

Sinister Seven: Unconventional Metal Journalist- At-Large Bill Zebub

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I’m not sure anyone can lay claim to championing extreme forms of metal as much as gonzo journalist/incurable metalhead Bill Zebub can. His quarterly print and online magazine, *The Grimoire of Exalted Deeds*, showcases his unorthodox, often-hilarious approach to music journalism, backed by a series of low-budget, investigative documentaries such as *Pagan Metal*, *Metal Retardation*, *Metalheads: the Good, the Bad and the Evil* and similarly-fuelled horror flicks such as *Jesus Christ: Serial Rapist*, *Dolla Morte* and *Assmonster*. Also the host of a New Jersey radio show (under the moniker Professor Dum Dum), Zebub’s latest doc *Death Metal: Are We Watching You Die?* explores the current state of death metal by interviewing some of the genre’s biggest bands, including members of Cannibal Corpse, Cradle of Filth, Mayhem, Krisiun, Theatre of Tragedy, Marduk and many more. Recently, we got the man himself on the goat horn and staged a dark discussion of our own – something we like to call The Sinister Seven!

1. Why have you dedicated so much of your life to celebrating and investigating metal?

Metal has always stimulated my imagination. As the years passed, there were many new forms of metal that sent me into other worlds. It can be said that, no matter what the mood is, there is a metal style that answers the call. As for “investigating” metal, it just came naturally. I’m a person who indulges his curiosity. The earliest memory that springs to mind is when I bought Melissa by Mercyful Fate. The back of it had a phone number that was actually King Diamond’s – when he lived in Denmark. I called one night and woke him out of a sound sleep. I was young so I didn’t know about the

time difference between our countries. But King answered all of my questions. He’s been respectful of fans since he first started. By the way, my questions weren’t about what kind of food he likes to eat. They were very insightful questions that I later asked him when I started the magazine. My interest in his music led me to be involved in the remastering of all the Mercyful Fate and King Diamond albums – you’ll see me listed as co-producer. And when *Abigail* was released as a special edition that included a DVD, I wrote the liner notes for that. If someone had told me, when I was in high school, that I would have accomplished all that, I would have laughed in disbelief.

2. How many bands do you estimate you’ve interviewed over the years and who surprised you the most?

I honestly can’t estimate. I had several radio shows before I started the magazine, and I have a radio show now. I’ve been surprised quite a lot, but usually in a good way. Ronnie James Dio was supposed to be a dick, and so was the singer from Manowar, but they were ultra-cool, and I actually feel very bad for being as naughty as I was. You see, when a band was too revered, usually for the wrong reasons, I would go on the attack. And of course, when everyone hates a band, I defend them. You saw that in my death metal documentary. In the early days when Cradle of Filth was huge in the American scene, I loved to wage war against [singer] Dani Filth – comically-speaking, of course. But these days it’s quite common to see people mock Dani, so I gave him a very respectful interview for the documentary. It worked, because quite a lot of viewers told me that they had no idea that Dani was so cool, or that he was down-to-earth. But I suppose that you want a bit more of a socking answer, so I will tell you about Malevolent Creation. When I first interviewed [guitarist] Phil Fasciana, his record label told me that his album was being returned by lots of people and that Phil was being called a Nazi. It was because one of his songs contained the word “nigger” – I don’t see how that makes him a Nazi, but Americans aren’t really that educated. Anyway, I decided to address that in the interview, and Phil was amazingly cool and funny. He didn’t act defensive. He acted like a totally well-adjusted person who was not fake-upset over mere words. I have to say that when I see someone get PUBLICLY outraged, I am suspicious of that person. Think about it. Ok, before I go on too much about that, let me just say that the interview was hilarious, and I had great respect for Phil. When his next album came out, I interviewed him again. He wasn’t the same. What I didn’t know was that he was trying to hint to me to lay off the racial humor, but he knew that when I publish interviews, it’s in a dialogue form in which you see the question and then you see the answer, and I don’t edit a single thing. So if he asked me to please stop asking those questions, the reader would see him acting like a pussy. What I didn’t know was that Malevolent Creation had problems when they toured Europe because of the hype about the dreaded racial slur. I wonder why Germans didn’t act like that during WWII? It’s kind of funny for a country that was so anti-other-people to all of a sudden have bleeding heart liberals. Where were they when people were getting killed for being of a certain ethnicity? Sorry for the tangent. Anyway, you have to hear the audio of that interview. It’s priceless! He was really under a lot of pressure. But I still don’t believe that it’s as bad as he told me. I mean, I later found out that his record label lied about the albums being returned. Only ONE person did that, and that person was white. But it made a good story, right? Anyway, years later Malevolent Creation got signed to Nuclear Blast, and we did another interview, and the old Phil was back. The very first thing he said to me was, “What’s up, nigger?” So it was an interview of total madness, with as many racial jokes as we could cram in there. I published it right away on my site and alerted the publicist at the record label, and he flipped. I was asked to take it down, which I would never do. Besides, when something appears on the Internet it will never truly disappear. The people at the record label were nuts. Phil left a message on my answering machine that Nuclear Blast was thinking about dropping the band. I calmly told the record label people that I have been doing racial humour forever, and that the interview was no big deal. I know it’s hard to believe when you are brainwashed, but that whole hysteria is just a public fiction, not a private reality. And I really think that you have to be as stupid as a nigger to be offended by racial humour...(that was a joke, by the way).



3. In *Death Metal: Are We Watching You Die?*, you seem to suggest the genre’s current vitality in the face of downloading’s erosion of record sales is seriously being threatened, but so long as the mainstream keeps churning out shiny, pop turds, won’t there always be death metal to maintain balance in the musical universe?

People don’t listen to death metal because it’s an alternative to mainstream music. Something in you must resonate with it. You can’t be taught to like it. You either do, or you don’t. I love the more atmospheric and intensely sad forms – collectively called “doom” – but a lot of people who like the aggressive sort of death metal don’t understand why I love doom so much. Many bands don’t make a living from the music. They have other jobs. Many people I talk to are in bands primarily because of their love for the music. Even bands as well known as Immolation laugh when I ask them about royalties and such. It’s a costly hobby, if you don’t mind me calling it that. I think that people like that are far less affected by downloading because they just want to participate in this special scene. They aren’t motivated by money. But the fact is that it costs money to put out albums and to tour. When people aren’t buying albums then record labels don’t recover the money that was invested in the recording. Less money becomes available to bands, and albums might not sound as good. There is less money for advertising and promotion, so less magazines find out about the albums and the artists. And that’s another point – when record labels have less money to spend on ads, magazines start losing money. Within the past five years, over a dozen metal magazines died. Let’s end this on a positive note: if you love a band, buy the music. If you are going to download stuff for free, do it for bands that aren’t your favourite. And most importantly, go buy a ticket for a show when a band tours through your area. I put my money where my mouth is. I can get into any show for free, but I buy tickets. I only get in free when I am working on a documentary or for my magazine – they wouldn’t let me in with recording equipment otherwise. But I make up for it by buying a few T-shirts from the merch table.

4. *Are there any frontiers left for extreme metal?*

I would say so. When I first got into the music, there was no doom. There were Sabbath type bands, yes. Candlemass really showed the power of playing at a slow tempo, but bands have since redefined what “slow” actually means. Bands like Esoteric, Shape of Despair, and early Funeral were extreme, but not in the way that you would think. It’s a highly creative musical scene, so there is much left to hybridize. Therion brought orchestral instruments and opera singers into metal, and Elend brought tortured, anguished, death metal vocals into opera. Tempos have gone both ultra-slow and ultra-fast. Some bands tried to go as low as possible, some had two bass players, some infused countless riffs into their songs and had time-changes every other bar. A lot had been done, and there is a lot left to do, but even if not a new idea ever emerges, it’s a sweet life when you drive in the metal lane.

5. *Most death metal bands incorporate horror elements into their imagery, but which bands, in your opinion, really walk the walk (maybe even scared you)?*

Would you ever ask if there is a horror director who walks the walk? I think that the brilliant lyricists as well as horror writers are people who are using their imagination to great effect. Maybe it’s a form of sublimation – venting your negative energy in a way that doesn’t actually hurt someone – or maybe it’s just indulging in the forbidden. It seems that the people who have the most brutal lyrics are usually the friendliest. I haven’t been afraid of anyone, but none of these people have tried to scare me. As for the music, that’s a different story. The band Esoteric have a double CD titled *The Maniacal Vale*. The first song on disc one is “Circle” – it’s over twenty minutes long. It’s kryptonite to me. I can’t listen

to it around other people. I have to hear it on headphones, in a dark room, with eyes closed. It’s richly layered with so many sonic elements. It’s sad and magical and scary. When I listen to it, I feel as if the demons that have invisibly followed me have come to bring me to their world. With closed eyes, I see wondrous landscapes. The voices are deep and menacing, yet melancholy. I feel like I am dying when I hear it. Actually, I may use it for a death scene in [my upcoming comedy film] *Rap Sucks*. But the earliest memory of getting scared was when I heard Mercyful Fate’s “Satan’s Fall” for the first time. It was like a metal opera – evil, beautiful, and with a sort of story-flow. Almost none of the riffs repeated. It seemed to be the metal equivalent to opera for me, at least at that time. While other people were listening to glam and praising 3-riff songs, I was haunting myself with metal that broke all rules.



6. You seem to share a real warm rapport with a lot of the bands you’ve interviewed and have become somewhat of an institution yourself in the genre. How does it feel to have become a fixture by simply dedicating yourself to something you love so much?

It’s actually funny that you say that because I was just forwarded a review of *Metal Retardation*. The girl had never heard of me before, and she is not a metalhead. She was given the DVD because no one else who works for the mag likes metal, and she seemed to be the only person who could tolerate it. She spent much of the time criticizing me for not knowing that the ARTIST is the star of the interview, not ME. How little she knows. I don’t mean that in an arrogant way, it’s just that I have accidentally become famous for being a fool during interviews. A lot of the interviews make you feel like you are watching a hidden-camera show. I released *Metal Retardation* to show fans what it’s really like when I interview people. When I first started the magazine, other journalists despised me. Some of them wrote furiously, condemning me and predicting that I would never get anywhere with my stupid style. Well, I am still writing and they are not. I am known, and they are not. That kind of peer-hatred diminished after *The Grimoire* beat all other [death metal] magazines in print-run and distribution but it’s coming back now. When I send out my documentaries and *Metal Retardation* for review, many of the reviewers don’t know about me and they make the same kind of remarks I had heard in the early days. So expect to see a lot of Bill-bashing when you Google my titles. I don’t blame a lot of people for hating my documentaries because I don’t make them for beginners and I don’t make them in a pretentious way. I don’t have a narrator because the ARTISTS are the experts. They don’t need to have their ideas re-worded by someone who has a better speaking voice but who is not in the scene. I also don’t see a point in asking for a huge budget to fly me to various countries and to book studio time for lush sets. An artist would say the same words whether he’s on a tour bus or in a castle. Plus, it’s METAL to just DO IT. Do it then and there. That’s why my documentaries are less than \$12. I made them to be SEEN, not to rot on a store shelf because they cost \$25 and have all of the juicy non-PC stuff removed.

7. How does metal inspire you as a filmmaker?

When I do the “theatre-of-the-mind” thing, listening to music with my eyes closed, a story sometimes gets born. That happened with the Esoteric song, “Circle.” But I also like to use metal in my movies. A lot of reviewers hate my movies for that reason. I also know that some fans of my movies don’t like metal. It’s just too bad. I have had to tolerate a lot of really aggravating music when I watched movies. So it’s payback time. But more than that, metal is a big part of me, and as an artist I want to express that in whatever I do. Right now, I can do as I wish because I fund all of my movies. But I know that when I make movies for investors, I will probably not be able to use as much metal as I would like. Last summer I had several meetings with a producer who wanted to sign me to a three-movie deal, and one of the first questions he asked was, “You don’t plan to use metal music in the soundtrack, do you?” In the end, I rejected the offer, but not for that reason. I have recently proposed a different investment model to him, and that is still in negotiation, but it looks like it will be my first movie without metal, if it comes to pass. So you see, I am not a zealot. But I do love it, and even if I am forbidden to use it, I am still inspired by it. I am furious about the mainstream exalting rap, which has lyrics

that are so bad that an impartial reader would judge them to have been written by a retard. Compare any rap lyrics to any of the Shakespearean lyrics of Theatre of Tragedy from the *Velvet Darkness They Fear* album and you will see the stark contrast in intellect. Yet, mainstream society dismisses the music in favour of the noise that was made by simpletons. In the words of Elend, “I am the field when pain is the seed.”

For more on Bill Zebub’s many projects and The Grimoire of Exalted Deeds magazine, check out www.billzebug.com and www.thegrimoire.com.



1 Comment »

1. Comment by [Dave](#) — April 23, 2010 @ 6:52 pm

Note to self: get outlandish viking hat.

Awesome!

Welcome to the Abattoir, Trevor.

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