




JAKE OWENS - COURTESY VENOM PRISON



Ben Thomas
(right), one of
the guitarists of
Venom Prison,
appears in the
documentary
"Metal Health:
Out of the Pit."

The new film "Metal Health: Out of the Pit"
documents the pain of headbangers.

INTO THE VOID

BY DON HARRISON

ily Rivera grew up in an unsteady home. Times were tight, and his dad's government job kept shuffling the family around. "We never stayed in one place," says Rivera, a burly, tattooed man with a Rasputin beard. "We'd move every two or three years. So I had a hard time putting down roots."

Rivera, guitarist for the Fredericksburg heavy metal band Spiral Grave, always felt like an outsider, "a transient." This fueled a deep depression that he struggles with today. "Music became my solace," he says. "That was a safe place I could hide. A sanctuary."

As shown in the 2019 documentary "Metal Health: Out of the Pit" Rivera's battles with depression fit a pattern for many in the music business, especially those who operate in the harder-edged world of heavy metal. He's one of many hard rockers to share their stories in this raw, revealing film.

Director Bruce Moore, 52, a music engineer who has become something of a heavy metal lifestyle chronicler, produced "Metal Health: Out of the Pit" at his home studio in Mechanicsville. He says that he first started thinking about depression and its effects on musicians after the 2017 suicide deaths of Linkin Park's Chester Bennington and Soundgarden's Chris Cornell. A year later, a friend of Moore's, Jill Janus, singer for the band Huntress, took her life. "I realized that metal artists are suffering too."

Taking part of its name from the famous Quiet Riot tune "Metal Health: Out of the Pit" features 17

singers, musicians, journalists and fans talking about their battles with depression, and how they've learned to cope with tragedy. Adorned in piercings and leather, affiliated with outfits that have names like While Heaven Wept, Fall and Resist, Exmortus, and Exhumed, they confess their personal — as opposed to theatrical — dark thoughts.

"Some of them were abused, others were separated from loved ones or lost somebody," Moore says. A few have witnessed the effects of mental illness firsthand, like Patrick Donovan, guitarist for California's Toy Called God, who talks about how the death of his father caused the suicide of his brother. He also recounts the difficulties experienced by two ex-bandmates suffering from bipolar disorder. Donovan stresses that mental illness "affects all of us ... and people can have the same diagnosis and express themselves in very different ways."

"Even Katy Perry fans, teenage girls, will cut themselves," says David Lawrence, a metal fan from Mechanicsville who's featured in the doc. "Depression and mental illness can happen to anyone."

The documentary isn't flashy. Single-shot camera angles capture the subjects. There is no head banging or shredding. Instead, viewers hear a minimal, mournful soundtrack by Klank, an industrial metal group from California. A voiceover reminds us of Plato's observation that creativity is a divine madness, and we are informed that artists throughout the ages, from painter Vincent Van Gogh to writer Ernest Hemingway to rocker Kurt Cobain, have committed suicide.

"Studies show that creative artists are the fifth in the top 10 of professions with the highest rate of depressive illnesses," says Jennifer Gilante, a licensed psychologist who appears in the film. (She's also Moore's sister and the film's consultant.) She says that artists in general are more apt to suffer from manic depression, but musicians are three times as likely. That's according to a 2017 study, conducted by London's University of Westminster, of 2,211 industry professionals.

The journal *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* looked specifically at heavy metal listeners. Psychologists Gavin Ryan Shafron of Columbia University and Mitchell Karno of the University of California-Los Angeles found, in an analysis of 551 college students, higher levels of anxiety and depression among listen-

Bruce Moore,
director of
"Metal Health:
Out of the Pit"





Dee Calhoun, frontman of Spiral Grave, is featured in the documentary.

ers of heavy-metal music as compared to non-metal listeners. Even with that, there were no more

underlying levels of anger in metal listeners than in, say, fans of light jazz.

If mental illness is acute in heavy metal musicians and fans, the big question, according to Gilante, is: Does depression attract them to the music, or does it cause their depression?

OUTSIDERS LOOKING INWARD

When Bruce Moore first contacted publicists and media outlets about his potential film exploring depression in heavy metal, he was unsure of the response to expect. "I asked for stories, and boy, did I get them," he says.

He collected them on tour buses, in backstage areas, alleyways, even in his living room. Some participants, like Ben Thomas from Venom Prison, a band from South Wales, sent Moore video confessionals shot in their homes.

The breakthrough interview was conducted outside of Richmond's Canal Club, with Matt Harvey, front-

"DIVING INTO THE DARKNESS HELPS KEEP US SANE."

DAVID LAWRENCE, METAL FAN FROM MECHANICSVILLE

man for the California-based Exhumed. "He just started opening up and telling me his story," Moore recalls. "And afterward, I said, 'There's something here.'" The director soon connected with Tuomas Saukkonen of Wolfheart, a visceral black-metal band from Finland. "He's a real tough guy, but he ended up talking with me in an open and honest way about mental illness, and his suicidal thoughts. He's just like you or me, and he suffers like you or me."

Along with his crew — son Colin, a senior at Lee-Davis High School — he casts larger-than-life metal performers in a different light. "We try to get them to talk about things other than their new album or tour, all of the things you can find anywhere on Google. We show them to be real people." >



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< INTO THE VOID |



Venom Prison's Ben Thomas says that the life of a working musician can, in itself, cause depression. "You're stuck in a miserable van most of the time," he says, citing poor food, lack of sleep and relationships left behind. "And unlike most people, you can't run to H.R. if you have a problem."

Subjects featured in the documentary say that the bleakness and darkness of the music doesn't fuel the madness, it helps to elevate it.

"Diving into the darkness helps keep us sane," metal fan David Lawrence says. "What draws us to the music is the sense of isolation. We don't fit in. But, with metal, it's OK to be an outsider."

Lawrence, a longtime journalist who works as an editor and writer at the Mechanicsville Local newspaper, says that loud music helps him cope with a childhood of abuse and suicidal thoughts. "And alcoholism," he adds. "Alcohol made me feel OK for the moment. Like poison ivy. Even when you shouldn't scratch, it feels good to scratch."

At 58, this lifelong Kiss fan, and the author of two books, is sober and taking medication, and he's learned to

Patrick Donovan
of the band Toy
Called God

listen to all kinds of music — the Band is a particular favorite. But metal is the music he reaches for when things get bad. "When I've had the gun barrel in my mouth, it's always metal that gets me through."

"Metal Health: Out of the Pit" is being released at a time when the topic of depression is top of mind in the industry.

The Moores recently made a discovery while in New York when they attended a concert by a band traveling with their own counselors. "They were offering free consultations to people and encouraging them to talk about their anxieties and depressions ... I said to my son, 'Holy cow. Look at that. That's perfect.'"

Colin Moore, working with his dad on the documentary, came away with the feeling that heavy metal is cathartic. "it's almost like a therapy of sorts to these guys, getting the anger and aggression out. It hits deep in some of them, and the music that comes out of them communicates to the audience. You can feel it." ■

The documentary may be seen at no charge at youtu.be/ydZp3lV068Y.

COURTESY BRUCE MOORE

VIKINS STEW, ANYONE?

SHOWCASING OTHER ASPECTS OF METAL

Bruce Moore, the director of "Metal Health: Out of the Pit," is also known for capturing a different side of heavy metal music.

"Brutally Delicious," his web series and its accompanying podcast, serves up a cooking show that's not really about music: It's more about interesting people making edible things. The online cooking show is a place where metal and hard rock musicians serve up their favorite home-cooked meals. You'll find David Ellefson from Megadeth talking about his coffee company and how to make cold press, Australia's Psycroptic concocting a delicate grilled brie sandwich with raspberries and chocolate chips, and Iron Maiden's Blaze Bailey preparing English fish sticks, among many others.

"It's sort of like 'Headbangers Ball' mixed with 'Rachael Ray,'" Moore says.

His other projects include more documentaries on heavy metal — "Metal Missionaries," about the intersection of Christian rock and Satanic black metal, and "Women of Metal." Both are available on Moore's YouTube channel for Brutally Delicious Productions, where you'll also find regular installments of "Brutally Delicious."

Once, in his younger days, Moore was knee-deep in another kind of music, hip-hop. He worked as an engineer in New York City studios like the Hit Factory, manning the controls for, among others, Arrested

Development, Keith Sweat, Heavy D and Public Enemy. "I worked with Chuck D for a long, long time," he remembers.


But it wasn't Moore's kind of music. "Heavy metal is what I grew up on. I guess you could describe me as a 50-year-old headbanger. I grew up to listening to [Iron] Maiden and [Judas] Priest."

After getting married, he and his wife, Denise, settled in Florida, where he worked for 18 years in a Clearwater mastering house. Then Denise got a job in Virginia. "So we moved here, and I found work as a police dispatcher. I was with Hanover for 12 years, and now I'm [in emerging communications] at VCU. The schedule affords me the opportunity to do other stuff."

"Metal Health: Out of the Pit" covers more serious territory than his other music works, but it reinforces Moore's belief that, underneath the tough exteriors, demon imagery and blasts of Marshall stacks, heavy metal musicians are just like everyone else. "And they hurt like everybody else," he says. —**Don Harrison**



Top: April Rose of Auditory Armor in "Women of Metal"; bottom: still from "Brutally Delicious"



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