

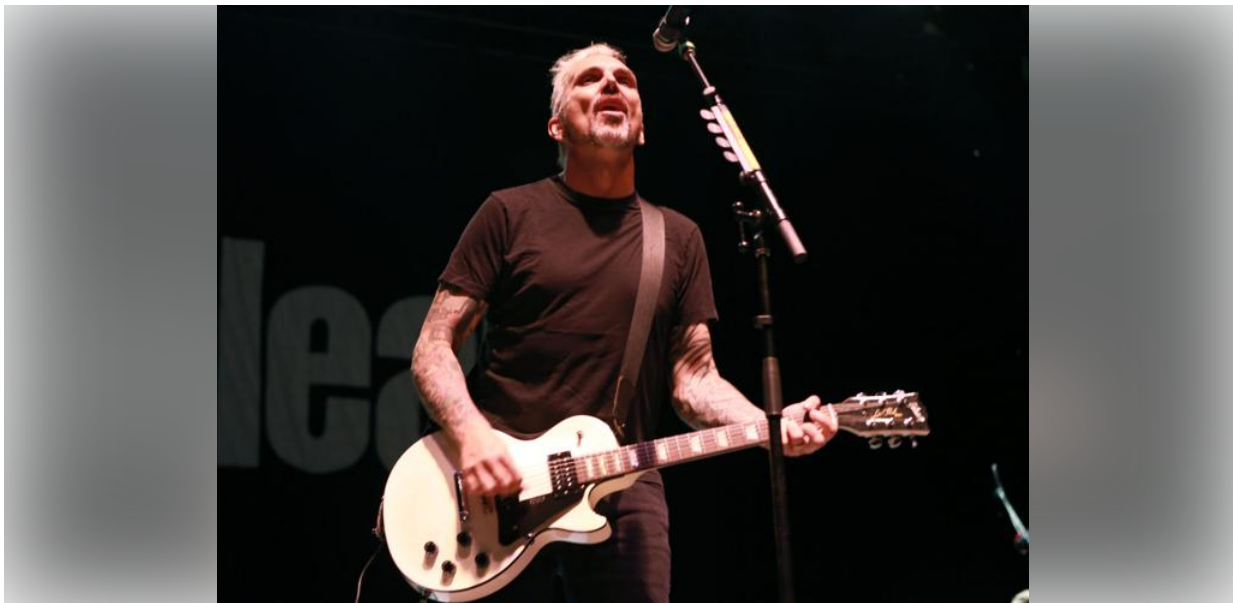
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TOP STORY

## Everclear vocalist Art Alexakis reflects on dealing drugs, finding new path

By Josh Ewers Main Street Nashville

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Art Alexakis with Everclear performs at Verizon Wireless Amphitheatre in Atlanta in 2015.

Robb D. Cohen / Invision / Associated Press

Everclear vocalist Art Alexakis and his band are living 190 proof that there is life on the other side of the static for those strong enough to power through.

With a long list of deceitfully bright radio-friendly decade standards that helped define the summers of an entire generation, including “Santa Monica,” “Father of Mine,” “I Will Buy You a New Life” and “Wonderful,” the rock band named for a potent variety of alcohol is now celebrating the 30th anniversary of its debut album, “World of Noise.”

But just making it to year one at 30 years old was a massive challenge for Alexakis.

“Every life has noise. Every life has distortion in it, disruption that confuses you,” Alexakis said. “There’s a white noise that becomes louder and louder and louder, if you allow it.”

Alexakis was born the youngest of five into a suburban middle-class neighborhood of Los Angeles, but he and his siblings’ lives were abruptly uprooted when he was 5.

“It was a volatile situation between my mom and dad,” Alexakis recalled. “My dad was very emotionally abusive. He became physically abusive toward the end of it. He was cheating on my mom. He was just mean to her. Finally she just got tired of it and left.”

With its patriarch out of reach of efforts to collect child support, the family relocated to a west Los Angeles housing project in an impoverished Del Rey neighborhood. Working two jobs to support them, their mother often left the kids to their own devices.

In that vacuum, Alexakis’ brother became a drug dealer who was no stranger to juvenile hall, jail and prison. He was once shot in the stomach during a drug deal gone bad.



“That’s what I was growing up with. That was the men in my life,” Alexakis said. “My other role model was my brother-in-law who was a blackout alcoholic, son of a blackout alcoholic, grandson of a blackout alcoholic. These were the men who were my role models.”

Alexakis quickly picked up on the behaviors.

“I knew how to do all that stuff growing up. I started drinking whenever I could. That stereotypical alcoholic. I think my brother was, too,” Alexakis said. “I remember taking a beer when I was 3. My mom gave me a little sip, right? To make sure I didn’t like it. I loved it, tasted like candy when I was 3.”

Alexakis would later find dangerous substances such as cocaine, crystal meth and heroin.

“I remember smoking pot for the first time,” Alexakis said. “There’s a picture of me in one of those photo booths that used to be in stores, just a little, cute, sweet-faced 9-year-old boy, but I’m obviously stoned. You can tell by my eyes.

“Being the father of children now, it’s just like, ‘What in the hell was going on?’ “ he continued. “My mom was working. She was working two jobs and going to night school. She was depending on my oldest siblings to be taking care of me. They were, just not in the way she wanted.”

By 5, Alexakis had lost his family structure. At age 8, he was raped. And at age 12, he lost his 21-year-old brother to a heroin overdose.

Amid all that trauma, when the future musician picked up his brother’s guitar at the age of 13 and first grasped hold of his long-term lifeline, he also picked up a more immediately minded gig selling drugs.

“It made me tough,” Alexakis said of his life in Del Ray. “But as I got older and was becoming more depressed, dealing drugs was just a way to make money to do drugs, which made me feel comfortable in my skin. I didn’t feel comfortable in my skin at all.”

Alexakis recalled his mindset then.

“I started carrying a gun when I was 17,” Alexakis said. “But there were a couple years where I stopped that because I learned if you were going to carry a gun, you were going to use it, and if you used it, you were probably going to get shot.”

When his girlfriend died from an intentional heroin overdose at 15, Alexakis donned heavy boots, filled the pockets of an Army jacket with lead fishing weights and jumped off the Santa Monica Pier, only compelled to survive by the voice and vision of his brother.

Music played its part in keeping his head above water, too.

“When I started playing, it came back to me what I wanted to do and it helped me through the depression, the death of my brother and all that stuff,” Alexakis said. “It was pretty strong PTSD for many years that I never dealt with. I really didn’t deal with it until I got clean and sober in my late 20s.”

By 1984, a 22-year-old Alexakis stopped doing drugs after his own brush with a cocaine overdose. Still, he never finished college and kept drinking heavily until he was 27, when he finally kicked the last of his vices.

“I’m very grateful, believe it or not, for my addiction, for my alcoholism, because it’s helped me work harder to lose the status quo, and that teaches us how to succeed,” Alexakis said.

“I didn’t know until recently that, not only do I have ADHD, I probably have OCD and I’ve had depression and anxiety my whole life, as early as I can remember. It came out really early with all the trauma in my family — abandonment, being hit, being raped — nasty, nasty things that help make us who we are, good or bad.”

These days Alexakis is a family man touring with a legacy act in celebration of the 30th anniversary of its debut album, “World of Noise,” while powering through an impairing multiple sclerosis diagnosis he received in 2019.



That album was made while a newly sober Alexakis was raising an infant daughter in Portland, Oregon, and working a day job. Alexakis had just been trying to see what he had with a couple of players who'd responded to a newspaper ad when he handed over \$400 and traded a couple of effects pedals for the time to record 12 songs. It was going to be his last time starting a band, one way or the other.

"There was a lot of anger, just vitriol, a lot of juice in there, because that's what was going on. I was a 30-year-old kid at the time and kind of out of my depth in a lot of ways," Alexakis said. "Really the only reason I called it 'World of Noise' as a joke was because there was just so much feedback on that record. It was just like squealing feedback because I couldn't afford new tubes for my amp. We were that broke."

The modest investment paid dividends through the 1990s. And now, with the freedom and success it bought him, Alexakis is cleaning up one last element of his life by fulfilling a promise to his late mother.

"I always promised my mom I'd go back to school ... I promised her I would get my degree before I died," Alexakis said.

Alexakis is a year and a half into pursuing a degree in psychology, with certifications in alcohol and drug studies and life coaching. Once finished, he hopes to focus his efforts on aiding struggling creative people.

"I can be fulfilling. I can be of service to people. I can take all these skills I've learned in 33 years of sobriety, being a dad, living, making good decisions, making bad decisions and learning from all of them," Alexakis said.

"That's what I've been doing for the last 30-something years. I know those people. I know what it's like to be sober and do that, and I know what it's like to be not sober and do that. I want to be able to help push people that are creative and who have coachable goals. ... It's pretty gratifying."

For now, though, Alexakis is focused on the tour.

And as he knows well, celebrating the humble "World of Noise" is a long way to have come for a boy almost drowned out by the static that defines it.

"It's the beginning of everything I did after that, not just the music, but what I'm doing now with going to school. Even though it's heavy and dark with the subject matter, you can still see the positive stuff in there, even though it's very angry, deep-end wah, a lot of a feedback," Alexakis said. "You can still see that kid who wrote that record. He saw the light through the tunnel, and that's what he was looking for. And I still am, but it's a lot closer now."

Everclear will play Fifth + Broadway's Skydeck on July 6.





Everclear - "Santa Monica"  
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