



GOO GOO DOLLS

Sometimes you've got to go home to find yourself.

That's what the Goo Goo Dolls discovered when they began writing songs for ***Let Love In***, the band's eighth album.

Since forming in 1986, the Goo Goo Dolls have evolved from a scrappy punk-influenced trio into the platinum-selling, chart-topping act behind such radio staples as "Name," "Iris," "Slide," and "Here is Gone." Along the way, founding members John Rzeznik and Robby Takac left Buffalo, N.Y. for Los Angeles, but Rzeznik soon found that L.A. isn't everything it's cracked up to be.

"I wasn't really feeling any kind of real inspiration in Los Angeles," he admits. "I was sitting here just beating my head against the wall trying to write songs and I wasn't feeling inspired at all."

The quest to rekindle his muse led Rzeznik to pack his recording gear and guitars in a U-Haul truck and drive across country to his hometown. He met his band mates Robby Takac and drummer Mike Malinin, and set up shop in a 100-year-old Masonic Ballroom.

"It was a really beautiful old place," he says. "It felt really good to be back where I grew up. It's sort of that whole getting-back-to-your-roots thing only that sounds so cliché, but there's definitely a different kind of dramatic tension there than in L.A."

After the incredible success of "Iris," the landmark power ballad recorded for the *City of Angels* soundtrack, and the Goo Goo Dolls' 1998 blockbuster *Dizzy Up the Girl*, Rzeznik became a Los Angeles resident. But he soon found that the commercial success that the band strove for and obtained came with a price.

"Nobody likes to hear a fucking rock star talk about his problems," he says, "but it was really kind of alienating and strange to me. All of a sudden people really change how they treat you. I found a lot of people being disingenuous. So my circle of friends tightened, as in there are fewer of them."

Those feelings of isolation and the search for inspiration led him back home to Buffalo where the Dolls spent a long cold winter working 12 hours a day, writing and recording material for ***Let Love In***.

Once in Buffalo, Rzeznik was able to tap into his roots. "It just reminded me -- this is who you are. This is where you're from. It's never anything to be ashamed of, and it actually gave me strength to have a sense of my own history," he says. "It's so easy to come out to L.A. as an outsider and plant your head so far up your own ass you can disappear."

The fifth and youngest child of a working class family, Rzeznik grew up with four sisters and a strict Catholic upbringing. "I was the last kid, which is a big difference from being a baby," he says. "The last kid gets what's left over and shuts up about it."

He inherited his lifelong love of music from his mother, a schoolteacher, and father, a postal worker, who were both musicians, practicing flute and clarinet, respectively. During those formative years, he endured the wrath of overly strict nuns at school and his eccentric father at home. "I think the phrase 'going postal' originated with him," Rzeznik quips.

Years later at college Rzeznik recalls his chums raving about by the writings of legendary hard-living novelist/poet Charles Bukowski, but he wasn't impressed. "I remember them saying, 'Bukowski's a genius' and I'd say, 'My father was Charles Bukowski.' Maybe if I was observing this guy as some sort of exotic species I could really admire from a distance, but no, I was living in the jungle with Bukowski."

The young Rzeznik tried to find balance between his hotheaded father's ravings and the strict teachings of the Catholic Church. "It was a really chaotic upbringing," he admits. "I went to church six days a week for nine years," he recalls. And yet on Sunday mornings, as the rest of his family prepared to go off to church, Rzeznik would receive a mixed message from his old man. "My father used to say to me, 'Don't let the church screw up your relationship with God,' before he rolled over and went back to sleep."

It was in a copy of the Rolling Stones' *Hot Rocks*, a seminal double-vinyl "best of" set, that Rzeznik found refuge, listening to Jagger-Richards classics while staring at the gatefold sleeve and dreaming rock star dreams.

Those dreams turned to a nightmare when Rzeznik lost both of his parents within a year of each other when he was just was just 16. Shaken but not beaten, Rzeznik was left to his own devices.

"I went off on this amazing adventure, moving into the college "ghetto", got my own little place and started playing in bands. I was introduced to a lot of interesting things and people. I was like this wild kid on my own. I didn't have to answer to anybody or anything," he recalls. "I could just be myself."

Although by Rzeznik's own admission, "the dog was off the chain," he was responsible enough to get himself through high school and enroll in college with plans to become a social worker. "Mostly what I did was sell pot and chase girls while collecting grants," he admits. He also found time for such extra-curricular activities as smoking ganja with Rastafarians and catching shows by the Ramones, the English Beat, and the Clash.

It was while he was attending college that Rzeznik met Takac. "I was playing in a hardcore band. I just wanted to have someone to play with," Rzeznik remembers. "He was sort of like this hippy metal guy and I was very influenced by the whole punk thing. We just got together and enjoyed hanging out so we started playing together."

Recalls Takac, "When John and I met each other, I really didn't know how to write a song and he really didn't know how to keep a band together. We started learning from

each other, and as we moved forward, it became easier for us to complete our own sentences with the help from each other.”

The bassist and original voice of the Goo Goo Dolls worked days at a local recording studio, giving the aspiring band a place to hone its craft and record demos at night. Armed with the demos and a photo, the pair drove to New York intent on scoring a record deal and ended up signing with Celluloid Records, which issued the band’s first album in 1987.

Soon the band landed a slot opening for Boston punks Gang Green and a tour that traveled all the way to the West Coast. Once there, the Goo Goo Dolls came to the attention of Metal Blade Records, which was looking to expand beyond metal into the burgeoning alt-rock scene.

It was on Metal Blade, which subsequently became affiliated with Warner Bros., that the Goo Goo Dolls began the transformation from thrash-playing punks to respectable rockers unafraid to wear their hearts on their sleeves. “My biggest influences were the Replacements, Husker Du, the Clash, and Elvis Costello,” Rzeznik says. “I didn’t feel like screaming constantly. I wanted to do what Paul Westerberg was doing. I wanted to *be* Westerberg.”

Years later, the Goo Goo Dolls would find themselves opening for the ‘Mats on that band’s final tour and Rzeznik would co-write “We Are The Normal” with his hero Paul Westerberg -- even if it was done through the mail -- for the Goo Goo Dolls’ 1993 effort *SuperstarCarWash*.

Although the Goo Goo Dolls have gone on to reach the commercial heights that eluded most of their heroes, Rzeznik has not forgotten. “Guys like Bob Mould, Paul Westerberg, Michael Stipe and Peter Dinklage, they paved the highway we drive on,” he says.

The Goo Goo Dolls also have put in plenty of work and not only survived but also thrived over two decades, a milestone that hasn’t gone unnoticed by the band. “One of the things that we’ve managed to do -- as simply put as possible -- is stay together,” Takac says. “That’s awfully difficult for a lot of bands.”

For ***Let Love In***, Rzeznik and Takac renewed their writing partnership. “John and I wrote together on this record,” Takac says. “We had done some stuff lyrically together, but the last time we actually wrote completely together on *SuperstarCarWash*.”

While the Goo Goo Dolls have certainly enjoyed their success, one thing is certain -- the band hasn’t forgotten where they came from and is happy to give back to its loyal fans. That became perfectly clear on July 4, 2004, when the band returned to Buffalo to play a free gig for more than 60,000 fans. When rain fell on the outdoor show, it could have turned into a logistical nightmare, but instead it became a hometown triumph that was captured for posterity’s sake on *The Goo Goo Dolls Live in Buffalo July 4th 2004* CD/DVD release. “The whole thing turned around as soon as it started raining,” Rzeznik recalls. “It was awesome. I remember being up there playing and going, ‘Sometimes God just cuts you a break’ and that’s what it was.”

Writing the songs for ***Let Love In***, Rzeznik found similar inspiration in his hometown. “When you drive down the street and you see the park and the bleachers where you first

a kissed a girl, you drive past the house you grew up in and you remember them taking your mother out in an ambulance, you see the post office where your father worked, you drive through a neighborhood that used to be all factories and now it's just leveled, or you drive by a street and see a beautiful little shop that just opened and how people are really thriving there," he says. "It gives you a lot of hope and perspective."

That feeling, hope, and perspective informs ***Let Love In***. "That whole experience kind of opened up my heart," Rzeznik says of the Buffalo sessions. "It was good to feel again. I don't need to feel good all the time. I just want to be able to feel."

Listening to ***Let Love In*** -- recorded with acclaimed producer Glen Ballard -- it's apparent that Rzeznik isn't only sharing his own feelings, he's tapped into consciousness to such an extent that some of the Goo Goo Dolls' songs have become anthems. Take "Better Days" for example, a song from ***Let Love In*** with such power and empathy it was adopted by CNN as an anthem of sorts for the recovery efforts following Hurricane Katrina.

"I was just looking at the situation in the world," Rzeznik says of the song. "Fear makes people do frightening things. Fear is a catalyst for selfishness and war. Sometimes I fear that we're losing our ability to reason. I needed some hope to hang onto. That's why I wrote 'Better Days'".

"Let's just hit the reset button," he says. "Let's say I'm sorry and start over again. That was basically the message. Something better is going to come."

With that hope, the Goo Goo Dolls have offered ***Let Love In***, a rare work of naked honesty and emotion in songs that will stick in your head for the weeks, months, and years to come.

Here's hoping that you, too, will open the door.

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