

Music Review: STEMM - *Blood Scent*



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Perhaps no metal group has been more associated with Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) quite like Niagara Falls, New York's STEMM has. Going back to 2002, singles like "Face The Pain," "Fallen" and "Holding On" have been either UFC event theme songs or background music for its shows, as well as appearing on its soundtracks and other SPIKE TV programs.

But it's no secret to those who have been following STEMM since its inception in 1998 that the band is far different today from when they started. First, it was an east coast rapcore group. Then it was a meaty UFC-approved metalcore band who could sing/scream hooks with the best of them and who could be considered in league with Chimaira, Hatebreed and the like.

Now, with its latest full-length *Blood Scent* (Catch 22 Records) and a new lead singer, the band is a mixture of styles including hardcore metal, groove metal and of course, metalcore. With the departure of vocalist TJ Frost in 2007, the only remaining original member Joe Cafarella stepped up to take lead vocal duty. Judging by the results on this latest CD, it's a wonder why he didn't take the helm earlier.

Track one, "Blood Soaked," starts out ferociously, with double kick drums and machine-like guitar riffs going 1000 miles per hour before singer/guitarist Joe Cafarella and company slow down a notch for the fade away ending. Quite frankly, this is the type of high energy all potentially great metal records should have.

Elsewhere, easy-on-the-ears metal tracks like "Awake," "Beneath My Skin" (a break up song) and "House of Cards" still show the STEMM of not so long ago, with well-sung choruses and hooks. The latter track was used as the theme song late last year for the UFC program *UFC Wired*.

But perhaps the best song on this record is "As Real As It Gets," if not for any other reason than that it has the most memorable twin guitar harmonies that Cafarella and

guitarist Alex Scouten have come up with yet. It just shows that when the guitarists lay off the open power chords for a while, they can come up with interesting and highly skilled riffs that take their brand of metal to another level.

STEMM mixes it up even more on its excellent metal cover of the Nine Inch Nails classic "Wish," where STEMM brings out the fuzz boxes, kicks up the intensity with double kick drums and adds extra palm-muted fury towards the end. They get kudos as well for its idea of industrial sounds, a creepy recording of a kitchen blender at song's end.

Also, the band snuck in as a secret track a quality live acoustic version of "Beneath My Skin" to close out the record.

As far as STEMM's comparison of its latest album to Pantera and its career-defining album *Vulgar Display of Power* is concerned, it shouldn't be entirely dismissed out of hand given a blistering track like "Broken Face Masterpiece." But in no way does it set a new bar for heavy metal to live up to like *Vulgar* did in the 1990s and beyond. You can definitely hear a lot of Phil Anselmo in Joe Cafarella's voice throughout the record and given the heavy guitar and bass tuning, maybe Down or *Reinventing The Steel*-era Pantera here and there. But Pantera and Dimebag Darrell were one of a kind. Let's leave any declarations of the next *Vulgar* album up to the rest of the metal world.

In all, *Blood Scent* is without a doubt STEMM's best and most dynamic album to date. It has the usual "hate anthems" and some same-y songs given the band's Drop-C tuning. But overall this group has gotten better and added more depth to their songs ("One King Down," "As Real As It Gets") than on previous records (2005's *Songs For The Incurable Heart* being among them). A solid batch of metal tracks and a band constantly improving as a unit is all you can ask for. So if you have dug their material in recent years, there's no reason you won't enjoy their music now.