

## Why Heavy Metal is Music to Their Ears By Dale Davis

"A long, long time ago, I can still remember how that music used to make me feel" sang Don McLean in his classic "American Pie." This long, long time ago, 1958 - 1959, was when Ritchie Valens sang with a guitar and a small amplifier. What we saw in *La Bamba* stands in sharp contrast to the metal bands of today who in concert fill the stage with amplifier on top of amplifier and spend, as Metallica did for their latest album, two months writing and ten months recording and mixing in a studio. What's different, and what about those kids, mostly male, with the long hair and the t-shirts that read Metallica, Slayer, Megadeth, and Anthrax? Where did they come from?

Led Zeppelin, the granddaddy of heavy metal, first toured America during the last days of 1968. Their sound was met with open arms; young men banged their heads against the stage. Jimmy Page was twenty four. He had taught himself the guitar, listening to Elvis, Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly, and James Burton, Ricky Nelson's guitarist. Robert Plant was twenty. He had discovered Elvis when he was thirteen. Atlantic Records knew rock was changing. This new audience liked their rock loud and violent. Atlantic, Led Zeppelin, and kids were charting a new course for rock.

"The Times They Are Changing" Bob Dylan sang in 1964, and by end of 1968 some of America's youth found the rhythm for that change, not in the folk guitar of Dylan and Joan Baez, but in the hard drive of metal, the beat for what they didn't have the words for, the "fist in your face" in Alice Cooper's words. Attitude, hard, no curves, not diluted, no moon and June here, this rock swings on melodic drive.

Beginning in the mid-fifties teenagers staked out their freedom to the beat of rock-and-roll. These were the years of 8:30's prime time "Father Knows Best," "Doctor Kildare," "Bob Cummings," "Lawrence Welk," "The Beverly Hillbillies," "Gidget," "Ironside," and "Bewitched." In 1958 there were forty-one million television sets in America, the median U. S. family income was \$5,087, Eisenhower was president, and transatlantic jet service was inaugurated by Pan American World Airways. Ten years later we lived through the Tet offensive and My Lai and Robert Kennedy's and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassinations. Tear gas, grenades, nightsticks, and fire arms were used to contain American youth at the Democratic convention in Chicago. The Kerner Report began, "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white-- separate and unequal." By 1968 there were seventy-eight million television sets in America. 1969 was the year of Neil Armstrong and *Easy Rider*, the year *Penthouse* began publication and *Saturday Evening Post* ceased, the year Hell's Angels was hired to provide security for a Rolling Stones concert and a young man was stabbed to death as he tried to reach the stage. This was the year of Charles Manson.

"American Pie," released at the end of 1971, was the epitaph for the early innocence born from the union between rhythm and blues. Enter Led Zeppelin who, also, found the blues route in their bedrooms listening to Leadbelly, Muddy Waters, Elmore James, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Robert Johnson. The path begun by the Yard Birds, Cream, and Jimi Hendrix unleashed Led Zeppelin's guitar, bass, thunderous drumming, and what could be called a vocal attack.

We were in the seventies, a nation of television sets whose youth were primed for the visual extravaganza and theatrical antics of metal's high volume driven translation of "Give me the beat boys and free my soul. I want to get lost in rock 'n' roll." Rock, the forever hybrid, the outsider's art, spawned AC/DC, Aerosmith, Alice Cooper, Black Sabbath, Deep Purple, Judas Priest, Kiss, Queen, Rush, and Van Halen as metal in the seventies rose right beside our kids who were growing up on horror movies. Rock uneasily accommodated Def Leppard, Iron Maiden, Queensryche, Poison, Faith No More, Twisted Sister, Guns N' Roses, Suicidal Tendencies, Sacred

Reich, Living Color and Metallica, Megadeth, Slayer, and Anthrax as heavy metal, the outlaw of rock, moved through the eighties.

The eighties were Metallica's universe, speed metal, the wedding of hard-core punk's rhythm to melodic drive. "They think our heads are in our hands but violent use brings violent plans, keep him tied it makes him well, he's getting better can you tell. . . no more can they keep us in, listen damn it, we will win. They see it right they see it well, but they think this saves us from our hell . . . Sanitarium . . . leave me be . . .," Metallica sang in 1985. By the end of the eighties adults listened. The print media, television, and film exposed "adolescent adjustment reaction." *Newsweek* in 1989 called it "the biggest child welfare scandal of the last fifty years." The kids, they knew Metallica's "Welcome Home (Sanitarium)" line by line; it was they who were being sent "home" to mental hospitals for anxiety over drugs, suicide, and "alienation."

"I graphically describe a lot of things--this really happens, this does go on. I'm not telling people to do it; I'm just telling you what I see, what I hear and what I know," Tom Araya, Slayer's lyricist said. What does he see, he sees political oppression, gang killings, serial murders, threats of war. Slayer's music is unnerving, unending horror, like the unending horror of a Jeffrey Dahmer, thirty-eight homicides in Rochester this year, sales receipts for horror novels, and what the box office takes in for *Silence of The Lambs*. In America horror and violence sell; Slayer sifts through the pawns.

"Bands like us are writing a new book in rock-and-roll history. If Elvis Presley released the body and Bob Dylan released the mind, we're releasing whatever's left: all the stuff that people would rather overlook in a world that's gone mad," Dave Mustaine, lead singer and guitarist of Megadeth, formerly with Metallica, said in *Rolling Stone*. Megadeth doesn't overlook organized crime, substance abuse, and nuclear arsenals.

While metal bands like Queensryche and AC/DC make *Billboard's Top 50 Albums* in the nineties, what Led Zeppelin wrought is evolving anew, not on the charts yet. *The Baltimore Sun* reported that heavy metal music, Van Halen in particular, was the choice of U. S. fighter pilots as they set out on bombing missions in the Persian Gulf War. Here at home, however, a new generation was growing up to this bold, loud, social protest conscience evolution of metal with Metallica, Slayer, Megadeth, and Anthrax who were looking at all of us.

"Run-DMC first said a deejay could be a band . . . Stand on your own feet, get you out your seat . . . Beat is for Eric B and LL as well, hell . . . Wax is for Anthrax, still it can rock bells . . . Ever forever, universal, it will sell," rapped Chuck D in "Bring The Noise" on Public Enemy's 1988 album, *It Takes A Nation of Millions To Hold Us Back*. Scott Ian, Anthrax's lyricist and rhythm guitarist, began wearing Public Enemy shirts onstage in 1986 and 1987; he's a Public Enemy fan. "Bring The Noise," the most important track to Ian on Anthrax's new *Attack of The Killer B's*, features Chuck D rapping the first two verses and Ian rapping the last two. Crossover audiences aren't a new idea for Anthrax. In 1990 Joe Belladonna sang, "The public enemy's not the man who speaks his mind, the public enemy's the man who goes and acts blind" in response to the death of Yusaf Hawkins in Bensonhurst. And this "Keep It In The Family" which Ian refers to as his favorite song on *Persistence of Time* is included, also, in the new album. "I want people to know that song, wanna shove it down their throats. I want it to be everyone's favorite track," said Ian.

Anthrax knows kids, wants to reach the kids who buy their albums with music that will make a difference in their lives. Anthrax speaks directly to kids who aren't sure who to blame for their lives, kids who know first hand divorce rates rose, AIDS, street crime, racism, parental neglect and abuse, school dropout, the American dream of the job and house not there anymore, kids Donna Gaines refers to in *Teenage Wasteland*, a remarkable examination of today's youth and

youth culture, as "the minority of minorities, young people [who] get the lowest pay, have fewer rights, and suffer more absolute control than anyone." How do we involve and engage these kids, our kids? What can we all learn from heavy metal and the kids who listen to it?

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