

Why is Nine Inch Nails' ex-drummer teaching college in Alabama?

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Courtesy photo

The intro to mass communication teacher at Calhoun Community College once ate a light-bulb as part of a backstage dare, while on-tour with Nine Inch Nails in the early '90s.

He was that platinum-selling industrial-rock band's original drummer. And a critical part of their now-classic recordings.

The same teacher later performed around the globe with shock-rocker Marilyn Manson.

If you saw future-R&B group Gnarls Barkley's concerts promoting their smash 2006 single "Crazy" and debut album "St. Elsewhere," he was behind the drum-kit then too.

At one point, he was hunkered down with Axl Rose, trying to come up with music for Guns N' Roses' infamous, decade-plus gestating "Chinese Democracy" album.

Chris Vrenna has done all those things during his music career.

And more.

Currently, in addition to intro to mass com, Vrenna is teaching intro to recording technology, studio production and Pro Tools at Calhoun, a school with an enrollment of around 10,000 and located in Decatur, a north Alabama city best known for being home to Point Mallard water-park and rocket manufacturer United Launch Alliance.

Vrenna's more than OK with being there.

"You never know what life's going to be and I like a new challenge and I like teaching," he says. He's seated behind a desk in a small office - decorated with platinum records, model rockets and Funko figures of Jimi Hendrix and Amy Winehouse - inside the Alabama Center for the Arts. The Calhoun Jazz Band's rehearsal room is visible through a window behind Vrenna's left shoulder.

"But yeah," Vrenna, age 51, continues, "in 2010 if you would've told me, 'In eight years you're going to end up in Huntsville, Alabama,' I'd be like, 'Yeah, right!' But things change."

After tearing his left rotator cuff twice ("It's a full year of physical therapy to recover. I couldn't even lift my arm over my head for six months"), the result of decades of repetitive drumming motion, Vrenna turned to teaching. Vrenna's first teaching gig was at Wisconsin's Madison Media Institute. He started at Calhoun this fall.



File/Business Wire photo of Nine Inch Nails, from left: James Woolley,Chris Vrenna,Trent Reznor, Danny Lohner and Robin Finck

Now, Vrenna resides in nearby Huntsville suburb Madison, where he maintains a home-studio stuffed with "a rather large analog synth collection" and works on music for video games, like 2018 first-person-shooter title "Quake Champions."

Prior to teaching, Vrenna, an Erie, Penn, native, lived in Los Angeles for 18 years. His top three all-time bands are Depeche Mode, The Cure and Rush. Outside of music, he enjoys watching Seattle Seahawks NFL football games and TV shows like "Stranger Things," "Better Call Saul," "Ozark," "Walking Dead," etc. With a Grammy and having toured the world several times over, Vrenna says, "The one thing creatively I haven't done and want to do is I want to score television. That is my thing. I love television."

Vrenna says he and Nine Inch Nails frontman Trent Reznor still email each other from time to time, but it's been a couple years since their last contact.

On a recent afternoon in his downtown Decatur office, I spoke with Vrenna about his life in music and new vocation teaching it. He looks fit and sharp. His formerly jet-black hair is now a tasteful gray shock, and he's wearing a tie, vest, dark pants and boots. A silver skull-charm dangles from the black laptop bag lying on the floor behind him.

Vrenna speaks in rapid, page-long bursts often zooming into the tangential.

Edited and condensed excerpts from our conversation are below.



Courtesy photo

Chris, these days there are many places to teach music at. So why Calhoun?

I'd been teaching for five years now and was ready to step up to the next level, which would be either a large two-year or maybe small four-year type of school and like anybody else I looked around at the websites and job-boards and things. And I came to Calhoun twice and really liked the people, first and foremost. Everybody that interviewed me I immediately felt comfortable with which is always a good sign. Then I came back and the campus president was great and it just felt really good.

On one of my trips down here I had hours to kill before my flight back home, and I'm a giant space-nerd so I went to the (U.S. Space &) Rocket Center, and I felt like I was a little kid at Disneyland. I just loved it. Living in a city known for high-tech and NASA is not that bad of a place, you know? You've got the mountains. I had interviewed at a couple of other schools and, I don't know, this one just felt right.

And I was going to be tasked (at Calhoun) with modernizing the entire program and so that was a challenge I thought I would be really good for.

Back when you were first learning drums, what's an album you played along with a lot?

The first songs on drums I really learned were Boston, their debut album, basically all of side A. I was about 10 - started playing drums at six, but my instructor wouldn't let me even touch set of drums for year. Instead it was learning the 26 rudiments, stick control, reading drum charts, playing to a metronome. He was an old jazz dude.

But the first two albums remember getting when I became musically aware, were the first Boston album and "Kiss Alive II." I went more for Boston. I wore out side A from playing it so much drumming along to it. Then I started discovering drummers, and in the late '70s, early '80s, that meant Neil Peart and Rush.

How did you first meet Trent Reznor?

About 40 minutes south of Erie is a town called Meadville, and about 40 minutes south of that is Mercer and about 40 minutes south of that's Pittsburgh. So, Trent's from Mercer. I'm from Erie. I was playing in band in Meadville. The keyboard player in my band and Trent were great friends. They both owned an incredibly rare and incredibly expensive at the time German synthesizer, called a PPG Wave 2.3. It was fantastic. It was blue and black and *this big* and metal.

I was into drum machines because we were synth pop, everything Depeche Mode, Gary Numan. My keyboard player was like, "I know a friend named Trent selling a LinnDrum," and I was like, "Oh, my God, really"? He got in touch, sure enough it worked out. So, one day, I drove to Meadville and then John and I drove to Mercer and I bought Trent's drum machine.

It was like 1985. I was still in high school. Trent's two years older than me so he was out of high school and he was playing in a band in Cleveland called the Exotic Birds, which everybody knows about it and it's all over the internet. After graduating high school, I went to Kent State which is 40 minutes south of Cleveland, maybe an hour, and then I would always drive up to Cleveland to see the good shows

Trent and I became immediate friends after I bought his drum machine. We just had a lot in common and just hit it off, so we stayed in touch and stayed friends.

Then the Exotic Birds' drummer quit the band. Trent called, and I drove up on a Friday night and he and Andy, the other guy in the band, we had an audition in Andy's basement and we played through all the songs and they jokingly looked at each other like, "I guess he got the gig." It was meant to be because they both knew me, and I knew every song and had been to every Exotic Birds show since I went to college.

And the rest is history. That band broke up and Trent started writing some songs on his own. I'd come up after school and help him record them and that became Nine Inch Nails.

Did you guys in Nine Inch Nails have any idea you were going to be "the next cool band"?

Not until "Broken" or Lollapalooza. Because the first record "Pretty Hate Machine" came out in 1989 and it didn't really blow up until 1992 or '91. "Down In It" was on MTV "120 Minutes" and then we made the "Head Like A Hole" video and "Head like A Hole" I think was the single that really took off. But it was different back then. We spent all of 1990 on tour just pushing stuff.

We were in a van and we had a trailer and then we got the worst tour-bus of all time. We couldn't afford a tour bus, but we needed to get out of the van because our poor tour manager was doing tour managing duties, helping set up the stage gear and then trying to drive all night and then you wake up with your van in the gravel on the interstate at four o'clock in the morning because he fell asleep again. Our first tour bus was gross. The seats were ripped and the beds stunk but at least it was a bus and everybody could sleep and we were safe.

But back then labels would support you. They would give you money. It was about building, and you'd plan what the second record and the third record was going to be like. Now if your first single and your first

record doesn't hit immediately, Interscope's just forgot your name and they don't return your phone calls and it's on to the next thing. It's really changed.

"Pretty Hate Machine" is going to be 30 years old next year. Crazy

What do you think it was about Nine Inch Nails' music that fans connected with?

Lyrically it was interesting. A lot of people could relate. We were young and angsty and people were interested because they hadn't heard sounds like what they were hearing. And one thing Trent was really good at was taking bands like Skinny Puppy and Coil and Ministry and what that (industrial) genre was doing and made it more digestible for the more average music listener. And it worked.

By the end of the '80s we were making fun of bands like Flock of Seagulls with the funny hair and it was also wimpy. All those synth-pop bands Erasure, Thompson Twins, New Order, their songs were structured like pop songs. They're very light in the sound of the synthesizer. On the other hand, you had metal: Ozzy (Osbourne), Sabbath, Iron Maiden, (Judas) Priest. So, what if you took the power, energy, angst and distortion of your heavy metal, but you applied that aesthetic to the pop and the synths and the drum machines of all these bands over here and you merge them together. And that's what industrial is.

What's your favorite Nine Inch Nails album you played on?

The "Broken" EP. It's just so heavy and just out there. And we made videos for every song that were all banned by every place in the world and we won the Grammy for the song "Happiness in Slavery" that came off that EP. I like "Downward Spiral," but man "Broken" with all the weird remixes, I just loved it.

I read you played the sparse drums on the original Nine Inch Nails version of "Hurt." What did you think of Johnny Cash's cover of that song?

I loved it, and then I read that I guess Trent didn't like it at the time or something and I was really shocked by that. I thought it was brilliant. It made me cry. Who doesn't love Johnny Cash?

What stands out to you about performing at Woodstock '94 with Nine Inch Nails, in front of a crowd of 300,000?

Woodstock is still the largest crowd I've ever played and still the most scared I've been in front of any crowd. And it wasn't just the 300,000 people out there, because once you get past the first 10 rows of any show you can't see anything - it's all just lights and heads. I used to get more nervous at the smaller more intimate shows because I could see all their faces, if they were talking during a song and you can see who left. Later with Manson, we'd be playing to 50,000, 75,000 people at these festivals all summer in Europe, I'd tell myself, "At least it's not Woodstock."

The combination of "Closer" being a big single and that one performance really propelled Nine Inch Nails. After that show, David Letterman kept trying to get Nine Inch Nails on the show to perform and Trent would just never do it. He just didn't want to be on TV, period. He just refused to do it. I kept telling Trent, "It's Letterman. Come on. You get to yell 'f---' on Letterman." And he'd just go, "Yeah I know. We're not going to do it." I never got to do all the TV shows I wanted to do until Gnarls Barkley.

How did you get the Gnarls Barkley gig?

That album was done by just the two of them, it's all programmed by Danger Mouse and he produced it, because it's a hip-hop record, and Cee Lo sang. But then it blew up and they needed a drummer. And my former manager after I quit Nine Inch Nails and I got my own personal manager, he was managing Danger Mouse, so he called me and he goes, "Hey man I got this new guy Danger Mouse and this crazy new band

called Gnarlz Barkley. I need to put a live band together." I was the first one brought in and met with Danger and helped put the band together and did that whole run as their drummer.

Gnarlz Barkley was the must-see set at big festivals that year.

That was *the* festival show. Our first was Coachella 2006, and we played the big tent, but every single person was dressed as a character from "The Wizard of Oz." That band did every talk show, so that's when I finally got to do Leno and finally got to do "Saturday Night Live" and we did "Top of the Pops" in England, all those shows I always wanted to do growing up, since Trent wouldn't do them. Manson would do them.

I was on Letterman so many times that Paul Shaffer knew me by my face. Because I would go from Manson to Gnarlz back to Manson back to Gnarlz and like the third time I was there he's passing me in the hall and goes, "Didn't I just see you like two months ago? Wait, is Gnarlz playing again?" I was like, "No we're back touring again with Manson because Gnarlz is off." He goes, "Oh man, I was about to lose my mind."



AP Photo/Michael Sypniewski

What was most interesting about playing music with Marilyn Manson?

I've known Manson since 1990. He was doing his band Marilyn Manson and The Spooky Kids, working South Florida, writing for a fanzine. He was a great writer. He came out to the first Nine Inch Nails tour to interview the band for the local whatever. After the interview he was like, "Hey, I've got a band. Can I give you my tape?"

One day we were driving across Texas, and Texas is a long boring drive of nothing but tumbleweeds for a thousand miles and so Trent was like, "Let's listen to this guy's tape," because we were so bored with all our CDs in the van. He popped it in and we got about two songs in everybody started looking at each other like, "This is really good." And it became our favorite tape. We listened to it all the time.

And Trent reached back out to him and we kept in touch and as soon as Trent got Nothing Records as part of Interscope, he was given his label, he's like, "I know the first band I'm signing." So, I worked on those early records, I played drums on them. Ginger (Fish) played most of the drums on "Antichrist Superstar." I played drums on maybe half of it.

"Beautiful People" is Ginger and I playing drums together - the *diggidi dun diggidi dun dun*. We set up two kits, like two sets of toms at the same time and we double mic-ed the whole thing and then we played it and we set up another set of toms and we'd both play, and we layered ourselves.

The only reason I ended up in the band was Ginger got hurt. They were playing on a TV show, and there was some sort of big set piece, Ginger did a Ginger and fell off. I get a phone call from Manson's manager and I was in Perth, Australia with Gnarl Barkley and it was the last show of the tour, after 12 months straight, no break, just around the world, around the world, around the world. My phone rings and it was Manson's manager. "Hey man, so what are you up to?"

It was crazy. I don't want to say it was a nightmare, but it was a three-ring drunken circus on wheels on the time, forever. And after Ginger got healthy and came back, then Pogo (aka Madonna Wayne Gacy, aka Stephen Bier) the keyboard player quit, so I moved over from drums to keyboards. And I ended up being a full-time member of that band for like seven and a half years, somewhere in there.

He burned me out though. Quick version of why I quit is it's a very dark lifestyle. There's a lot of substance problems, the hours are insane. It's just really intense. It's as crazy as everything you've ever read and everything you've ever heard.



AP Photo/Michael Caulfield

What's the most debauched thing you witnessed during your time with Manson?

If I could even come up with it, I probably wouldn't even tell you because one thing about this stuff, there's kind of a code of honor where you don't want to, because it would involve perhaps other people. Mine were always with other people. I was always the one that was like, "You can't do that. Are really going to do that? Oh my God, you're doing that." And I'm the one in the corner laughing. I witnessed a whole lot of horrifically bizarre stuff.

What's the most normal thing about Marilyn Manson?

That he likes comedy movies, like "Land of the Lost" with Danny McBride, that was a movie we watched a lot. Even more normal than that, he really enjoyed like nice steak dinners. When we were on-tour we'd go out and have these incredibly awesome multicourse dinners on nights off and stuff like that. He just likes to have a nice meal and hang out. Was kind of a homebody, loved movies and TV. His DVD collection was ridiculous. Thousands of DVDs.



Courtesy photo

If you're able to instill only one thing in your music students at Calhoun, what would you want that be?

As far as my students go, I can teach you the technical side of things. I've been running Pro tools since 1992, I know it inside and out.

But what really seems to be important are those intrinsic things.

There's no class on how if there's 10 people equally qualified to do something, why should that artist pick you to work with them, to be the engineer? Because there are certain things about being in the studio and being on a bus and being on tour and the way the industry really works.

And that's why I got into teaching, because I was lucky enough to have everything we just talked about, and worked with people like Flood the producer and be Billy Corgan's MIDI programmer for six months and watch Billy work and become friends with Smashing Pumpkins.

And all the people I've gotten to work with along the way taught me things, and the way this industry propagates into the future, is it's passed on from one to another.

You don't go to college and hang out with Axl Rose or whatever.



File/Business Wire

Where exactly where you when Axl Rose first called you to ask about playing drums with Guns N' Roses, in 1997?

Billy (Corgan) had put me up in a hotel in New York. And I had a message on my phone and it just said, "Hello this is Axl Rose I'm looking for Chris Vrenna." And I just kept hitting repeat on the voicemail over and over and I thought, "My God, it really is him."

And he called because at that time Robin Finck, the guitar player from Nine Inch Nails had quite Nine Inch Nails and was playing in Cirque du Soleil. Slash is already out of the band, but Duff (McKagan, classic-era GNR bassist) was still there though. But (GNR) all came down to see Cirque du Soleil and I don't know how they recognized Robin. And they waited after the show and tracked him down and he went and joined Guns N Roses. So, Robin was the new Slash. And the next person to leave (GNR) was Matt Sorum, the drummer, so that's when I got the call.

Axl, I love that guy. His musical tastes were far more advanced than his fanbase's. He loved Nine Inch Nails. He's wearing the white SIN shirt in one of their videos that was one of our tour shirts. And he loved the Passengers (album "Original Soundtracks 1") that U2 did (with Brian Eno). I got asked to go down and ended up sitting in and the next thing you know six or eight months later, I was still there.

So, Guns N' Roses during that time was you, Axl, Robin, Duff McKagan, (keyboardist) Dizzy Reed and (guitarist and Rose's childhood friend from Indiana) Paul Huger?

Yep.

Was the former Pearl Jam drummer Dave Abbruzzese working with GNR during your time with them?

Dave Abbruzzese was after me and then after Dave was Joey (Castillo). And then Joey was the drummer for quite a while and then Joey ended up playing for Queens of the Stone Age after that.



AP Photo/Steve McEnroe

What facility did the Guns N' Roses sessions take place at?

It was in Santa Monica, a rehearsal room. A big famous rehearsal room but he had brought in a portable recording stuff, because it was all jamming, trying to come up with parts. There were no songs written or anything, so every single thing that was played in the room got recorded just in case somebody came up with something good. It was nuts. Axl was like a night owl so you'd go down there at like seven o'clock and you were there until sunrise, five nights a week.

When "Chinese Democracy" was finally released in 2008, did you recognize any music from the period you were working with Guns N' Roses?

Nope. Not a thing. Because by then they'd gone through nine drummers, 14 guitar players, seven producers. Because I kept up with it after I was there. When I was there, (the electronic musician) Moby was going to produce. Axl didn't come in very often. He'd show up about once a week. So sometimes we jammed. Sometimes me and Moby just sat and drank coffee and talked about music. Moby was rad. Can you imagine a Guns N' Roses record with Robin Finck and me and Moby producing? And Axl really wanted it to have an electronic element. He kept referencing the Passengers album that U2 did and it's wonderful. It's so good. That and Nine Inch Nails.

He thought that was where he could see the sound of Guns N' Roses going, modernizing it: "We're not a bunch of '80s, strung-out-on-heroin dudes on Sunset Boulevard anymore." And I applauded Axl and that's why I stuck with it for as long as I did, and I got Axl's vision.

The best time I ever had though was when Axl came down and he was just in the mood to play and he was like, "Alright we're going to run "Appetite (for Destruction," GNR's 1987 debut album), top to bottom. Ready. Go." And I was like, "Holy crap." And we played the whole album, top to bottom. One time I got to do that. And I got home in the morning and I couldn't sleep I was so excited I got to do it. He sang half of the words, half voice - he didn't want to blow himself out. He sat and played the grand piano for some of the songs. Axl's talented, man.



AP Photo/POLFOTO, Thomas Leffeldt

What did those proto-"Chinese Democracy" Guns N' Roses jams sound like, that you were a part of?

It was a little all over the place. And Paul (Huge) made it change a little bit. By that time everything was so fractured, and everybody had an opinion of what the band should do. After Duff left, that really bummed me out. Because Duff was a good hang and he was the last thread to the first record.

After he left I even had a talk with Axl one time like, "You know, you're changing the sound of the band and it's really just you and we're all new dudes and we all come from cool places. But have you ever thought of just saying, f--- Guns N' Roses. That name is dead. The band is over. We are now called 'blank.'"

And he goes, "Yeah you're not the first person who's told me I should probably do that. But Guns N' Roses is an international brand name, and to start over when I can just use the brand name that everybody knows, I can't sacrifice the branding that's already been established."

And I got his argument for not changing the name. But I also firmly believed in what I was saying. If Axl Rose came out and said, "Look, man. Everybody's quit the band. If I call this Guns N' Roses you guys are going to laugh at me," which a lot of people did. Because it's not what we know as Guns N' Roses, so call it something new. You're Axl Rose, it will be big and people will know that new logo and that new name and that new whatever.

When "Chinese Democracy" first came out, without Slash there I didn't give it a fair shot, but over the years I've grown to like it.

If I was a die-hard fan, I wouldn't want Tommy Stinson (on bass) and Brain on drums and Robin Fink and Buckethead (on guitar).

Was Buckethead around for any of the Guns N' Roses stuff you were?

No, Buckethead came way later.



File/AP Photo

What's something about Axl Rose as a day-to-day guy most people don't know?

Just really a soft-spoken guy, very knowledgeable about music and art and film and just would like to sit around and talk about film and art, the way I talk about TV. Same kind of talk. But very soft spoken. He's actually not that crazy. I think maybe he outgrew it too, like we're all young and nuts at one time and then you eventually get older. Now Guns N' Roses goes on on-time, every time. People change.

That's one thing about everybody you've asked me about. People grow up and people's tastes change. I don't listen to the same music now I listened to when I was 16. I don't like the same kind of movies when I was 22. Trent's married and has four kids. He scores movies.

The problem becomes this weird thing where fans don't want you to ever change what you were. They don't want Manson to be anything besides "Beautiful People," "Antichrist Superstar" Manson. Even though Manson's going to be 50 next year. No one wants to see 50-year-old Manson in the same fish nets and bustier thing and jock strap. Nobody wants to see that, so let him wear a suit and a tie because he looks good in a suit in a tie. Let him not wear as much goofy makeup like he used to wear on "Mechanical Animals." You can't please anybody. A few people get lucky and can.

U2, another artist you worked with (including a remix of the song "Elevation"), is one of those few bands people *do let* evolve. What was cool about collaborating with U2?

Nicest guys ever. Inside I was shaking the whole time and jumping for joy. I had seen every tour since "Unforgettable Fire" and here I am producing them and working with all four of them in the studio creatively.

The Edge (U2's guitarist) is in charge. Everybody has their say and everybody has to sign off on everything, but every hour I was mixing I had to send where I was to The Edge. Every hour. There was a guy in a car sitting outside my studio and I would say, "This is the 11 a.m. mix" and he would drive to where he was so Edge could listen to it. Edge would call me, give me notes and then I would include those notes for the next hour, so it was like he was in the room with me. Super meticulous. They have their own quality control person that's on staff fulltime to help them make sure that all the designs, everything is up to their standards.



Courtesy photo

Is there a band out there still that if they called, you couldn't say no to?

Being a teacher, I can't tour obviously, but I still have my studio in my house and I'll still score video games when I can and mix and do my own music (released under the name "Tweaker").

I still try to stay as active in the industry as possible, which I think is important for the students because it keeps me fresh, current and I can share my experiences with my students in real time as I'm going through a project. A lot of times I'm on NDA (non-disclosure agreement), but as long as I'm not betraying any confidences of my clients, I can include it in my teaching and make sure they get real life examples.

Were you aware of Muscle Shoals' recording legacy before you came here to Alabama?

That's one of things I thought was interesting about this job. We're 90 miles to Nashville, we have the history of Muscle Shoals an hour from here, we're three-and-a-half hours from Atlanta, which has the biggest, booming movie and TV industry there. All the Marvel stuff is done there. You have Memphis. We are a couple hours within so much of everything that is going on in music.

Everybody's tired of sitting on the 405 (interstate) for three hours a day in a car (in Los Angeles). I couldn't wait to get out of that city.

With the internet you don't need to be there. You can get on Skype and do an interview with a movie director, work in your studio in Huntsville, Alabama, upload stuff, and you can do this where everybody's more comfortable. Have a better quality of life. People can still collaborate and not be in the same room. That's kind of where we're at now.



We brought some of Chris' Calhoun colleagues and groupies with us today.

“Rock Star” has become a synonym for success in the popular culture, its like a yardstick, that measures impact. e.g. Buzz Aldrin is a rock star, etc. They are among the most admired people in our culture partly because we identify with music of our

generation. They tilted our culture and help us define ourselves, often, generationally. They are to us what the Greek and Roman deities were to the ancients. Last month we brought you Zombies, today we bring you a bona fide Rock Star.

Chris Vrenna is a native of Erie, PA, and became Director of our Music Technology Program at Calhoun's Alabama Center for the Arts in downtown Decatur. DESCRIBE

Chris is modernizing our Music Technology program for future technicians who are seeking careers in the music industry and folks who want to learn the system and software for their own personal satisfaction. Chris came to us from Wisconsin where he taught in their Music Technology program for five years.

But, as noted, before becoming an academic, Chris had another Gig. He, Trent Reznor and others founded the Grammy winning seminal electronic rock band Nine Inch Nails. The group was the van guard of the Industrial Rock Genre that continues to influence groups to this day. Chris later performed with shock rocker Marilyn Manson and the R&B band Gnarls Barkley.

So the question is, how did Chris get into academics and to Alabama and he will tell you in his life story.

I want to say that our academic colleagues and students at Calhoun have been most impressed with Chris' passion for teaching and making a difference in our students lives. I believe that is the core of being a great teacher. We really believe he's one of us. There's nothing pretentious about this man and he truly does love teaching school. He has a wonderful personality and is a great story teller.

Moscow Manson story