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JEFF MIERS: SOUND CHECK

'Blood' sports: Stemm and the long, hard road to self-realization:

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When Joe Cafarella talks about Stemm, the band he cofounded in the late 1990s, an irreverence concerning convention and authority is laced through all of his words. Like heavy metal itself, Cafarella sees his music as an opportunity to present a set of values that stand in opposition to what we might call “normal” or “straight” society.

Surely, this tendency is at least partly responsible for the relentless drive and unflinching self-assurance evident in the area band’s full-frontal metallic attack. To listen to Stemm is to enter the presence of a band railing against the dying of the light at ferociously high volume. The group’s latest effort, “Blood Scent,” is easily its most ambitious. It’s also an album that stands in stark contrast to the music industry approved mode of modern-day heavy metal.

Stemm is an independent band in both the literal and metaphorical senses; this makes its hard-earned success all the more profound. The new “Iron Man 2” video game features the single “Awake” off “Blood Scent.” “Face the Pain” is the theme of the Ultimate Fighting Championship, a long-standing relationship that also has

Stemm's songs on UFC video games and television programming. Stemm has made a habit out of sharing the stage with internationally known metal acts including a recent club show with Korn in Albany, as well as spots on the Rock Star energy drink Mayhem Festival with Slipknot, Disturbed and Slayer.

In an interview, Cafarella talked about the long, hard road out of Buffalo and into the hearts of modern metal lovers.

Some background is in order regarding Stemm's now lengthy relationship with Ultimate Fighting Championship, and how working with UFC may have led to your involvement with "Iron Man 2."

Stemm has been involved with the UFC for over seven years now. The exposure — through their television programming linking Stemm to the MMA [mixed martial arts] world — has been massive for an independent band like us. I remember when we first started working together, not many people were as familiar with the Ultimate Fighting Championship as they are today, but we were just excited to hear our music on television! The UFC used to tell us back then, "This is only the tip of the iceberg as far as popularity goes for this sport, and we're taking you with us."

The "Iron Man 2" video game is probably one of the few times UFC exposure wasn't related to getting us on the game. We have known Raymond Herrera — drummer for Arkaea and longtime drummer for Fear Factory — for many years now, and he's also involved with Sega. Raymond always liked Stemm, and he really looked out for us over the years. He is the man behind the curtain who brought Stemm to Sega for the "Iron Man 2" video game.

You refer to "Blood

Scent" as Stemm's own "Vulgar Display of Power," the revered Pantera album. There is definitely a sense that "Vulgar" shares with your work, in that it's irreverent, confident and stands in opposition to flavors of the moment. Can you elaborate?

This lineup is what I consider "the final cut." I don't think Stemm can be better than this, as far as musicianship goes, but most importantly to me, as far as friendship and brotherhood go. With that said, we've all experienced some hardships over the years in our personal lives and within the industry, as does any working band.

The focus while writing "Blood Scent" was putting our foot down for once and doing what we wanted to do as a band. We stopped jumping through hoops for label execs who would tell us what they would like to see us do, but still turned us down after we compromised for them. It can be a real heartbreaker. We stopped thinking about what record labels might think when we wrote for this CD, and our songs became tales of what we have been through, what we did to get through the problems, and ultimately how to attack and destroy our enemies, metaphorically speaking.

For "Blood Scent" we were on the attack, out for blood. That was the concept.

You've set the bar for how metal bands might approach the whole "independent artist in the post-major label collapse" world. To what do you attribute your ability to stand firm through so many industry changes?

Being loyal to your fans. We have always been a very approachable band, in terms of the public. We like to hang out with our fans and talk to them. It becomes personal, then. When you write us on MySpace or Facebook or Twitter, you actually get a response from one of us. You get to know fans. We usually wind up becoming friends. That's why we're in this. The love of music, seeing the world and meeting the people who support Stemm wherever they may be.

So many fans of heavy music from our generation have given up on new metal, and prefer instead to listen to the albums they loved when they were in high school. How many times have you heard someone say, "There's no good new metal?"

Unfortunately, I couldn't agree more. Metal has become a trend these days. When you look at the younger metal bands, you see a certain way to dress, how to wear your hair, what to name your band, a certain vocal approach. My kid plays me countless new metal bands on her iPod, and each band sounds exactly the same to me. I'm very selective when it comes to the newer bands coming out these days.

It's very hard these days to think that a metal band could rise to the top like Pantera, Korn or Slipknot did, because the market is so oversaturated with hundreds of "cookie cutter" type bands that labels dump on these poor kids. There's no originality, nothing to make a band stand out anymore. To rise to the top today is even harder for bands like us.

In addition to Stemm, who else is making worthwhile new metal?

Some of the bands that I dig are Every Time I Die, Lamb of God, Chimaira, Killswitch Engage, Sevendust, Pantera and a band from the Buffalo area that we just signed to our label, Catch 22 Records, who go by the name of His Name Was Yesterday. We're planning a fall release for the CD that they are finishing up recording.

But — believe it or not — the style of music that soothes the savage Stemm beast while we're on the road is country music! It's funny to see metal-heads driving by our van and trailer, throwing up the devil-horns sign at us, while Brad Paisley, Zac Brown Band or Hank III might be playing in our van. This is quite amusing to us. If they only knew!

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