

Sublimity musician's bluegrass roots go back to his childhood

By Denise Ruttan

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Zach Driscoll, 31, of Sublimity sits in downtown Stayton.

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Zach Driscoll was about 5 years old when he saw Conway Twitty live in Portland.

"My grandma was infatuated with him. Every time he would come to Oregon, we had to see him," Driscoll said.

At what was the Portland Coliseum, Driscoll and his grandmother got seats close up. Driscoll wore chaps and a cowboy hat. Whenever Twitty danced or pointed, Driscoll did, too. Soon the country star couldn't stop laughing at the small boy imitating him.

"He had me brought on stage. I remember everything seemed big and loud," Driscoll said. "I remember being so afraid I turned around and jumped right back into my grandma's arms."

That year Driscoll started singing. He has not stopped.

Driscoll recently moved from Molalla to Sublimity with his girlfriend, Charlee. It's a homecoming of sorts for the humble, straightforward musician and soldier, who at 31 has led a life of many stories.

There's the Zach Driscoll who loves country and bluegrass, who plays guitar and mandolin and sings lead vocals in a country band.

There's Zach Driscoll the wanderer, who can pack up everything he has in a few days and just go. Born in Portland, Driscoll lived all over the country after his parents divorced. Mill City, where he lived in fifth through seventh grades, is a special place, though.

"Everyone I knew and my family worked for the mills. It was nice. I liked it because it was quiet; you could ride a bike through town and there was no traffic," Driscoll said.

There's Zach Driscoll the soldier.

Driscoll enlisted in the Army after graduating from McKay High School in 1997. He served in Fort Lewis, Wash., then Korea.

Driscoll came home Sept. 9, 2001.

"I was staying at my grandma's house that day. She had served in the Army," Driscoll said. "She wakes me up, saying, 'Zach, we're being attacked.' I thought Russians were dropping out of airplanes."

Driscoll still had five years in inactive ready reserves.

Driscoll got a call from a friend, Jason Stewart, who was in Tennessee, playing banjo for James Monroe.

"Some credit (his father) Bill Monroe with being the father of bluegrass," Driscoll said. "He said they're looking for a mandolin player and asked me if I wanted to audition."

Driscoll was there.

"I auditioned for James. At that point I wasn't that great of a mandolin player, and I still don't think I am," Driscoll said. "I started singing harmony, and James liked it. He said: 'Pack your things. The job's yours.'"

Driscoll had \$2,500 from his dad and a one-bedroom apartment with cockroaches.

After three weeks of rehearsing, bad news came.

"We're going to have to let you go. You have a wonderful voice, and you'll do well in country music," James Monroe told Driscoll.

Alone in Nashville, Driscoll picked up two jobs to make ends meet; one was on the General Jackson showboat, where he saw the bright lights of Music City every night.

Every Sunday at the Station Inn, he played with a bluegrass jam circle. Driscoll got some gigs around town. He stayed there for a year or so.

Then he moved throughout Oregon. He lived in Stayton, where he got a job as a truck driver. His stepdad was diagnosed with cancer, and Driscoll put on a benefit concert that raised \$800.

"That really got me playing bluegrass, the beginning of my band Three Quarter Time," Driscoll said.

The original staples of the band were Clyde and Nikki Clevenger, Chuck Holloway and Jason Barlow. Members changed over the years. They toured regionally at bluegrass festivals and country fairs, and they recorded two albums.

Driscoll re-enlisted in the National Guard in 2007. He was called up to Afghanistan in 2009.

In November, he was sent to Fort McCoy, Wis., with 2 feet of snow on the ground. A month later, he was in the desert of Afghanistan.

Driscoll served as a combat engineer team leader with the 162 Engineer Company, serving for a year. It was his job to identify and destroy improvised bombs.

There were continuous operations, driving 2 mph, scanning sand and dirt for subtleties.

It was nothing like the movie "Hurt Locker."

"It's very easy to become complacent," Driscoll said. "That's the biggest thing you have to fight. When you become complacent, that's when something happens."

On Easter Sunday 2010, his vehicle struck a bomb.

"We'd been on the same road we had been on the day before. We were the fourth vehicle in the convoy. Three vehicles before us had swerved to hit a pothole. Our driver didn't," Driscoll said.

Only two soldiers were hurt.

While on leave for 14 days in June 2010, Driscoll was visiting Charlee in Prineville.

On their way to Redmond, they followed a blue Jeep that kept drifting. A 1976 Porsche was in the next lane. The Porsche had no place to go but a railing.

The crash seemed to happen in slow motion, like the brown and the black of a bomb going off in the Afghan desert.

Charlee and Zach pulled over to the side of the road.

The driver of the Porsche, whom Driscoll later would know as Jason Fischer, was fighting to stay alive.

The driver of the Jeep had a cut on his forehead.

In the Porsche, Fischer's front teeth stuck out of his face. His left femur was exposed. Bright red blood was coming out of Fischer's leg.

By then, more people had showed up.

Medical training from the National Guard kicked in. Driscoll asked someone for a belt.

Driscoll fashioned it into a tourniquet and held the belt together until medics arrived. Police took a report, and a medical helicopter took Fischer away.

Later, the Crook County Sheriff would recognize the couple with awards. They said that because Driscoll's quick actions had stopped potentially fatal bleeding, he had saved a man's life.

Fischer's wife, Jenn, kept in touch with Driscoll when he went back to Afghanistan. She sent him photos of Jason's progress.

"Four to five months later, he was walking with a cane. Talk about a fighter," Driscoll said.

For Driscoll, what he did is what he expects anyone else would do for him.

But his dad, a Salem police officer for 30 years, told him that it does not happen. Too many people slow down and drive away, their lives too busy to help.

"That didn't make sense to me," Driscoll said.

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