

Born In The Basement Kundrat Productions

Though OverKill is, in the grand scheme of today's metal hierarchy, an "underground" thrash band, just about everyone into this music knows who they are. Elder statesmen supreme, OverKill — like Motörhead, Slayer and Megadeth — just keep on coming, no matter what the trends throw their way. Though they never reached the worldwide fame of their aforementioned peers, there's no doubt that OverKill has always commanded a large respect among those in the know. Reliable with each album they've churned out, the remaining core of the band, D.D. Verni and Bobby "Blitz" Ellsworth are content with their identity as speed metal lions.

What has remained a virtual secret — until now — is the untold story of founding drummer Rat Skates. Rat's behind-the-scenes narrative is so well hidden by time that many metal journalists forget to include him, some to the point of insult. Sadly, the frame of reference for many OverKill fans is the *Under The Influence* album as "Hello From The Gutter" became a trash-thrash classic on *Headbanger's Ball* and was for many a first-time exposure to OverKill, despite MTV playing "In Union We Stand" fairly often throughout 1987.

In *Born In The Basement*, Skates gives the true OverKill fans a friendly wave hello, as it's been practically two decades since we last saw him. What is revealed on this fascinating DVD is that Rat had every bit as much to do with the success of OverKill as the unrelenting stamina of the core two holding down the fort today. Skates reveals that he's the creator of the famous OverKill logo, one that took its notes from Iron Maiden (so much so that Skates admits to lifting the "O" directly from the band), as well as giving us a look at all of the DIY self-promotion he directly channeled into the band before OverKill was signed to Megaforce. Everything from photocopying fliers at his printing press job, to unleashing a campaign of stickers all over New York and New Jersey (including Jersey Turnpike toll booths), to silk-screening t-shirts with his girlfriend in his home, which Rat jokingly refers to as "date night," *BITB* goes beyond nostalgia.

What's so tremendous about *Born In The Basement* is watching how Rat came up with OverKill's early stage sets, using stolen milk crates for drum risers and backdrop holders to strenuously toiling with primitive (by today's standards) materials including magic markers to create OverKill's overtly impressive castle and dungeon designs. Moreover, Rat gives us a fully



This DVD is an invaluable blueprint on how to build up your band when the odds are stacked against you. Get this. — Ray Van Horn, Jr.

When Wires Cross...

I originally phoned Rat Skates — aka Lee Kundrat — for the *Get Thrashed* piece I was working on a few months back [Nov./Dec. 2007], an award-winning project he not only co-produced with Rick Ernst, but one that helped spawn the creation of the must-see DIY thrashumentary *Born In The Basement*, initially planned as a bonus feature to the *Get Thrashed* video tome. The legendary drummer-turned-filmmaker of course thought I was calling about *Born In The Basement* (released late last year). Needless to say, many of my preliminary queries were met with paused, hesitant answers — puzzling given Skates' notoriously verbose demeanor. After several minutes of seesawing confusion, we figured out the miscommunication and what began as a nonlinear clusterfuck of an interview transformed into a lengthy, thrash investigation, where Skates' passion and dedication permeated the phone line like it was 1980 all over again. Excerpts from the conversation follow...

Metal Maniacs: What was the initial impetus for *Born In The Basement*?

Rat Skates: I had the idea of doing a thrash metal documentary four years ago. Being that I was part of that scene, I was gonna go backwards in time instead of forward [*Get Thrashed*]. *Born In The Basement* is a musician's journey — my journey — through that time period, and the development more or less single-handedly of one of the bands who are now considered among thrash metal's best [OverKill]. It's speaking for pretty much all the guys at some point because at the time it was



OverKill circa 1981.

all a DIY effort; we didn't have any guidelines or road maps to anything. We had to figure out how to do it. I was the guy that was probably doing that more so than anyone because it took a little longer for us. We didn't get signed until '85. Metallica, Anthrax, Slayer, everyone was picked up for their first deal in '83. So I had to keep constantly hammering away at this stuff. [Metallica drummer] Lars [Ulrich] at some point was doing it until [original Metallica fan club head] KJ Doughton took over and Kerry King [did the same] for Slayer for a long time. The feedback I've gotten from all those guys it was, like, "yes, this is it!" A lot of people may not understand it or they might go, "dude, that's really funny how you had to dub those cassettes one at a time." But that's what being in a band required back then. There were no CDs, no Internet, no email. We did it any way we possibly could.

MM: What are your fondest memories from those early days?

Watching the genesis that Rat presents of OverKill turning from punk to power metal to "blood metal," as the band would call it, to straight-up thrash is likewise a treat. To witness OverKill in ghoulish paint, holding inverted crosses, only to watch bands like Venom, Celtic Frost and Slayer do the same is often sobering. Skates paints a vivid picture of thrash's most primal moments — from music to business — and how much dedication it took just to get OverKill shirts onto the backs of teenagers and the logo on the front of their school textbooks.

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In 1981-'82? The term "thrash" didn't even exist.

RS: It's true. It *wasn't* called thrash yet. Thrash wasn't a term until pretty much '85 or late '84 and quite a lot went on before that. People think, "oh I'm totally oldschool dude, I saw Slayer in 87." It's like, "whoa! You missed a good four years of what was going on at least." Everyone started around 1981 and at the time we were just stepping up the NWOBHM stuff, especially Iron Maiden, Judas Priest and of course the hardcore bands that couldn't play as well as us but had the energy we always admired.

But to answer your question, the thing I enjoyed and what stands out to me most was the fact that it was all new and the fans, DJs and musicians were equally important to each other. This stuff had never been done before. No one ever heard it or knew what to make of it. If it wasn't for the DJs and for the journalists at the time doing like [legendary/pioneering metal fanzine] *Kick Ass Monthly* and copymachine magazines who believed in it so much, there may not have been a "scene." We all had this burning in us; we knew how great this stuff was. We were all friends and we just pushed it equally hard. We were never concerned about, "well, how are we going to develop this into a career? How do we make money?" We did it because it was fun. That camaraderie that we all had; that friendship, is beautiful to this day.

MM: What do you think OverKill had that other bands lacked at the time?

RS: Prior to 1986 [Skates left OverKill following the release of the eminent *Taking Over* full-length], I think [guitarist] D.D. [Verni] and I had very good imaginations and we weren't afraid to exploit whatever we were thinking visually or in songs. OverKill started out as a very theatrical band wearing very heavy makeup. It was great! We [Skates, Verni, vocalist

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Bobby "Blitz" Ellsworth and guitarist Bobby Gustafson] all looked like a cross between Alice Cooper and the Misfits. I think that ultimately with OverKill and a lot of bands, including Slayer who started with makeup too and had heavy music and a heavy show, I think we listened to a lot of these bands more than we should have. It was like, "dude, Metallica is just as heavy and they don't have that shit on their face." It's like, "wait a second, you should do what's in your heart and what you feel."

MM: What about today's thrash "resurgence?" Can something that was so fresh and new be reenacted with the same conviction?

RS: [Pauses] I think it's flattering that these guys want to emulate what was going on back then. However, what we were doing at the time was brand new and *developing*. Every few months things changed. A lot of people never talk about the time period from like '81 and '82, which was the most important because that's when all the thrash bands were getting together. In '81-'82, there wasn't anything even *close* to stage-diving or moshpits; it was all fist banging and playing air gui-

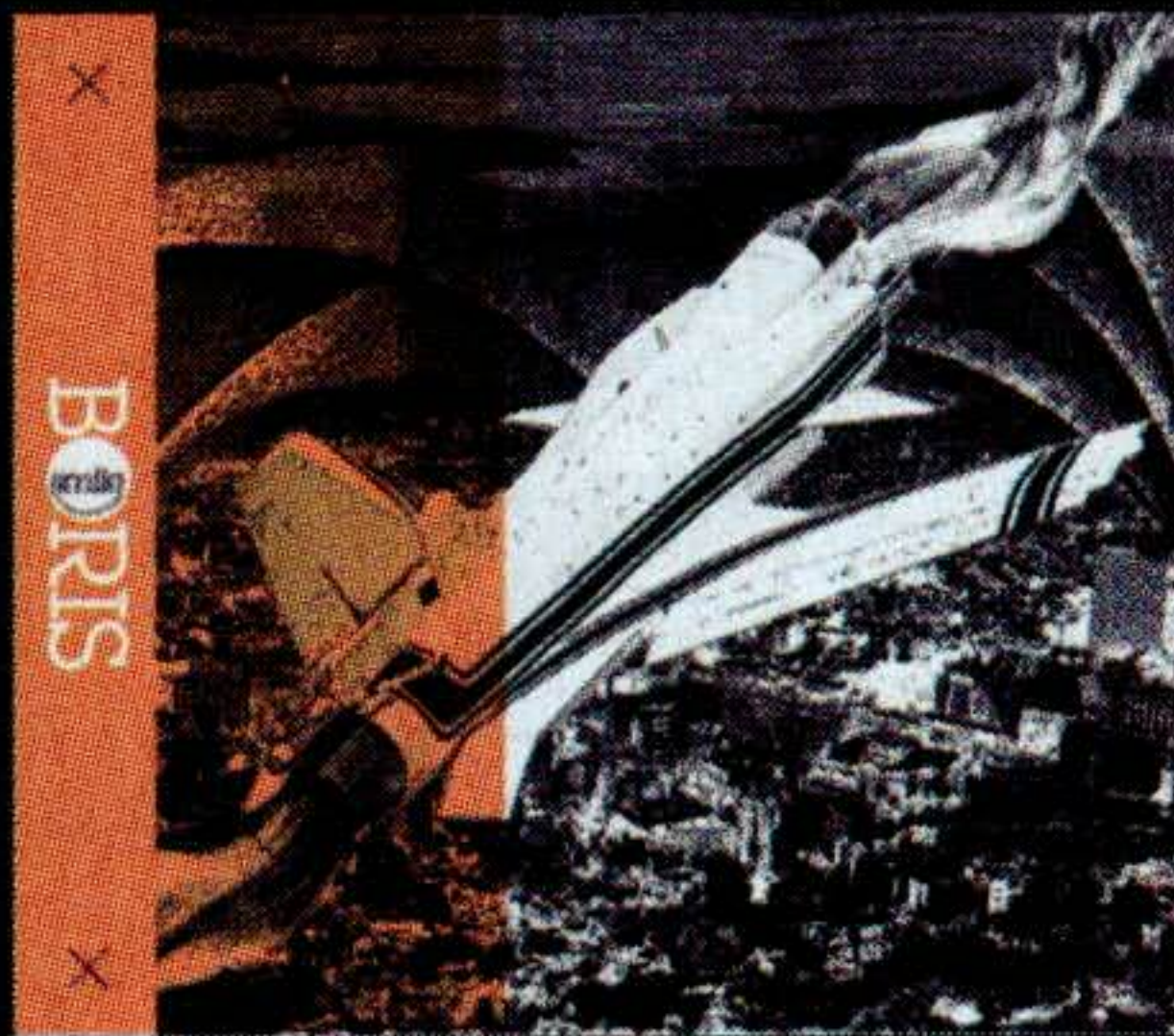
tar. Eventually it got more physical and everything got more exaggerated and harder and it led into what's now a given: Stage-diving, a pit, the whole thing. It developed slowly. Today, metal in general has reached an extreme. What all these bands are doing is really cool because it's kind of like reliving it but I don't see where and in what direction it's gonna go. I'm not sure some totally new style of metal will come out of this, like how thrash metal came out of NWOBHM. I don't think that's actually gonna happen because metal has always been about being extreme and the guys today, with tuning as low as they do and the vocals... I like melody; to me music is melody. And heavy is great but it's still music. What's going on today, I guess I'm old or something but I don't get a lot of it.

MM: The vocals?

RS: The constant screaming, absolutely not. I can't even really listen to it. I think there's some really interesting music going on behind it but there has to be a song at the end of the day. That's why Metallica is as big as they are; they are great songwriters. Thrash would have never ever gotten here if it wasn't for the New Wave Of British Heavy Metal. They stepped up what traditional heavy metal was from that time and we stepped it up another notch. But we were still playing music and there was actual *singing* going on. There were actual dynamics and melody in the vocals. Today it's all about power; back then it was not. It [thrash] burnt itself out around 1988 when things got fused together and everyone kind of looked and sounded the same but even then, it wasn't all about power and Satan. It was still music. It was cool. Let's face it, if you put on Venom now, you put on *Welcome To Hell*, back then we were like, "oh my god! This is... can you... and the lyrics?!" It was so extreme and that's why we all loved it. Now, it's like, "this is Disney, right?" [www.ratskates.com] — Liz Ciavarella



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