

# DOC COYLE '98

By Alice Roche Cody

Doc Coyle '98 remembers the exact moment, at age 13, when his world changed forever. He was hanging out with two friends from his New Brunswick neighborhood, and they showed him MTV for the first time. That led him to discover heavy metal, and he couldn't get enough of groups like Boyz II Men, Megadeth, Metallica.

"I didn't realize music could be so cool," said Doc, an LA-based professional guitarist. "I remember watching *Wayne's World* and hearing *Bohemian Rhapsody*. A light bulb went off. In the guitar solo in Guns N' Roses' *November Rain*, the music spoke to me."

About this time, he started strumming a beat-up old guitar he stumbled upon and soon graduated to an Ibanez Les Paul loaner. "Once I got that, it was game-over," he said.

But really, his game had just begun. It marked the start of a long and tumultuous path to become a guitarist for Bad Wolves, a heavy metal band about to release its third album. In 2018, the group blew up the charts with its cover of the Cranberries' song, *Zombies*. Tragedy surrounded the endeavor. Bad Wolves dedicated its music video to the Cranberries' singer, Dolores O'Riordan, who died the night before she was to record vocals with Bad Wolves. The cover topped *Billboard's* Mainstream Rock Charts, was nominated for *iHeartRadio's* Rock Song of the Year and logged more than 355 million hits, and counting, on *YouTube*.

If someone had told teenaged Doc that he'd find musical fame not once, but twice, he wouldn't have believed it: "I never had the goal: *I'm going to be a rock star*. My ambition, my imagination was not that big."

Growing up, music hummed throughout Doc's homelife, from Jazz Radio spots featuring Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, to bands like Pearl Jam, the Beatles, the Police. His dad, an Irish-Catholic-Polish piano teacher, played in a band with Doc's mom, an African American jazz singer and DJ. The household harmony gave way to discord; his parents split up when Doc was 10. And outside, dissonance rang out as well as poverty and crime plagued his inner-city surroundings. He stayed out of trouble by keeping to himself, listening to heavy metal, and drawing comics.

Doc attended public high school for a year, but didn't fit in. His grandfather, the first black real estate agent in Middlesex County, smoothed the way for Doc and his brother, Dallas Coyle '97, to attend Gill St. Bernard's, where his granddad reffed basketball games. Gill awarded the boys a partial scholarship, and their grandparents, Piscataway residents, paid the remaining tuition.

"Growing up in a lower class in black and brown environment and then going to visit your grandparents in suburbs, it's another world," he said. GSB, with its idyllic rural setting, proved a step beyond.

"Gill was a golden opportunity," he said. "It was my way out of my urban environment. Being able to go to school and not worry about anyone messing with me was a relief. At New Brunswick High School, I was an outcast.

I thought: *Maybe if I go to this school, I'll find people who like me, and I won't be a misfit.*"

Yet adjusting to Gill took time. "It was a culture shock, but not in a stereo-typical way," he said. "People have an idea of a prep school being haughty-taught, but it wasn't. No one was mean to me. People, for the most part, were nice, but there's a shorthand developed among certain groups. They're used to their culture, and you're behind the ball on the subtleties. The privileges. You turn a certain age; you get a car. It's not like they were bad people or spoiled, it's just normal for that element. I was dealing with my own discomfort."

Both Doc and Dallas played basketball, and the required uniform on game days highlighted their disparity. "We were supposed to wear khakis and a collared shirt," he said. "We didn't have that stuff and scrambled to get it. We were at a disadvantage but not disadvantaged."

Academically, too, it took Doc time to acclimate. He remembers his English teacher, Mrs. Ripton taking an interest in him and pushing him to be a better student. "Mrs. Ripton had me write these opinion pieces, and how I write now is based on what she taught me," he said. His current writing credits include numerous songs and content for *VH1* and *CreativeLive.com*.

Overall, GSB served as a positive place, and taught Doc how to navigate different spaces he'd find during his music career. "I felt special and lucky," he said. "It was a picturesque environment, one that most kids will never experience. Smaller class sizes with engaged, thoughtful teachers who had personal relationships with me. I knew I was someplace special."

Before graduating, he started a heavy metal band called God Forbid with Dallas. Next, Doc attended William Patterson, but didn't find his classes as engaging as those at Gill. "All I could think about was music and band, so I dropped out," he said.

He shuffled through some minimum wage temp jobs and summers spent landscaping. Not a fan. "I thought, *This is what adults do every day, all day, forever? It sounds terrible.*"

Meanwhile, the hours of practice he put into his band payed off. Within a year, God Forbid landed a record deal and by the next year, they hit the road.

"Slowly but surely, we tapped into something special," he said. "I put all this time in, but never thought about where I'd be five years from now. I had small goals, like make a demo, play out of state, record a full-length album. It was like a dog using its sense of smell leading through the forest. Instinctual."

Next came 10 years touring with God Forbid. Playing in front of huge audiences definitely had its allure, but success had its sacrifices. "Our band became popular, we got really good, but people I knew from high school were pursuing real careers and living an adult existence," he said. "I had this outcast existence. I was 25 years old, touring the

world, and not making any money. I'm not buying house, not married, no degree, and no back up plan. I didn't fit into what I was being prepared for at school. It was a tradeoff."

A year after recording God Forbid's sixth album, Doc spiraled into an identity crisis and quit the band. By now, he also tended bar and lived with his grandmother. When she passed away, he had nowhere to go. "I was homeless, out on my own for the first time at age 32, what most people do at 22," he said. "I had no money and needed to figure out what to do with my life. It was the first time without a band. I never had a great sense of self-worth; the adulation was external. I had to become a more complete human being and build myself from the ground-up."

His solution? Packing up, moving across country, renting a room, and writing for *VH1*. Eventually, he joined Bad Wolves. "The rest is history," he said. "I got the chance at a second career. I moved to LA thinking I was old news. At 34, it felt like music was a young man's game."

He also journeyed inward, embracing mindfulness practices. After years of toiling so hard, he slowly let go and practiced acceptance. "I started to believe in myself and freed myself of the expectations of having a house and kids," he said. "A lot of people think they have to struggle and push through. I started going with the current more and not pushing so much. Now I have a *yes* mentality. *Just do it.*"

Things started to click, and he branched out even further. First came an indie film, *The Retaliators*, his SAG card, and the launch of his *Ex-Man* podcast. Even as he continues to reinvent himself, he hones his musical craft. Two weeks before the pandemic shut-down, he played alongside two Metallica

musicians, Kirk Hammett and Rob Trujillo, in The Wedding Band. Now Doc's grounded in California with his girlfriend, unable to play live venues and yearning for his return to the road.

"The boredom and monotony of not leaving the house and not being able to socialize much is taking its toll on me mentally," he said. "I love traveling. It's cool to randomly be in Prague, Finland or Australia. Bad Wolves gets to tour with big bands like Nickelback, Megadeth, Papa Roach. I still get a kick out of watching and learning from all of these great artists. I dearly miss going to shows, period." Festival dates with one of his favorites, Metallica, got cancelled.

But Doc remains grateful. He knows that second acts aren't a given. "I had it and lost it and got it back," he said. "It's rare to have a second career. If this band doesn't last, I'll try again. There's no retirement plan for bands. If we break up, I'll have to figure it out. You can't count on anything in this industry."

The echo of his words can be felt in the lyrics of the newly released Bad Wolves' song: "They told me don't look down/Don't be the victim/Don't you run away/I had to fall to learn to walk again."

No matter what comes next, surely, he'll prevail. Based on his track record, the odds are in his favor.

