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Faces of Ben, Faces of Metal

by *Holly Nelson*

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Sweat dripped off Big Ben's bald head. His bright green shirt clung to his large frame and his face was bright red. He jumped up and down as he screamed his lyrics, "I'm dealing with all the distrust, coming to terms I know I must." He pulled the microphone close to his mouth and cupped it with both hands. "Trying to cope with all the pain."

Big **Ben**, a 27-year-old Tempe mechanic with a reddish goatee, was practicing with his metal band, **Malo de Dentro**, in a Phoenix warehouse.

Jerry Loomis, the baby-faced shaggy blond guitarist, laughed as **Ben**, who weighs 250 pounds and is six feet tall, jumped in front of him, teasing him during his solo. As **Ben** resumed singing, he turned around to face the barefoot drummer, Brett McKinney, and **Ben** rhythmically banged his head back and forth in the air. A stocky guitar player with a salt and pepper goatee named Chuck Simoes donned black frame glasses and jumped up and down with **Ben**.

A skeleton flag on the closet door fluttered in the direction of the wind blowing in from the open door. A

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golden gong stood behind McKinney like a rare antique, out of place in the stuffy industrial warehouse. Two hanging light bulbs floated above the drum platform. The chairs, the walls, and the doors vibrated with each clash of the symbols.

The heavy metal band, **Malo de Dentro**, practices every Friday at the industrial park near 35th Avenue and Thomas Road. **Malo de Dentro**, which means the evil within, recently acquired singer/screamer **Ben** Litke as their lead vocalist to help catapult them from underground mediocrity to a leading voice in the prevailing Valley metal scene. But, the band got more than they bargained for in their party animal lead singer. Taming him would be like telling the ocean to stop making waves- in the middle of a tsunami. When the Phoenix rocker gets a mic, it is impossible to anticipate his next move or his next outburst of profanity. And some wonder whether Big **Ben** is all show and no substance.

At first glance, Big **Ben** is obnoxious and crude. But he has two sides. Or at least he says he has two sides. He says he's a kind-hearted intuitive poet. But his crude stage persona tends to reign whether he is performing or not. Onstage **Ben** screams "Four letter word!" like it's the only word he was taught.

"It's the fact that it's a word that isn't supposed to be used heavily in social situations and it expresses anger," said **Ben**.

What gets **Ben** mad, among other things, are situations he can't control, like other people's behavior or when people do not take him seriously. Creating a commotion is something that **Ben** likes to do.

And then he has to chill.

Big **Ben** claims to down as many as twenty shots, usually Jack Daniels, on a night after a show. He says he has slept with roughly 150 women, but cannot remember the exact number. He admits he's used coke to get amped up for shows. He calls women crude names like "whore" and "slut" and chugs whatever is in his hands at lightening speed. He says he spends nights staring at tiles on a bathroom floor, in drunken stupors. He says he has a problem with alcohol.

"Alcohol has a history in my family. I scared the shit out of myself with the amount of alcohol I consumed with no control last weekend. It's made me slow down for a while," **Ben** said.

Ben loses count of how many shots, beers, and mixed drinks he has in one evening, but he estimates the number is well into the double digits.

The other **Ben**, hidden behind the facade of his on stage persona, is an aficionado of the arts. He's an aspiring poet. Writing, he claims, is his ultimate passion and he looks forward to becoming a published writer. In "My Funeral", **Ben** writes:

Taking in the essence of my being,

Swallowed whole cold remains are all that's left of me.

Ben was born in Merced, California. His mother moved to Mesa and raised him alone. Ben's father left early in his childhood and currently lives in Washington. So maybe it's the abandoned child that makes **Ben** insist he just wants to be loved, despite his self-admitted alcoholism and promiscuity. Starting a family and being one part of a companionship is what the poet **Ben** looks forward to. His desire to settle down with the right girl is something he is not afraid to admit.

In the lyrics to "Undesired", **Ben** cannot mask how he longs to find someone to love him when he opens the song with the words "pushing the desire for your love." He wants to find a love, but the easy chase after a show is all he seems to accomplish.

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The poet **Ben** conflicts with the rocker **Ben**. The poet tries to think philosophically about life. The rocker wants to live every day as if it were his last. The poet doesn't want to think too far into the future and its possibilities of failure. The rocker doesn't care.

What's a 27-year-old mechanic still doing in a metal band?

It's his stress reliever after putting in long hours at work. "I enjoy feeling the rush right before I start," he claims. "There is a moment I can't even describe it. It's like sick, excited, going to vomit and more than sexual feelings all at once. It is amazing."

Metal music was a natural choice for **Ben** because he progressed from acoustics and got used to the comfort of playing and listening to all types of music. By familiarizing himself with an abundance of genres, he was able to choose the right sound that he wanted to express himself with. **Malo de Dentro** is Spanish for "the evil within" and the four members of the band claim the name represents their desire to cut loose creatively and release any of their personal "evils."

Brett McKinney (drums), an IT Development Manager, Chuck Simoes (guitar), a technical supervisor, Jerry Loomis (guitar), a line carpenter, David Chaney (bass), an air conditioning technician and **Ben** make up the band **Malo de Dentro**. **Ben** lives in East Mesa. The other band members live in Queen Creek.

Playing in a band helps the guys to let loose after a long week at their 9-5 jobs.

"We all look forward to Friday's practice because we earned it," McKinney said.

The band incorporates Latin influences of metal music into the name of their band. Simoes points to other metal bands like Soulfly and Sepultura that have Latin influences in the name of their band as well.

Simoes has over 25 years of guitar-playing experience. **Malo de Dentro** is the most recent addition to his musical resume that includes hard rock and metal bands Reverend and Stepfather.

"Brett and I came up with the name as way to facilitate the darkness within us," Simoes said. "We got lucky because we found a sound that worked for us right away-it's a gift."

Surprisingly, once the topic of Ben's star role in the band emerged, **Ben** turned his head away, quietly embarrassed.

"**Ben** is the vehicle. All the music revolves around him, it's based around **Ben**," Simoes said.

The other guys agreed and **Ben**, his voice much louder than the others, interrupted the guys to change the subject either to topics ranging from the bands influences to the name of their debut CD, *Rise of the Snake*.

"Brett and I came up with the name for the CD a long time ago and there is no discussion about changing the name," Chuck said.

Naming the album *Rise of the Snake* is similar to the band's name, in that it represents an exiting of evil, or the lifting up of evil, Simoes explained. The snake, a symbol of evil, is comparable to the band's namesake that embraces the villainous. A track titled "Undesired" is comparable to Deftones with its low growling tone, but as the song progresses, it embodies the true emotion of heavy metal music: anger.

The band looks to legendary metal bands like Pantera and Black Sabbath for musical inspiration. Locally, they recognize Lamb of God and Sepultura as musical influences as well.

Ben believes that metal is not only making a comeback- it never left.



"I am just spreading the word and trying to promote the hell out of the music scene. It has never gone away; it has always been underground," said **Ben**.

To metalheads like **Ben**, the electric combination of symbols, bass, standout riffs, and throat wrenching screams are what metal music is about.

And then there's the moshing. Hundreds of screaming people banging their heads in unison and slamming up against each other are really just a group of people with similar musical tastes who communicate respect, superiority, and comradery, he says.

In Ben's eyes, metal is evolving. "We're not really stuck on an old trend but more like trying to create a new one. We really don't sound like anything out there currently, we are trying to do something different, and I think we are," said **Ben**.

In the taped off quarters of the Big Fish Pub in Tempe, small cliques of guys and girls drank and smoked. The early October show gave Ben's friends a chance to check out his band. Long hair, baggy pants, tattoos, and a lot of pushing and shoving was expected. But it was **Ben** that everyone was talking about.

As the band set up their instruments and tuned their guitars in the dim lighting, their friends and some family stood in the center of the concrete floor. A black couch in the back of the room provided a safe haven to waiting girlfriends or people who would rather watch the show than participate. Everyone awaited the first strings of **Malo de Dentro**.

Once the music started, the sparsely populated room gave way to a circle of pushing and fighting in the mosh pit. In unison, the crowd rocked their heads back and forth, back and forth. **Ben** jumped with the crowd and taunted, screaming into the microphone.

But a couple of Ben's close friends wondered about **Ben** and his decision to be in a band. Taylor Combs, 24, a technician at SRP and a friend of Ben's for nearly five years, said **Ben** wants everyone to know him as the man on stage, because he craves attention.

"It's human nature to want to be seen and heard, but it seems like **Ben** starves for attention," Combs said.

Singing on stage for **Malo de Dentro** may provide a different kind of freedom for Big **Ben**. It's his time of acceptance and his time to be in the spotlight without having to jockey for it.

"The band is always a way for me to vent and get away for that exact moment. I don't care if there are two or two hundred people out there. It's my time right then," **Ben** has said.

But it's not exactly the venue for a sensitive poet. Combs used the term "alpha male" to describe the way his group of guy friends competes with one another whether it is for women, masculinity, or status. **Ben** takes everything to an extreme, that's why he is always wrestling with the biggest guys or getting wasted to the point of oblivion, Combs said.

So is **Ben** "alpha insecure" instead of an "alpha male?" The answer lies in his lyrics. In "Nothing" **Ben** sings "there is nothing, no place, where I belong". The Little **Ben** inside of Big **Ben** is willing to admit he feels like an outcast. But the **Ben** his friends know would rather arm wrestle to prove his strength than admit he has major insecurities. In "Instilling Fear," **Ben** questions his sanity. "Placed in my existence, I'm crazy can't you see, locked in my institution, straight jacket security."

"Everyone wonders if they're crazy, right?" Big **Ben** asks as he packs up his mic and amps after the show.

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