

S T E V E N C H U R C H

Hit List¹

These people haven't heard heavy metal. They can't take it. If you play it for 24 hours, your brain and body functions start to slide, your train of thought slows down and your will is broken. That's when we come in and talk to them.

--Sergeant Mark Hadsell, of Psy Ops, to Newsweek magazine

Metallica: "Enter Sandman"

There was a time in the late 80's—a decade still tinged with the sepia tones of nostalgia for me--when the only tape in the Kenwood tape-deck in my 79 Mazda RX-7 was Metallica's *And Justice for All* playing on an eternal loop. Not because my tape deck was broken. Not because I didn't have other tapes. Just because I loved it. The album meant something. *And Justice* came before the *Black Album* featuring "Enter Sandman" and was the first album recorded without their original bass player, Cliff, who was killed when a tour bus rolled over on him. Later the "dude who replaced Cliff," (aka Jason Newsted) would complain bitterly that Lars and James turned the bass way down on *And Justice*, de-emphasizing

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/dec/11/gunsroses-elvis-presley-human-rights>

his tracks to the point of near inaudibility, a possible metaphor for the loss they all felt so deeply—the loss of Cliff and his gut-ripping bass riffs—or maybe just evidence, as Jason suggested, that Lars, the son of a professional tennis player, was a control freak in running shorts who didn't trust him to handle the job. None of this mattered to me. I just loved the noise. *And Justice* was also the first album for which Metallica created a MTV video, and they used it to showcase their radio-friendly ballad, One—a very popular video about an angst-ridden mummy . . . or something like that (OK, so it's based on the Dalton Trumbo anti-war novel, *Johnny Get Your Gun*, and not my favorite song on the album, but still a visually arresting and compelling video that probably won awards.) *And Justice* was, by most accounts, their first “commercially viable” record and, by many other accounts, the beginning of a downhill slide. But I didn't care. I loved the album deeply and passionately. I listened to *And Justice* in the morning, on the way to work, during my lunch break, and after basketball practice, on the way home for dinner. I listened to *And Justice* while smoking dope, drinking Mickey's Big Mouths, and fucking my nymphomaniac girlfriend out at a campground by the lake, my bony teenage hips pumping and banging like a piston to the rhythm of driving guitar. When friends rode in my car, they complained about the noise and teased me, demanding another tape, something else, anything but the same damn songs. But I didn't care. Some mornings as I pulled into the parking lot of Lawrence High School, home of the Chesty Lions (seriously, that's the mascot), I'd crank up *Dire Maker*, lean my head back and feel the soft brush of my mullet hair-do on the back of my neck as I screamed along with James Hetfield, “Dear Mother, Dear Father/What is this hell you have put me through?” because I was a teenage boy, riddled with angst and because it felt good. Not because it meant anything, not because my parents had put me through any kind of hell, really, besides the usual 80's divorce. But the raw emotional truth is that I loved Metallica². I needed it. I needed the sound, the noise

² I attended my first live Metallica concert a few years ago at our local soulless sports arena in Fresno (a place named after a grocery chain) where I was inducted into what lead vocalist, James Hetfield called, “the Metallica Family,” which as far as I could tell looked eerily like a Promise Keepers rally—almost entirely male, overweight, chanting and swaying to monotonous rhythms, many of them occasionally bursting out in ecstatic fits, yelling “Yesssss!” at the top of their lungs or the joyous, “Whoooooo.”—the major difference between the two groups being that everyone in the Family wore black instead of khaki Dockers and yellow t-shirts, and many of them had interesting facial hair, piercings, and sleeve tattoos. Oh, and they were blasting Metallica at full gut-rumbling volume. I felt like I was standing inside a jet engine . . . Aside from that, the place did feel a lot like a church—perhaps one of those pentacostal, apocalyptic ones where they preach about the End Times, blast rock music, drink strychnine and handle rattlesnakes. The environment was ecstatic, positively epiphanic at times. And when Metallica played “Enter Sandman” all the Family members went completely apeshit crazy and began pumping their arms into the air, 15,000 fists thrusting in unison and all of them chanting, “Enter night. Exit light. Off to never-neverland,” at the top of their lungs. It was a little frightening, even for someone who was sympathetic to the Metallica Family values. Everyone knew all the words to *Enter Sandman* and every single person sang those words, often while clutching a cup of liquid in one hand that might as well have been

and the odd feeling of peace and calm that washed over me when I listened. Some mornings I just wanted to skip school, skip basketball practice, and hide inside all that window-rattling, chest-humming, ear-ringing noise of power-chord metal on full volume. I wanted to stay in the car, letting the sound roll over me, drown in it and pretend that I didn't hate high school or myself or my nymphomaniac girlfriend. And maybe that's where the meaning is—in the escape, the out of body sort of rush, that feeling of being enveloped. Wrapped in noise. Comforted. Like sound therapy. And maybe the meaning of it is only in that moment, trapped forever in those interstices between spaces, between home and high school, car and classroom, past and present.

strychnine, and raising the other in the air, eyes closed in a silent sort of reverie, lost in the spiritual wash of noise. At times, throughout the show, James would fall silent himself and let the audience sing the chorus to a particular song. It was like the call-and-response I've seen between preachers and their audience. Like most born-again, the audience knew the stuff from *And Justice* and the rest of the band's New Testament but had a harder time with lessons from the older books of the Metallica canon, albums like *Kill 'Em All*, *Ride the Lightning*, and *Master of Puppets*. As much as I liked *And Justice*, I'm really more of an "old school" Metallica fan these days—reveling in the messy angst and fucked up time-signatures of "Seek and Destroy" from their first album. As with most old testaments these books are darker and full of pestilence and smite. *Kill 'Em All* features songs like "Seek and Destroy," "Metal Militia," "No Remorse," and "The Four Horsemen." Despite an edge of its own, *And Justice* is an album mostly about social justice, the environment, and mental health. But *The Black Album*, which followed *And Justice for All*, featuring "Enter Sandman," was by far the band's most hit-heavy, radio-friendly album and the most popular track, "Enter Sandman," the very song that sent the Metallica Family masses into near hysterical worship is, in my opinion, also perhaps one of the silliest and most ridiculous songs the band has ever recorded. It features, after all, an almost sing-song chorus based a nursery rhyme and alluding to the children's classic, *Peter Pan* (which, I would argue, is markedly different from the creepy Oompaloompa-esque chanting in "Frayed Ends of Sanity" on *And Justice*). If you try, you can sing most of *Enter Sandman* like a nursery rhyme. Try it. Try to hear the soft melody of, "Exit light. Enter night. Take my hand. Off to never never land," and now imagine it, accompanied by gut-ripping guitar riffs, played over and over and over again, all night long.

2. Sesame Street: “Sunny Day” theme song:

sunny days. sweeping the clouds away. on my way, to where the air is sweet. can you tell me how to get how to get to sesame street? come and play. everything's a-okay. family neighbors friends. iraqi. that's where we meet. can you tell me how to get, how to get to . . . sunny days. sweeping the clouds away. on my way to where the air is sweet. can you tell me how to get, how to get to sesame street? come and play. everything's a-okay. family neighbors friends. detainee. that's where we meet. can you tell me how to get, how to get to sesame street, how to get to sesame street, how to get to sesame street, how to get to sesame street? And what happens when we get there? What happens when the nostalgic weight of our memories, our love for songs and giant stuffed birds or invisible woolly Mammoths, meets the immovable fact: we torture to a soundtrack. We torture to the Sesame Street theme song. This happens. At detention centers around the world. We (you, me, our country) use music to psychologically break prisoners and detainees. Much of it is music you and I know and love. Much of it is metal. But some is music from your childhood, weaponized and deployed strategically. Music like “Sunny Day,” the Sesame Street theme song.

3. Guns N' Roses: "Welcome to the Jungle"

Welcome to the Jungle was one of many rock songs used by Task Force Ranger during the invasion of Panama (Operation Just Cause) in 1989 in an effort to drive Manuel Noriega from power and then roust him from the Vatican Embassy in Panama City. The military set up massive loudspeakers outside the building and blasted music 24 hours a day. In addition to Guns N' Roses, they played a lot of Elvis Presley, Bruce Springsteen, and many of the same favorite songs used against prisoners today. At night they bathed the building in ultra-bright light, haunting him with eternal day, making it nearly impossible for him to get some sleep or a simple moment of quiet peace.

When my son, Malcolm was still in diapers, just learning to talk, he used to demand that I play "Welcome to the Jungle" on the stereo but he got the name wrong and would say, "Daddy, I want Malcolm to the Jungle," or simply, "I want a drum song," and then he would do his signature dance—a move that involved one foot (typically the left one) planted to the floor, as if it was nailed there, while he kicked the other leg in the air and spun around in a circle, banging his head up and down like a deranged circus animal. The music had to be fast, hard and loud. If it wasn't he would wrinkle his brow, stare hard at me and demand that I remedy the situation. "Drum Song!" he'd bark and stomp his feet until the noise gushed out from the speakers and moved him.

4. Bruce Springsteen: “Born in the U.S.A.”

Perhaps it's the contradiction that hurts most, the brutal lack of irony in musical taste. Who wants to accept that the music they love often contradicts their most cherished values. Interrogators use protest music by Springsteen or bands like Rage Against the Machine to torture people who may be nothing more than protestors themselves, people who dared to speak out against the U.S. Government. You wonder if they even know how to listen, how to pay attention to the small things. Words. Tone. Rhythm. Perhaps they're just tuned into a different frequency. If you stop and think. If you stop and listen. Really listen. You hear the contradictions. You hear Springsteen singing a pop song about the pain of loss, the horror of Viet Nam, the futility of war, and the disaffection and suffering of returning soldiers. You hear the protest, the angst in the cry, “Born in the USA!” But if you don't stop, trim away all the noise, and pay attention, you don't hear the hum of morality. If you only hear the chorus, the looping sing-a-long part that has made this song one of the most popular rock songs of all time, then you're like Reagan in 1984 who famously misinterpreted and misappropriated the song when, at the height of the song's popularity, added the following lines to his standard campaign stump speech: “America's future rests in a thousand dreams inside your hearts; it rests in the message of hope in songs so many young Americans admire: New Jersey's own Bruce Springsteen. And helping you make those dreams come true is what this job of mine is all about.”

5. Barney and Friends: “I love You” and Drowning Pool: “Bodies”

“In training, they forced me to listen to the Barney “I Love You” song for 45 minutes. I never want to go through that again,” said one US operative.

Suzanne Cusick, a music professor at New York University, has interviewed a number of former detainees about their experiences.

Played at a certain volume, Cusick said, the music “simply prevents people from thinking.”³

Stevie Benton’s band Drowning Pool, recorded one of the interrogators’ favorites, “Bodies.” He had this to say about the controversy over rock songs being used to torture detainees:

“People assume we should be offended that somebody in the military thinks our song is annoying enough that played over and over it can psychologically break someone down. I take it as an honor to think that perhaps our song could be used to quell another 9/11 attack or something like that.”⁴

I take it as an honor to think
Perhaps our song could be used to quell another attack
I take it as an honor to think

Other artists think differently:

“The fact that music I helped create was used in crimes against humanity sickens me. We need to end torture and close Guantanamo now.”

-- Tom Morello, guitarist, Rage Against the Machine

In October of 2009, Morello and a coalition of other musicians—including Trent Reznor and members of Pearl Jam, R.E.M, and The Roots—demanded that the U.S. Government release the titles of all songs used to torture detainees at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility.

³ <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-talk-musical-tortureoct23,0,4546424.story>

⁴ from blog at <http://qwidget.com/blog/2008/12/pop-music-used-to-torture-detainees/>.

6. Aerosmith, Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Don McLean, Lil' Kim, Limp Bizkit, Meat Loaf, Rage Against the Machine, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Nine Inch Nails, and Tupac Shakur.

These artists are also on the suspected list of most used by the U.S. military to interrogate and psychologically break down detainees in places like Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and other detention facilities. But many of them are also on my most-used, most-listened-to list. They're classics, looped over and over on local radio stations. They're the soundtrack to school drop-offs and pick-ups, family outings, and late night drives. These songs are songs that make me smile and dance or cheer. They're songs that, at times, bring me some small amount of peace in a crazy world. But I cannot deny that many of my favorites are the favorite weapons of torturers. And I'm just beginning to understand what this means.

Perhaps the sad and terrifying truth is that my appreciation for music--this music, my music, American music—reveals that what I have in common with those interrogators is more than musical taste, more than a shared love, but also a latent propensity for violence and self-destruction. Did the music help them hurt? Did it inspire the violence? Is this an American sickness? And could I do the same if the soundtrack and scene repeated? It's always the other kids who do things like this. Other kids hurt people. Not me. I don't believe in that. I just like the music.

I know this now: the nostalgic first-time-I-heard-it memory, the image of place and person, is scrubbed over, peeled away by the sounds of torture. Those songs can never mean the same again. Not to the victims—not now that they have been played this way. And not to perpetrators. And perhaps these songs will never mean the same to any of us again either. There is no cocoon of nostalgia insulated enough to protect us from these truths. “Enter Sandman” just sounds different to me now. It just sounds wrong. Other songs, too. Perhaps the echoes from those acts resonate through all of us, coloring our own memories, tracing a jagged line between my love for Metallica, your love for another song or artist on the list, to that detainee strung up in his cell, banging his head because metal health is driving him mad. Perhaps one drop in a distant pool can discolor the vast sea of memory and we are all responsible for the alienation of nostalgia, for the separation between what we remember, what we love, and what it means anew.

STEVEN CHURCH is the author of *The Guinness Book of Me: a Memoir of Record*, *Theoretical Killings: Essays and Accidents*, *The Day After The Day After: My Atomic Angst*, *Ultrasonic: Essays and One with the Tiger: Sublime and Violent Encounters between Humans and Animals*. His essays have been published in *Passages North*, *DIAGRAM*, *Brevity*, *River Teeth*, *The Rumpus*, *AGNI*, *The Pedestrian*, *Colorado Review*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Terrain.org*, and many others. He is a Founding Editor and Nonfiction Editor for the nationally recognized literary magazine, *The Normal School*; and he teaches for the residential MFA Program at Fresno State and for low-residency MFA Programs at Sierra Nevada College.

