

DEAD CAN DANCE

Feature Article

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It's the sea of black T-shirts you notice above all else: Jesus Was a Cunt. I Am Dead. Angel Of Disease. Hate My Lord. The Killith Fair. Huddled packs of white, working-class male beer-guzzlers in size XXL long-sleeve metal tees mill around in pick-up trucks and Dodge Chargers in the parking lot outside the March Metal Meltdown in the industrial wasteland of Pennsauken, New Jersey, featuring Anal Blast, Skinless, Mortician, Corpse Vomit, Vomit Snack, Hate Eternal, Vital Remains, '80s thrash veterans Testament, Finland black metal gods Impaled Nazarene, Swedish black/thrash hybrid Witchery, Norse Viking metal legends Immortal... The list is staggering, over a hundred bands from the darkest corners of America and Europe on four stages for two days of extreme sonic dissonance, fists raised in the sign of the beast, and enough headbanging to rattle a nation. If you've never heard of these bands, you probably weren't meant to. And if you brought earplugs along, you're a total pussy. The South Jersey Expo Center is a sprawling convention hall sandwiched between a sex club catering to swingers and a 12-screen multiplex showing *Scream 3*. Across the street sits a motel renting rooms by the hour for \$25. Name talent has been put up here for the weekend. Pennsauken's bleak commercial thoroughfare stretches into the distance: grotty motels and fast food restaurants, abandoned strip malls, grimy auto repair shops, tired old titty bars. Ridiculed for years as the place where heavy metal never died, New Jersey rocks as hard and as fast as it always did. Only metal has slipped defiantly underground — speedier, witchier, filthier and more sacrilegious — counting fewer adherents than in its '80s heyday. America's mainstream rock press won't go near it, nor will Beavis and Butthead or Wayne and Garth. Pennsauken's not even on most road maps; you have to know how to get there.

America's extreme metal underground thrives on the margins of the music business, forsaking major-label representation and radio play in favor of a grass-roots, word-of-mouth network of mail-order record companies, websites, specialist record shops, fanzines and the rag-tag live festivals which provide networking opportunities for unsigned bands as well as a chance to see revered European talent like Immortal, Impaled Nazarene and Witchery perform rare, one-off American gigs. Flown over by festival promoters at costs in the range of \$5000 per band, booking European names means higher attendance but lower profits. Lesser known performers don't earn a penny. Greedier promoters often charge high fees to unknown talent for the privilege of opening for a Cannibal Corpse or a Morbid Angel, two of America's more successful death metal draws.

"Record sales and popularity determine which bands get paid," according to March Metal Meltdown promoter Jack Koshick, who stages four festivals each year, including the Milwaukee Metalfest, America's largest underground metal festival, attracting thousands of spectators each July. "Unsigned bands from across the country can get on-stage by helping us to sell tickets," adds Koshick.

San Francisco's Impaled are a lesser-known young grindcore band playing for free at the Meltdown. They've flown over from the West Coast at their own expense to play a Saturday slot at 11:40am, watched by fewer than two dozen people. "We don't have to pay to play, that's a big bonus," one Impaled member sheepishly concedes after Impaled's lumbering half-hour set. "Necropolis Records paid for our singer's plane ticket out of future royalties, which we'll probably never earn anyway," he laughs. Impaled's debut album, *The Dead Shall Dead Remain*, includes a cover photo of a toilet overflowing with bloody feces and eviscerated organs and features an opening number entitled "Feces of Death," sung in bleeding-throat vocal grunts with lyrics that go "Your evacuated torso is stuffed / With soiled toilet tissue balled into clumps / Diarrhea is imbued with a smile / With my conspurcate concoction your body I defile / Inundated arteries now burst / In festering excreta, immersed / Your body is awash in disease / When I'm alone in the morgue I do as I please." This is perhaps the most compelling example of why underground metal won't ever go *Top Of The Pops*.

Pennsauken's festival will go on to attract 3,600 fans and performers of death metal, black metal, thrash metal, atmospheric doom metal and grindcore during its nerve-shattering two days. In a surreal feat of booking, skinhead stalwarts The Business wind up on Friday night's bill so there's a smattering of crisply attired skins in the hall sticking out like sore thumbs alongside the more amply tressed death metal kids in their rumpled cargo pants and Anal Blast t-shirts. Merchandise booths flog everything from Cradle Of Filth panties to vintage Slayer badges to triple extra-large black hoodie-style sweatshirts — a lot of death metal fans are overweight — displaying barely legible band names like Incantation, Viral Load, Dying Fetus, Angel Corpse; all scrawled in a Viking-inspired type. Professional wrestlers and porn stars have been hired for the weekend as eye candy and comic relief from death metal's inevitable overkill. Former porn actress Jasmin St. Claire, autographing glossies in the lobby, explains why she made the career switch to professional wrestling: "Because they're real people, they can actually spell and they're not a bunch of dumb, ignorant fucks like the porno people." But there's way too much going on at Meltdown. The wrestling mats get hauled off on the first day when it's clear that fans only want metal. Jasmin stays because she's got a crush on Sharlee from Witchery.

The Expo Center's green room is its own lobby, where band members, concertgoers, event promoters, 'zine editors, record execs and T-shirt vendors are virtually indistinguishable from one another, in keeping with death metal's defiantly democratic veneer. There's no VIP treatment here; the only star tantrum of the weekend is thrown by Immortal's grouchy lead singer, who disrupts a press conference to complain about the lack of free beer. Indeed, the abundance of camaraderie at the Meltdown suggests a full-fledged love-in. Even the creepier folks in corpse paint and chain mail are friendly and approachable, their barks (or growls) far worse than their bites. Any aggression is saved for the moshpit, where mean-looking kids from rural Maryland careen furiously into one another. Metal hasn't lost its status as the white male adolescent aggression outlet of choice. Kids still want to rock n' roll all night in America. Meanwhile, unsigned bands hand out demo tapes in the lobby, hoping to get signed by the reps from Century Media, Relapse, Metal Blade and Nuclear Blast America (extreme metal's equivalents to major labels) who have come to the Meltdown to sell CDs and band shirts and scope out fresh talent. Fanzines like *Enslain* out of Quakertown, Pennsylvania and the amusingly lurid *Grimoire Of Exalted Deeds* from Clifton, New Jersey, featuring nude metal vixens drenched in Lucio Fulci-inspired fake gore, are foisted upon concertgoers from every direction, to be consumed later or more likely tossed on the floor.

Death metal's garish style evolved out of imagery culled from Anglo-Saxon culture, Nordic myths and J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth novels of enchanted forests and questing trolls. Metal gods Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath and Coven explored satanic themes in the early '70s, paving the way for an '80s black metal renaissance pioneered by Denmark's Mercyful Fate (who employed the screeching, operatic vocals that birthed atmospheric or doom metal); Sweden's Bathory (the first to incorporate romantic paintings of Norse myths on its much-imitated album-cover art); and Britain's Venom (whose satanic stage theatrics inspired legions of imitators, most notably Cradle Of Filth). Thrash metal entered the equation later in the decade via San Francisco's Testament, Germany's Sodom and Switzerland's Celtic Frost, speeding up the mix and introducing moshpits to metal shows. Death metal erupted in the early '90s as an extreme hybrid of hardcore punk and thrash metal, distinguished by a growling, "toilet-flush" vocal style, down-tuned guitars and double-time drum beats. American death metal pioneers Deicide, Morbid Angel, Obituary and Cannibal Corpse embraced slasher films, images of rape and dismemberment and bodily functions, thereby enticing legions of bezittened teenaged males back into the metal fold. Britain's grindcore originators Carcass incited a trend for repugnant album art featuring coprophagia (shit eating) and photos of dismembered corpses; song lyrics were culled straight from surgical textbooks. Black metal's third, most influential wave took off in Scandinavia in the early '90s. Oslo's Mayhem popularized corpse paint, Viking chain mail and overt satanic imagery. Stockholm's Unleashed and Norway's Emperor and Immortal growled out atmospheric paeans to dark woods, eternal winters and deathlike silences. Then Mayhem frontman Euronymous was stabbed to death in 1993 by Burzum member Vark Vikernes (as detailed in Michael Moynihan and Didrik Sørderlind's *Lords Of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Black Metal Underground*) and suddenly extreme metal was the most dangerous music in the world.

With fists pumped high and index fingers raised in the ever-present satanic molochio (rumored to have been pioneered by '80s heavy metal veteran Ronnie James Dio, after an Italian custom warning off the evil eye) the extreme metal underground really comes alive during the Meltdown's non-stop live sets. Each new band flies on stage for its brief set, assaulting fans with guttural vocals and generally playing the hell out of their instruments. Guitars are strummed with such ferocity, heads are banged with such force, that long strands of hair become shredded by the strings and waft delicately into the moshpit.

Meltdown's two smaller stages have been erected side by side in the same dark, cavernous hall, separated only by a thin black curtain. Not that it matters much: two death metal bands playing at once only sounds more cacophonous. European groups like Witchery and Immortal, accustomed to playing huge outdoor summer festivals like Dynamo in Holland and Donnington in Britain, before crowds in the tens of thousands, are subjected to shared equipment and sub-standard sound quality at American festivals. "Underground metal is where it is because it's not meant for everyone, not everyone can appreciate it," maintains Chrissy Gulczynski, a.k.a. Lady Enslain, a 'zine publisher, concert promoter and budding record label executive who makes it to the festival annually at metal fests in Ohio, Texas, Massachusetts and Wisconsin. "Not everyone can understand the art behind it," she continues. "I'm sure that the scene will get stronger, to where tours can support themselves, but I think that getting too big for itself would be metal's downfall."

Corpse paint-clad Immortal — the most anticipated of Meltdown's performers by far — concludes its blistering 45-minute-set somewhere in the wee hours of Sunday morning. Sweaty,

pumped-up boys in brand-new Mortician shirts vacate the garbage-strewn hall, pouring out into the puke-stained parking lot (vomit snack, anyone?) where they'll mill around some more until their hearing returns, then maybe scope out the all-night beer blasts at the heavy metal motel across the street. Jasmin and Sharlee are nowhere to be found. Several hours later a cleanup crew has eradicated any trace of beer cups, smelly boys, crushed hot dog buns, discarded band flyers, rolled-up 'zines, ignored demo tapes — because Baptist church services and bible-study classes resume on Sunday morning at the Expo Center. There's not a chance in hell the God-fearing Christians of Pennsauken would have stood for Impaled Nazarene's sacrilegious set the night before. But they'll pray in the same room. ■