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Rat Skates

Rat Skates was the drummer in Overkill and recently put out a great DVD, "Born in the Basement" and I recently got him on the phone for this chat about the DVD and his time in Overkill.

MC: Rat what inspired you to put out this excellent DVD that you recently put out?

RS: The inspiration really came from working on "Get Thrashed", which I had been working on in the background for almost 4 years. As I had been working on it, I was going through all of my personal things and realized I had saved EVERYTHING that I had been working on when I was building Overkill including Lori's photos, videos, t-shirt designs, flyers, press kit stuff, merchandise, rehearsal tapes, track reels from the studio and everything you could imagine. I saved so much stuff I couldn't even fit all of it into "Born in the Basement." On "Get Thrashed" we had a ton of fan contributions and that is what really made it happen. Meanwhile I had all this other stuff, and as I was looking through it all it really hit me like " hey, I forgot about a lot of this and how all of the other major thrash bands had members who were DIY (doing it yourself) guys like me." So I am looking at it and thinking, "I should do a bonus piece for Get Thrashed". This culture really grew out of just finding a way to do all of this stuff cause we believed so much in the music that we were playing. We were all thinking the same way; we just didn't have any resources. One thing led to another, and as I'm putting together this bonus piece I said, "I am going to see if I can make my own feature about our DIY attitude", plus I have an enormous history with Overkill. Basically, it was about 8 years of history that has never, ever been told or shown. I feel the fans deserve this because Overkill fans are some of the most devoted headbangers ever. The DVD that they put out a few years ago was terrible in that respect and also pretty boring because they didn't tell or show any of the history behind the band...that is probably because I'm the only one who has all that stuff. I would have been more than happy to help them with it, but nobody contacted me. So I figured let me just do this, it is a really cool story and I can integrate everything together, the history of Overkill, what I did to get us established, the club scene, the DIY thing...but, how the thrash movement was evolving as far as we were thinking was my main thing. Doing that, and having creative control gave me the freedom to do something outside of "Get Thrashed"; which turned out great and I'm glad I worked on it...you see, where "Get Thrashed" explains more of the factual history of thrash for the "new school" and how it evolved from point A to point Z, my film "Born In The Basement" is a little more adventurous...it shows more of the "off the wall", old school mindset, like the "just go for it, I don't care what anybody thinks" kind of attitude, so that is what I did and obviously from a musician's point of view.

MC: Do you have any other plans on putting any other DVD's out?



RS: Yeah, actually I have quite a few big plans. Although I am not sure which is going to materialize first. Are you referring to music like DVDs?

MC: Yes

(At this point Rat had me turn off the tape recorder and he told me about a project that he can't reveal yet, but if it goes through I'll be one of those that is loving life ha ha-chris)

MC: Now for those who don't know, give my readers a little history about yourself.

RS: In 1979 I was friends with D.D. Verni and he and I put together Overkill from the Lubricants which was a punk band that we had in high school. As our music went more metal, Overkill evolved. D.D. was always my partner; he was with me doing all of this stuff. The thrash movement on the east and west coast was born out of only a handful of people. They were the guys that were really motivating this scene and its' culture, some of them you will see in my DVD. The thrash thing was a new genre of music and a new way of thinking about playing Judas Priest and Black Sabbath songs with a hardcore influence. Every band, and you can take the top 10 most well known old thrash bands, each had like one guy who was the motivator and the "go to" guy who was really running their show more or less. That was mostly Kerry King, Lars, myself, Scott and Danny Lilker, etc. at the time in Anthrax and there were certain guys who were REALLY at the forefront of pushing this stuff. The big misconception about thrash was that the word didn't appear until 1985 or 1986 or something. It started as early as 1980 and 1981 cause that was when Overkill and Metallica were starting to form and so was Slayer. We were just finding our way. That is where I come from.

MC: For those who don't know, what did you do after you left Overkill?

RS: I got off the road and what I did was what I really wanted to do, raise a family. I got completely out of the music business more or less in 1992 after my band Bomb Squad was about to get signed. I left cause I was mad, fed up with the music industry, the scene and everything. I started getting involved in production work and I taught drums and percussion for a while, for like 5 to 7 years something like that. I just did other things. I mean I did the thrash metal thing and I was happy with what I did. I was pretty satisfied with the level we achieved and so it was time for me to move on to other things.

MC: Do you know if any of the members of Overkill have seen either DVD yet?

RS: Yes they have.

MC: Are they happy with it as far as you know?

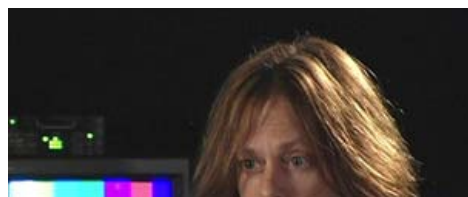
RS: That I couldn't tell ya. They should be happy. The DVD is called "Rat Skates...Born in the Basement." It is not called "Overkill...Born in the Basement." Overkill was the band that I was getting established and putting on the map. They were part of that. I couldn't NOT put them in it and tell the story correctly, although they sure jumped over me fast in that thing they put out...I was pretty insulted by that. I left them set up with a great business, it's a shame they couldn't ever take it any further...I was managing everything at that time...although DD was doing some things too, at least when his girlfriend wasn't complaining about something or another. So I'm the only one who has all of the earliest material, and the only one who could release this stuff, I told the band's history in the correct way, and the fans...who are MY fans as well...deserve it...and if I hadn't busted my ass all those years, three other people probably would never have had any career in music. The tree don't grow without the root! So, whether THEY are happy or not is meaningless to me...maybe that question should be reversed.

MC: Looking back what are some of your personal highlights playing with Overkill?

RS: The highlights for me were, in the early and mid 80's everything at some point involved drinking beer with your buddies, it was part of our everyday routine. I am speaking for all the bands in saying that nobody really went onstage and really played drunk. There may have been a few accidents here and there but it was really more of a mindset. There was just a lot of beer drinking going on and there are some unbelievably funny road stories based on everybody's antics after the shows; being completely tanked and just having what we thought was harmless fun and stuff. If you look at any early pictures of any band there is just beer everywhere. We

should have been sponsored by Budweiser at that point. The thing that was really memorable to me, the first really big European thrash tour was Anthrax and Overkill, called "The Metal Hammer Road Show". We were really the first thrash act to go over to Germany and parts of Europe at that time, even though there was a pathetic budget behind the whole thing between Megaforce and Metal Hammer magazine. Agent Steel was also on the bill. We all shared a bus, and everything was stripped down, we had to save money. Even though it was "hey big bands coming to Europe" it was still a low budget operation. The thing that strikes me even to this day as the most bizarre thing you can imagine is the fact when we traveled through some of these areas of Europe we didn't stay in hotels, we stayed in people's houses! An actual Germany family's home; we slept in their bedrooms and had our breakfast at their breakfast table in their house. They were mostly like farm kind of families and stuff. That was because in some of the areas we were traveling there wasn't a Comfort Inn or Best Western, etc. So being that their economy was nothing like the US, they would offer to put people up in their houses. I am sure they got compensated for it, but I am sure not much. It was just wild sleeping in someone's bedroom. I am sleeping in some German kid's bedroom. Now I don't know where the kid is, and I see pictures of his family and all this personal stuff around. There were some families that couldn't speak any English at all, and it was like being in "The Twilight Zone. The people were very nice and they drink warm beer over there. All the bands in '85 and '86 did this; those houses were your hotels and you just went there to find a place to sleep.

MC: I know we were talking about Lamour's up in Brooklyn before we started this interview and Overkill was my 1st show there at that now legendary club. What are some memories you have of playing there?





RS: Lamour was, and I told you this earlier, the greatest thing about Lamour was that people knew that they were gonna see an act there with integrity. It was gonna be a good band and a good show. Lamour booked a lot of bands and they took a lot of chances bringing in bands from Europe and everywhere, they weren't even sure if they were gonna be able to sell the room or not. The greatest thing was the fact that you were gonna see a quality show there and they were the only place that was bringing in, like say Possessed, who you were talking about before. They really didn't make many other stops on the east coast. For the metalheads like yourself, that was the place to be. That is where Anthrax and Overkill broke out of. Our audience more than quadrupled after playing there. The other great thing was, and I am sure you remember this fact yourself, everywhere you looked, you pretty much knew everybody...that was cool.

MC: Exactly.

RS: There were nights a friend would say "you want to check out so and so at Lamour's ?" I would go there broke, come home drunk and have eaten at a nice Diner. Everybody would come up and say "hey Rat have a beer" ...I never spent any money, saw a great show and got drunk! (laughs)

MC: Looking back how would you rate yourself as a drummer?

RS: I would rate myself as I competent thrash drummer. I think I was a different kind of drummer than a lot of the other drummers who are labeled as thrash drummers. You couldn't at that time just grow up to be a thrash metal drummer because we were still inventing that style. Every day was something new and different, it evolved into thrash playing. Dave Lombardo and I kinda talked about this a lot because as a drummer you think in terms of technique and you love your instrument. Every musician wants to impress another musician...that's the nature of playing and that's a good thing. If you're a guitar player, you say to yourself I just played this kick ass lead...the other guys are gonna freak out. Same with drummers. Dave came from a little more Black Flag and Dead Kennedy's kinda playing and I came from more of a few years earlier punk style of playing. It's the approach and the "go for it" kind of recklessness of playing that I think helped all the bands; making us more "thrashy" would be the word. The punk drummers just played, they didn't have too much of a refined technique, but their power, and the speed they played at and the attitude was so reckless it was great, and it really inspired us. As far as my drumming goes, I preferred technique over anything and I respect drummers who play musically and do the right things for the song. That is what I tried to do and I think I did a pretty good job in Overkill...I took riffs, parts, lyrics and arranged them into songs that made sense. I think Lars to this day is a very average drummer, but musically the parts he plays and his musicianship have always been great. I think Kirk Arrington from Metal Church was fantastic. But again, there are a ton of great players, but a comparatively small percentage of good songwriters.

MC: Do you think if the bands of yesterday, such as Overkill, had the technology of today that things might have been different for you?

RS: I don't think Overkill would have gotten any bigger even if there was technology. I think what has limited Overkill's success is that ... at the end of the day it all comes down to one thing and it is your song writing...if the songs are strong enough that is what is going to ultimately dictate your level of success. At the time, the Overkill records I played on, and some of this is my fault, you see that Overkill started out as being VERY influenced by Maiden and the NWOBHM stuff. I was also listening to a lot of hardcore and going to the shows and so we ended up doing "Fuck You" by DOA all because I had introduced them to hardcore. The thing Overkill straightened out after I left was the fact that every band had to find their identity. In the 80's there was a lot of things in one pot and these things were being stirred as was your musicianship, the speed at which we were playing, the heaviness and all of that, so of course you had stuff like SOD (Stormtroopers of Death). This was a very important record to me because of how heavy it was, how metal it was and how hardcore it was all at the same time. The best thing about it was it took that satanic stuff like Slayer was doing and it was the complete opposite of that. It was funny stuff. With Overkill, a great example, from "Taking Over" is this song called "Fear His Name" which is a real Manowar kind of song. It is about the battlefield and that whole fantasy type vibe, traditional metal and then you have a song called "Use Your Head" about getting a blow job or "Fatal If Swallowed"...at some point fans are like "what is this band about?" Are they about funny humorous stuff or are they really serious on an evil, darker side? They did straighten it out a few years later and they decided to go with the crowd, the crowd being the pentagram-type, evil, skull thing, done and done so many times, and I didn't want the band going in that direction at all. I was disappointed when I left cause I think Overkill could have been big, but at that point that had to get straightened out as far as the identity thing; everyone was going in different directions. I was into the hardcore stuff, Bobby was a James Hetfield clone at that point and D.D wanted to be Slayer and Blitz always just followed what me and DD did. My vision for the band was that I wanted Overkill to have the disposition and the lyricism of Motorhead...Lemmy's "poetry" and musically a cross between the 1st couple of Mercyful Fate and Iron Maiden records. It would have been an interesting combination if you can imagine that. I was really into hardcore so I was probably the one who was screwing that up. I don't think the technology would have helped us out at all. Metallica is where they are at today cause they wrote great songs, period.

MC: If you still go to shows, do you get recognized by any old school fans at all?

RS: Absolutely and I am surprised. (laughs) Some people say I haven't aged much and I don't necessarily feel that way at times, but I do still get recognized. We had a "Get Thrashed" screening last night in the Village in NY and there were over 200 people there, it was unreal! Signing autographs again was cool. I got to take it while I can get it!

MC: Do you ever see any of your old stuff on Ebay at all or get to sign any of that old stuff?

RS: Yeah sometimes people that saved stuff show it to me and it's all this really souvenir type of stuff. Thrash people are very intense and

passionate type of people and they are always saving shit too. I think it's great that people saved things. On www.ratskates.com we put a whole bunch of stuff from the EP and people should check this out. I put the original cover, it wasn't supposed to be black, there was a picture on it and it had a whole sleeve inside with a "thanks to" list, etc. It is in the "Xeroxed" section of my site, it's all really cool, classic stuff from "the day".

MC: Do you have a favorite Overkill song and album that you played on?

RS: Yes. The best song Overkill ever did was a song called "The Answer" and that is on the EP, and I think 'Feel The Fire' was the best record. 'Taking Over' I was disappointed in, not necessarily musically, but the production. Nobody knows this, but you and this is the 1st time I am telling this (cool a metal core exclusive ha ha), when SOD got out of the studio it changed everything because Scott found a guitar sound that everyone wanted, including Slayer, (they told me that). Everyone wanted that sound that Scott got. Now we recorded in the same studio, same people (Anthrax/SOD); all Megaforce shared the same kind of studio, and we tried to make a statement, "alright. let's set the new standard in heavy" so we layered the guitar like 20 times and used up so many frequencies, low to high, like all known bandwidth...it sounds like shit cause the guitar was so fat, unnecessarily fat, that it choked out where other instruments should be. I mean, the drums on that record I am very disappointed in, you cannot hear them. I said to everyone "you know that the snare and kick drums are what drives the music. Listen to these other bands, listen to Slayer, don't you here the bass drum and snare popping through? We can't hear that, you know, the guitar is too fat." So it came out sounding like that, and the record right after I left had a nice clean drum sound...one album too late. There is no reason you should not be able to hear every instrument that everyone is playing, that's just a basic...less is more. I really liked the way Kirk's drums sat in the mix on the Metal Church record, I said "this is how it should sound..." They finally realized this, after I left, and even brought in Metal Church's producer, Terry Date, to produce their record...so I guess my influence lasted for a while, I also wanted to record "I'm Against it", from the Ramones...I guess they were keeping notes.

MC: My favorite record from Overkill is also 'Feel the Fire' and I think that is one of the best thrash records hands down.



RS: And Chris, you know what is interesting about 'Feel The Fire' is that every early thrash record...and you can take all of them, whether it was "Killing is My Business" or "Kill Em All" or whatever it is...everyone has a totally different sound because at that time nobody really knew how to record that stuff yet, cause it was so heavy and fast and there was so much going on...there was no breathing room. It took up until like 1988 to about '91 for engineers and producers to really understand how to record and produce correctly a thrash record. That was when all of the bands started getting a similar sound and that point thrash started getting generic because all the bands were selling most of their records in around '89-'90, and there were so many thrash bands and all had pretty much similar sounds and people ultimately said "where is the identity in this stuff anymore?"

RS: In your opinion what do you think caused the demise of thrash metal? Do you think it was the grunge scene coming in?

RS: I don't think it was the grunge scene. Grunge didn't kill the thrash scene, I think that grunge was there and people turned to it because they were looking for something different. I think what killed the thrash scene was the identity of all the bands got too generic and too lost and mixed together, just like I was just telling you with the similar sounds you know. Ultimately on a thrash record there was a certain speed everyone reached, really fast double bass and a lot of productions sounded awfully the same on a lot of these records. Guitar sound sounded the same. A lot of bands said, "How can we get the Metallica sound? Or get Scott and Danny Lilker's sound on the SOD record?" And that was it. Everyone wanted that and when everyone kind of got that, everyone sounded the same and the songwriting changed a lot and became very riff oriented, which metal is always riff oriented, I am not saying that is a bad thing, but the song writing became "is this a good song or is it just a good riff?" To this day in Overkill's songs... there are some interesting riffs, but the songs sound forced together. It came down to, "is this a really good song from start to finish does this make sense? Does it go anywhere and does it have any dynamics?" That is what I think changed it. People were taking the song writing aspect and trading it in a lot for just playing really fast and really heavy and not stepping back, away from your instrument, and paying attention to the SONG. That is my opinion and I think people turned to grunge as an alternative, kinda saying this is all the same, and Metallica had already turned into another direction, which I respect them for.

MC: I think what also killed thrash was these major labels stepping in and signing some bad bands and dropping them when they didn't sell a ton of records.

RS: Right. I firmly think there is a big interest in the 80's thrash scene and this resurgence and interest because we came from the school of Black Sabbath, Judas Priest and Iron Maiden and who were writing songs and there was some melody there and we just stepped that up. We had something that was heavy and we had actually had good songs and whether or not you liked Joey Belladonna, he sang and had melody. James (Hetfield) is a phenomenal singer and so is Tom Araya, he really can use his voice and it wasn't just about screaming through the whole song. The current bands, bands like Shadow's Fall, Slipknot, etc, they were influenced with what we did in the 80's, but we had pretty much mutilated most of the melody in metal at that point (laughs), but we had stepped everything up to such an intense level, so if they are gonna step it up from there, I think your kind of at a wall, where do you go? With nothing but screaming through your whole record, there's no contrast anymore...metal's going to come back to melody and songwriting again, mark my words.

MC: Look at Pantera when they were together.

RS: Today, the screaming and everyone tuning the guitar lower...I mean sonically, metal is at such a extreme now... I don't know where you can go. Looking back at thrash it is actually refreshing cause there is actually songs underlining all that. People today might say "ah fuck that shit, it has to be heavy." I guess this is just my opinion as musician...I'll take the old school hardcore style of guitar playing over drop-tuning anyday.

MC: Oh before I let you go what places other than the website can people check you out on?

RS: www.ratskates.com. Yeah, on MySpace there is a Rat Skates account and there is a "Born In The Basement" account... I stay away from MySpace, but you can go and view some things there. The DVD is also on www.amazon.com and we just signed a worldwide distribution deal with MVD, who is the best in the business...it will be in the stores in December.

MC: Oh before I let you go do you remember a show you played at City Gardens with Venom and Black Flag?

RS: Yes.

MC: I was at that show.

RS: I think that was a great show and I think that was the 1st time that I had ever played there, but I had been there before. Those were just great times and it was great mixing crowds like that. There were some fights and some stupid shit, but ultimately everyone started to figure out "hey we're really all about the same thing", at some point at the end of the day, everybody just wanted to thrash around whether that meant mosh, stagedive or headbang, It doesn't matter if you're a skinhead or you had hair down to your ass...were still a unity of powerful people who just want to go nuts. By the way Chris, is this for a publication or a website?

MC: Well it used to be a publication and now it is a webzine so to speak.

RS: I really appreciate you doing this.

MC: Rat is was great talking to you...I am a big fan of the older Overkill stuff and the DVD is awesome.

RS: Thanks again Chris, and keep up the great work!

www.ratskates.com

www.myspace.com/borninthebasement

www.myspace.com/ratskates