

FILM REVIEW

Get Thrashed: The Story of Thrash Metal. Producer: Rick Ernst; Director: Rick Ernst; DVD; 100 minutes. Saigon 1515 Productions, 2008. Distributor: Lightyear Entertainment, 13739 N. Chandler Blvd, Los Angeles, California, 91401, (818) 855-1318; www.lightyear.com.

Global Metal. Producers: Sam Dunn and Scot MacFadyen; Directors: Sam Dunn and Scot MacFadyen; DVD; 93 minutes. Banger Films, 2008. Distributor (Canada): Les Films Séville/Seville Pictures, 400 de Maisonneuve O, Montréal, Quebec, H3A 1L4, (514) 841-1910, www.sevillepictures.com; Distributor (USA): Warner Bros., (866) 373-4389, <http://www.wbshop.com/>

Heavy Metal in Baghdad. Producer: Monica Hampton; Directors: Eddy Moretti and Suroosh Alvi; 84 minutes. Vice Films, 2007. Distributor (USA): Virgil Films & Entertainment, 43 Broome Street 6A, New York, New York, 10013, www.virgilmfilmsent.com. Distributor (foreign): Salt Company, 3rd floor, 1A Adpar Street, London, United Kingdom, W2 1DE, +44 (0)20 7535 6714, www.salt-co.com. Available online: www.vbs.tv.

BY CHRIS McDONALD

If you are going to do research on heavy metal, ethnography matters. The sociological work of Deena Weinstein (2000 [1991]), Natalie Purcell (2003) and Keith Kahn-Harris (2000, 2006), the ethnomusicological work of Harris Ber-

ger (1995), and the musicological study of Robert Walser (1993) all emphasize the need to delve deeply into the social contexts that enabled the emergence of the heavy metal subculture. The fans, the symbols, the rituals, the sounds, and the spirit of heavy metal provide a rich opportunity to explore the need for extremity, community and empowerment which has arisen in our secular, urbanized modernity. All three of the films listed above tackle the topic of metal in ethnographic ways, and all address metal's global impact. None of them are truly introductory to the topic, but all would provide good companions to the growing literature on metal. Considered together, the films also illustrate some of the advantages and disadvantages of being an "insider" to the culture studied (*Get Thrashed*), an "outsider" (*Heavy Metal in Baghdad*), as well as degrees in between (*Global Metal*).

Get Thrashed: The Story of Thrash Metal provides a history of heavy metal's "sub-cultural moment," the movement that took a once-popular arena-rock phenomenon and reclaimed it for locally-based, underground scenes, and propelled metal's splintering into a variety of extreme subgenres. Emerging mostly in California, thrash developed in the hands of young metal musicians who loved the classic metal of Black Sabbath and Judas Priest, as well as the faster, punk-influenced sounds of newer British groups like Venom, Iron Maiden and Motörhead. These same musicians rejected the commercially successful melodic sound and colourful, androgynous image of the new California glam metal

scene (epitomized by Mötley Crüe).

The content of the movie is provided overwhelmingly by interviews with metal musicians, as well as with a handful of metal DJs, record company owners, and fans. The movie's introduction describes early thrash metal's attempts to redefine the hardcore metal sound and hardcore fan. Pioneered by Metallica, thrash was marked by fast tempos, complicated riffs, and angry, graphic and gory lyrics. Thrash fans reinvented the rock concert to be more openly violent and intense and thus a more exclusive space that frightened away the casual spectator. Moshing, ritualized pushing and collision as a substitute for dancing, was adapted into thrash concerts from American hardcore punk. The scene relied on a small network of venues, record labels, magazines, word-of-mouth, and the trading of demo tapes to keep the bands in circulation.

Several key thrash bands are profiled at length, including the "big four" – Metallica, Megadeth, Slayer, and Anthrax – although San Francisco's Exodus also gets considerable coverage. The section devoted to fandom is probably one of the more insightful passages. The tribal aspects of rock subgenres in the early 1980s is brought out clearly in the description of the thrash metal uniform, which included long hair, rock shirts with three-quarter length sleeves, white sneakers, and cut-off leather jackets with patches and buttons deployed in very particular ways. Antipathy to other rock "tribes" (followers of hardcore punk or – worse – glam metal) acted almost as a kind of social glue in the subculture: what thrash fans *weren't* was almost as important as what they were. Female

participants were in the minority, but girls' dress and behaviours were closely aligned with the boys'.

Moshing, stage-diving and head-banging are covered as fan behaviours, and the lifestyle associated with the bands and their fans (partying, intoxication, and rowdy antics) are documented in interviews, pictures and archival footage. These behaviours made the audience as much a part of the show as the band, and much of this (especially stage-diving) was best done in small venues, where there was little separation between performer and audience. The sprouting of other thrash scenes in New York, and later in Europe, is covered. Germany's Kreator, Brazil's Sepultura, Canada's Voivod, and Switzerland's Celtic Frost are cited as evidence of the global reach of the subculture. Though a very small number of thrash bands (notably Metallica) achieved commercial success, most thrash musicians made records and toured at a subsistence level or at a loss. Yet thrash metallers made sure the scene survived, and a new generation of thrash-influenced bands (In Flames, Hatebreed) continue to draw audiences.

Get Thrashed is an insider's take on the subculture. Director and interviewer Rick Ernst clearly knows his subject, and knew who in the thrash metal scene, as well in the larger world of metal, to interview. Thrash metal's appeal – likened to a drug, or to caffeine – is not just explained, but to a fair degree, conveyed. The subculture's more shocking behaviours – the bloody stage-diving injuries, the violence against glam metal fans, Exodus's Paul Baloff's practice of snorting lines of spit – are presented as if to other insiders (gross – but isn't that cool!?).

In this sense, the film comes across as an uncensored slice of life in the subculture. But like any insider's account, there are some problems and limitations. As someone with a long-standing interest in metal, I was able to follow the story and keep most of the talking heads straight, but someone new to the topic would likely find the array of interviewees and insider's reference points a bit overwhelming. Much is also taken for granted. I'm all for letting fans describe their favourite music and performers in their own words – ethnographically, it's essential – but we also need some translation. The significance of Metallica, Anthrax, Megadeth, and Slayer was described by interviewees in very similar and unrevealing terms – each band seems to have uniquely contributed to thrash's style because they “rocked,” they were “heavy and fast,” they were “totally different than anyone else” – and I had to watch the film twice before the tangible, essential differences between these bands emerged clearly from between the repetitive confessions of admiration. Also taken for granted are the vicious politics that existed between underground rock genres in the 1980s and early 1990s – an interesting phenomenon, insofar as the hatred between thrash fans, glam metal fans, hardcore punk fans, and a host of other subcultures raged for seemingly trivial reasons. The meaning behind such conflict is never really addressed.

Global Metal, the second documentary from anthropologist, filmmaker and headbanger Sam Dunn, continues the sojourn begun in *Metal: A Headbanger's Journey* (2005). While the previous film took stock of metal's origins, meaning and culture in largely Anglo-American

contexts, *Global Metal* probes the genre's role in globalization. Dunn visits Brazil, Japan, China, Indonesia, India, Israel and Dubai, interviewing fans, musicians and journalists. Several Western metal musicians comment on touring in these countries. Through the choice of locales, *Global Metal* spends a lot of time assessing metal's impact in developing countries. Metal is presented as a critical alternative to traditional ways. For example, in India, where family expectations weigh heavily on teens and young adults, the metal subculture provides a space and a sense of belonging outside of the family and traditional Indian norms. In China, metal provides fans with expressive culture which is felt to be “modern.”

Metal as political criticism is also explored, with Chinese, Indonesian and Brazilian musicians crediting metal with providing a context to experience free speech and emotional catharsis in countries with repressive dictatorships. Max Cavalera, lead singer for Brazil's Sepultura, recalls performing for fans in Indonesia and feeling a connection to another third-world audience, enduring the same repression he knew in his home country. However, the film also acknowledges that metal's capacity for letting out rage may also have a de-politicizing effect, as frustration is channeled into music rather than direct political action (an observation made by one Chinese musician). Nevertheless, metal as something politically provocative is experienced by an Iranian fan interviewed in Dubai, who notes that jeans, rock shirts and long hair invites physical harassment and even imprisonment in his country. In Indonesia, one band used metal as a vehicle for anti-Semitic messages; in Israel, metal bands

confound political boundaries by winning fans in Islamic countries like Turkey.

Metal's presence in an affluent country like Japan differs greatly in meaning. Fans describe the feelings of metal as happy, energetic, a feeling of being "burst open." The survey of Japan's uses of metal – in karaoke, in cartoons, in the carnivalesque dress-up of the "visual kei" genre – leaves one with the impression that the Japanese treat the sounds and images of metal as pure artifice. It's not quite about mocking the metal of the West, but the sense of it as pop culture diversion, rather than subculture, catharsis, or way of life, offered quite a contrast with metal's role elsewhere. Yet this makes sense in the context of Japanese society, where conformity, respect for elders, and a polite, orderly demeanour make something like metal truly a fantasy world apart from everyday life.

Just as globalization is a process fraught with ambivalence, *Global Metal* asks questions that lie at the heart of that ambivalence. What does it mean that a Western subculture resonates with non-Western audiences in these ways? Are these subcultures imitations of Western models, or is metal being appropriated and modified to serve local purposes? How do fans in these countries view the globalization of metal? How similar or different are the pleasures, politics and meanings of metal in these diverse locales? Inevitably, given the film's length and visiting of seven countries, there is a sense of "sampling" various metal scenes and making some comparisons, but nothing like the depth Dunn achieved in surveying Anglo-American metal in his previous film. At the same time, I found myself wondering about an even bigger

picture as I watched the film. How does metal compare with other Western genres being appropriated all over the globe? What leads a young Israeli or Indian to metal rather than hip hop, another subculture with an expanding, global presence?

Heavy Metal in Baghdad takes a much more specific focus, exploring the very small metal scene in Iraq, and focussing on the capital city's one and only working band, Acrassicauda (Latin for Black Scorpion). The filmmakers, Eddy Moretti and Suroosh Alvi, first contacted the band in 2003 (as part of a story on Iraq for MTV). Taken with the band and their determination to play metal in a country wrecked by the American invasion and violent resistance, the filmmakers organized a concert for the group in a Baghdad hotel in 2005 and attempted to interview and follow the band members in the summer of 2006 during the height of the Iraqi civil war. The environment in post-invasion Iraq was so dangerous, Acrassicauda had only managed to perform six concerts in Baghdad since forming in 2002. The film works nicely as a companion to *Global Metal* by looking at the subculture in a single geographic and cultural context for the full duration of the movie. After Dunn's film, we are ready to look more in depth at metal in a single developing locale. By interviewing the band members repeatedly over time (particularly the bassist, Firas Al-Lateef), we get to know their personalities and their response to the military and political catastrophe that surrounds them.

Alvi's and Moretti's sojourn in Iraq sometimes upstages their musical topic, as they are ferried about in armoured vehicles, wearing flak jackets, accompanied

by a small battalion of heavily armed body guards. They are told on arrival in Baghdad to expect to be targeted by snipers. Some journeys through the city are cut short by their guides, fearing violence. Passers-by refuse to be interviewed by anyone speaking English for fear of being attacked later. The tense and brutal conditions of the city are well-established through these scenes.

The members of Acrassicauda account for their love of the music through the same tropes covered in *Global Metal*: the music provides a release, a feeling of freedom, an empowering way to come to terms with the brutality of their world. "Where else can we find fun?" asks one Acrassicauda fan, "Nowhere!" The difficulties of working as a metal band in Baghdad are shown: gigs interrupted by rolling power outages, harassment by Iraqis for their metal attire and short goatees (all the members had short hair; long "metal" hair would make them targets for violence), their rehearsal space and much of their equipment was demolished in a mortar attack (fortunately, the band members were elsewhere at the time). The film follows the group to Syria, where the band fled after conditions in Baghdad deteriorated further. Working low-wage refugee jobs in Damascus and not permitted to travel, the group attempts to perform a concert. Damascus has no metal scene to speak of, and attracts only curious onlookers. The film ends with the group, out of money and options, selling their music gear and preparing to face the Syrian government's drive to send Iraqi refugees back across the border. (After the film was finished, the band managed to flee to Istanbul, and eventually to the US.)

One compelling aspect of the film is the filmmakers' culture shock while in Baghdad. They may have sympathy for heavy metal, but their outsidership to the Iraqi social context is laid bare by their contrast with the band members, who seem relaxed and stoically resigned to Baghdad's daily violence. Unable to do anything about the condition of their city, they live for each other and for the music, the one thing to which they look forward. *Heavy Metal in Baghdad* never takes up the gender issue. Only men are encountered in this journey, and though the band members discuss having wives and children, we never see them, even when interviews take place in the musicians' apartments. What did the women in their lives think of the identity that these men have taken up? Was there any female participation in metal in Iraq, with or without the men? Perhaps the filmmakers couldn't get at these questions under the circumstances, but I was left wondering.

In any case, I was compelled by Acrassicauda's story, and I experienced the same feeling Dunn did in *Global Metal*, humbled by becoming aware of the privilege that I have to make and listen to whatever music I choose, in conditions far more comfortable and humane than metal fans in Iraq, Iran or Indonesia experience. Heavy metal offers an identity providing empowerment and a way of channelling anger and aggression, and though the context and shades of meaning may change in the many countries where it has taken root, the feelings behind it, as these documentaries conclude, are shared by many. 🌿

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