

METAL DETECTOR

The Melvins (left-right): Coady Willis, Jared Warren, Buzz Osbourne, Dale Crover. Or possibly Elvis Presley



Heavier than metal but never wishing to be classified as such, The Melvins are loved by everyone from Monster Magnet to Mastodon. Jerry Ewing reveals why.

The Melvins are, quite simply, the granddaddies of alt-rock, a fact reinforced by the patronage of one Kurt Cobain (both Melvins and Kurt hail from the outskirts of Seattle). Despite this, and despite the fact that, at the height of the grunge boom, Atlantic Records swiftly picked up the band (and dropped them just as swiftly), they've never truly received the commercial acclaim their critical plaudits once suggested. Even today, with a seemingly interminable slew of albums to their name, they're harder than ever to get your head around.

The Melvins formed at Montesano High School in Washington in the early 80s. The original line-up of Buzz Osbourne (guitar/vocals), Matt Lukin (bass) and Mike Dillard (drums) began life as a covers band performing Who and Hendrix tracks before the influence of hardcore punk crept into the band's music. Mike left, replaced by Dale Crover, and the band developed their trademark sound of slow, ponderously heavy music (think Black Flag meets Black Sabbath). The band's early years were spent honing their sound and playing gigs in their local area, where a young Kurt Cobain would help them shift their gear (he also allegedly auditioned to join the band on bass but didn't get the gig).

The Melvins' first recorded material appeared on a Washington compilation for C/Z Records, 'Deep Six', in 1985. A year later they released their own 'Six Songs' (later 'Eight Songs', '10 Songs' and finally '26 Songs') on the same label. 'Gluey Porch Treatments', their full-length debut, appeared in 1986. Buzz and Dale moved to San Francisco in 1988, but not before Matt had quit to form Mudhoney and Dale had drummed on an early Nirvana 10-song demo. He'd later fill in for a drummer-less Nirvana on tour with Sonic Youth, while it was Buzz who suggested Kurt check out Dave Grohl.

With the grunge/alt scene beginning to whip up a storm, Melvins toured the UK, their sound becoming more drone-orientated all the time. The band paid homage to Kiss by releasing three solo EPs in 1992, akin to the Kiss members' 1978 solo ventures (Gene Simmons actually played with the band at 1993's Lollapalooza Festival), and in 1992 their friendship with Nirvana paid off when they signed to Atlantic Records. They would go on to release 'Houdini' (1993), 'Stoner Witch' (1994) and 'Stag' in 1996, before finally Atlantic owned up to not knowing how to market a decent alt-rock band and dropped them in 1997.

Undeterred, the Melvins simply returned to doing things as they had

before, signing with Amphetamine Reptile for 1997's 'Honky' and toured with Tool, before the band signed with Mike Patton's Ipecac label in 1999, releasing 'The Maggot' and 'The Crybaby' in 1999 and 'The Bootlicker' in 2000. Ipecac has also released much of the band's back catalogue aside from the three Atlantic albums, although Atlantic released 'Melvinmania: The Best Of The Atlantic Years 1993-1996' without the band's consent or help.

Of late, the band have collaborated with various artists as well as continuing to release their own material. Buzz plays in Mike Patton's Fantômas while the Melvins hooked up with ambient artist Lustmord for 2004's 'Pigs Of The Roman Empire'. In 2005 they worked with Dead Kennedy's mainman Jello Biafra on 'You Can't Breathe What You Can't See' and toured with the latter. The band, who released '(A) Senile Animal' in 2006 have recently joined forces with members of Big Business and are rumoured to be collaborating with ZU.

The Melvins remain one of the most enduring and engaging alternative metal bands, as well as the most hard-working and popular. Although not with Anal Cunt, who poked fun at the band in the song 'When I Think Of True Punk Rock Bands I Think Of Nirvana And The Melvins'. Ouch!

THE ALBUMS



PRICK [AMPHETAMINE REPTILE, 1994]

A joke too far

Although the band were signed to Atlantic at the time, 'Prick' was released on Amphetamine Reptile Records, to whom the band would sign when Atlantic dropped them in 1997, and this highlights the fact that the band were already experiencing problems with the label. Although Melvins always felt 'Prick' was a bit of fun, it was also released to gain funding for the 'Stoner Witch' sessions as money was clearly not forthcoming from the band's new label. It's a hotch-potch collection, ranging from plain goofiness ('Underground' was the sound of Tube buskers recorded in London, while 'Pure Digital Silence' was just that!), the odd live moment and some weird jams ('Montreal' mixed feedback with some drums and 'Pick It N'Flick It' is basically one OTT metal guitar solo). The band's name appeared in reverse on the cover to avoid contractual hassles with Atlantic.



GLUEY PORCH TREATMENTS [BONER, 1987]

A strong start

This, the Melvins' first full-length offering, is somewhat impenetrable for the new fan, yet way more accessible than some of the material the band have released in the last decade and serves as a perfect primer for what Melvins were all about... which is drone/stoner metal with a more alternative viewpoint. The material on this album is slow and heavy. That's slow and heavy in the Saint Vitus slow and heavy mould. 'Eye Flies' and 'Exact Paperbacks' would delight any fan of the sludgiest metal, while the occasional speeding up of the tempo displayed the band's love of hardcore. A passion for Kiss rears its head on 'Bitten Into Sympathy' and 'Leech' was an old Green River (early Stone Gossard/Jeff Ament band) song, reinforcing the band's grunge connection. Matt Lukin headed for Mudhoney after this album, which was reissued on Ipecac in 1999 with an additional 11 demo tracks.

THE DVD

Rather astonishingly for a band with as many live offerings as Melvins, only one visual document is to be found within their vast and often confusing body of work, and that is 1992's bizarrely titled 'Salad Of A Thousand Days'. It was originally released on VHS through the Box Dog Video label (it finally surfaced on DVD in 2003). Recorded at a May 1991 Melvins show at the North Shore Surf Club in Olympia, Washington, it's almost a home gig for the band and the somewhat shaky concert footage very much gives the impression of a personal home video. The band would have been touring on the back of 1991's 'Bullhead' and the bulk of the material therefore comes from that album. As for the DVD extras,

there's some footage from another gig and an early Melvins promo video, and it's all carried off with that vaguely disinterested air that the band have very much made their own.

