

SET IT OFF ARE HEADING FOR THE STARS – BUT FRONTMAN CODY CARSON NEARLY DITCHED POP-PUNK FOR CLASSICAL MUSIC. JENNYFER J. WALKER FINDS HIM DETERMINED TO MAKE UP FOR LOST TIME...

FRESH STAR FEVER

Right now, Set It Off are one of the most exciting new bands on the planet. They've just released their 5K-rated second album, *Duality*, and are hitting the road for a whopping 37 dates supporting Black Veil Brides and Falling In Reverse in the States. Yet they almost weren't even a band at all.

Before their formation in 2008, frontman Cody Carson's days were spent not writing irrepressibly catchy songs, but instead studying clarinet performance at the Oberlin Conservatory Of Music in Ohio. The plan? To graduate and eventually secure a job in an orchestra. So, when Cody phoned his dad, James, to ask if he could drop out to pursue an uncertain career in a rock band, unsurprisingly, it didn't go down well.

Mr Carson, who himself spent many years in his own band (Fall Guys And A Gal – the gal in question being Cody's mum, Stephanie), was so upset upon receiving the news, he had to hang up the phone and take a walk around the block of the family's home in Clearwater, Florida.

"My dad dropped out of [college] to go on tour with his band," explains Cody today. "It didn't end up becoming his final career, and he had to take other odd jobs to support our family. He thought the same thing would happen to me."

But there was another reason why papa Carson was so keen for his son to have a future on which he could depend. He had terminal cancer.

Given the heartbreaking circumstances and his father's reticence, Cody settled back into life at the Conservatory.

But the punk-rock-obsessed teenager who enjoyed "dick jokes and fart humour" struggled to connect with the elegant classical kids who "just wanted to talk about their favourite symphonies". So most of his spare time was spent alone in his dorm room, making cover videos of All Time Low songs. These eventually caught the eyes and ears of Alex Gaskarth, who started to comment on them. Plucky Cody reached out and asked if he could sing onstage with Alex when the Baltimore pop-punks rolled into Cleveland on May 2, 2008. And somewhat astonishingly, Alex agreed.

"I couldn't believe it had happened," says Cody of his onstage cameo singing Coffee Shop Soundtrack to a packed-out crowd. "I was so excited I called my mom at four in the morning, and said, 'I have to do this [for a living]!'"

The next morning, his poor, sleep-deprived mother showed her husband shaky YouTube footage of their son singing onstage.

Soon after, Cody's phone rang. "We think you should take a year off college and see if you can make this work," said his dad.

The frontman's father passed away just a week after these words were spoken. Earlier that day, the pair shared their last exchange. "My dad wasn't able to respond, but he could acknowledge. They put the

phone to his ear and I said my last words to him, which were: 'Thank you for this opportunity and your blessing. I love you and I'm going to make you proud.'"

"EVERYONE'S ATTRACTED TO THE DARK SIDE..."
CODY CARSON

Cody set about honouring this promise by recruiting his most talented friends: Zach DeWall (guitar), Austin Kerr (bass), Dan Clermont (guitar) and Maxx Danzinger (drums). And with a name pinched from a Fall Out Boy song, Set It Off, well, set off. To create their theatrical brand of pop-rock, the five-piece utilised Cody and Dan's classical backgrounds, and Cody adopted a maniacal onstage persona inspired by Batman's nemesis, the Joker.

"I love how free he looks and feels," explains the singer. "Everyone's a little attracted to the dark side."

But, just as the Joker can't live without chaos, darkness cannot exist without light, and both elements feature on *Duality*. 'I can't quite contain or explain my evil ways', Cody sings on the title track.

"Everybody has flaws," he explains. "I can be stubborn, I drink heavily with friends, and enjoy [casual] sex – people look down on that sort of thing. So, what I wanted to say with this record was, 'This is who I am, either accept me or judge me and say goodbye.'"

Other less-than-chirpy themes include dating someone and feeling like their dirty little secret (The Haunting) and calling time on a friends-with-benefits type situation (Ancient History).

But this lyrical darkness comes married to the melodic light of soaring choruses, such as on gospel-inspired lead single Why Worry, the title of which comes from a motto Cody's mother intended to sooth her son during times of stress (and most recently, a fear of flying).

"That song was a key moment in my life as a writer," he says. "When I'm putting a positive message into a song, I'm talking to myself as well. It's like therapy."

Despite it almost not happening, Cody Carson was born to be a star. He has a name befitting a Hollywood chat show host, and the immaculately groomed eyebrows to match. His charisma and



confidence come by the cruise ship-load and he's a natural performer. This latter skill was honed early in life, when his parents would take him on the road with his dad's band.

"If we had anything prepared, they would invite us out and we'd perform for their crowd," he recalls. So young was Cody at this time, he was content to be paid in ruskus. He sang Colours Of The Wind from Pocahontas. Dressed as explorer John Smith, obviously.

While Cody no longer dresses up as Disney characters (as far as we know), such experiences should stand him in good stead as he looks to impress Black Veil Brides/Falling In Reverse fans on a nightly basis. Cody, though, wants to eclipse even those groups in stature.

"We'd like to be as big as Michael Jackson if he'd started a pop-rock band!"

Really?

"Honestly, I don't think I would do this if I didn't think we had a shot at it. If I'm going to do anything, I'm going to do it to the best of my ability. I got that from my dad. It sucks that I can't ask for his advice or see his reaction when I show him a song, but he'd be happy to know I'm not half-assing this."

As he says this, the son considers the father he has lost. Smiling at the memory, he concludes: "I think he'd be very proud of me."

We'll second that.

SET IT OFF'S NEW ALBUM, *DUALITY*, IS OUT NOW THROUGH EQUAL VISION



Set It Off (from left): Maxx, Austin, Cody, Zach, Dan

CODY'S CONFESSIONAL

THERE'S A DARK SIDE TO CODY – BUT JUST HOW DARK DOES IT GET?

WHAT'S THE WORST TIME YOU'VE EVER LET SOMEONE DOWN?

"One time, there was a girl that my friend was interested in. I got too drunk one night, me and her hooked up, and he found out. I just felt like the biggest piece of shit and I had to apologise. We made up!"

HAVE YOU EVER CHEATED ON SOMEBODY?

"No. I'm very proud to say that. But I've been cheated on quite a few times. Probably by three or four different people. I found out every time. It's rare that someone does that and they don't get caught. I think it's a scummy, bullshit thing to do. If you're going to cheat on someone then you might as well just get out of the relationship."

HAVE YOU EVER HAD A RUN-IN WITH THE COPS?

"When I was 13, these two kids we used to hang out with said, 'We're going to play covert ops tonight!' So, we snuck out, and they got a mailbox and pushed it over. Then one of them punched out a lantern, and then they put a street hockey net in front of this guy's doorbell and they ding-dong-ditched him. Then the cops showed up, so we got down and started crawling in this person's backyard, and the cops put a flashlight on us and said, 'Stay right where you are!' So we ran as fast as we could and we actually outran the cops! I was terrified the whole way."

Cody's audition for The Magic Circle was going brilliantly