moderation.

What advice do you have for music lovers who are potentially taking roadtrips or travelling to a festival?

The more you prepare, the more enjoyable your time will be on the road as you won't have to worry about anything but the actual experience when it's happening.

Can you describe the importance of diet when on the road?

I can't express how important it is to take care of your body with a healthy diet on the road (and in life, really). With the extensive travel and stress I put on my body during tour, food is literal fuel. Being vegan is becoming easier through the years, around the world, but I do have to be creative. I have to plan for the days when nothing of real nutrition will be available and stock up when possible. A good, healthy diet on the road keeps you from

becoming sick as your immune system can lose strength with intensive travel. I don't have time to be sick with my job, not only that, but it truly sucks to be sick on tour

There is a general perception that touring for bands is a never-ending party. Is this accurate?

[Laughs] No, that is not accurate – at least with my experiences. There are those nights, but typically it is a never-ending groundhog's day with nearly the same scheduled events but in a different setting. The trick is try to remain present and aware of the passing time, as next thing you know, months have passed,

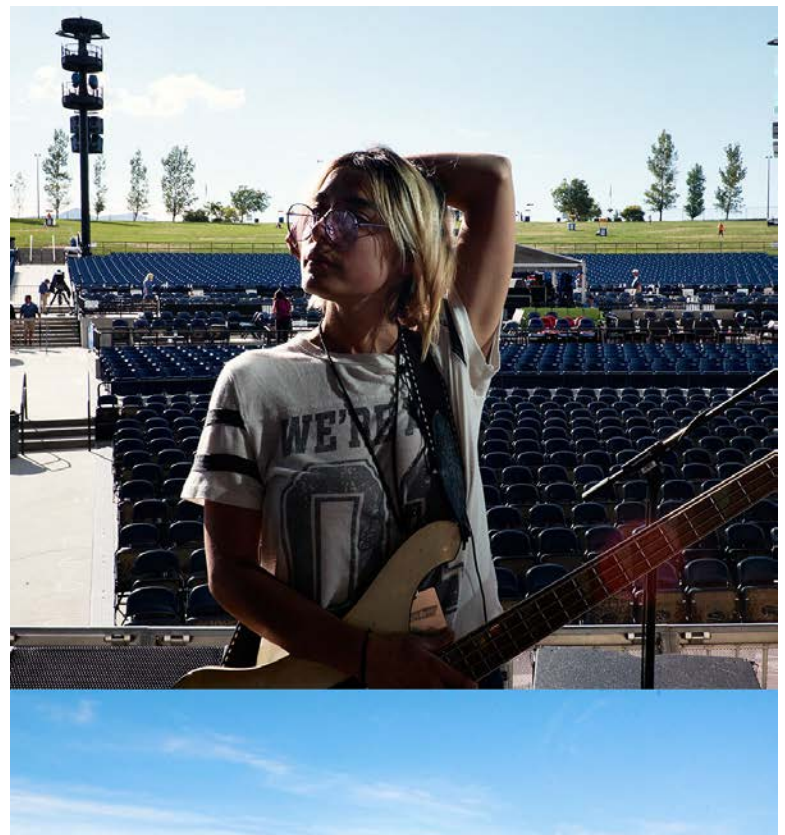
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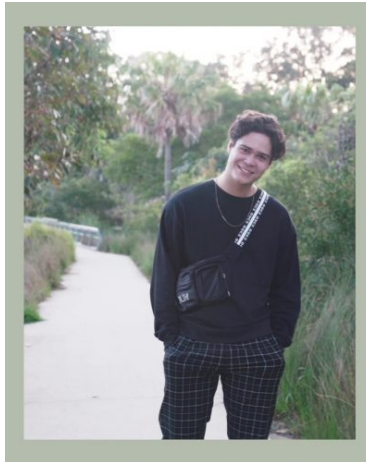


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