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Heathen

Victims of Deception [reissue]

[Metal Mind Records](#)

2007

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Heathen!!! I hear the name and a mudslide of memories jams up my neural pathways. Naturally it was Crazy Ken (he now goes by the nom de plume of "No-Show Ken", but to me he'll always be Crazy) who turned me on to Heathen. Ken had a nose for underground metal, and he regularly would make mix tapes for me with all the bands he was currently championing. I was going to Florida State at the time, driving back and forth between Tallahassee and Houston every chance I got in my little Honda CRX to see my girlfriend and hang out with my friends. And Heathen was a staple of that twelve hour trek across I-10, providing mental sustenance to a mind starved for anything during that boring-ass ride through the taint of America.

Heathen are from the Bay Area, one of the many thrash bands birthed during the fertile years. Lee Altus formed the band in 1984, with their first album "Breaking the Silence" coming out in 1987. It garnered them a fair amount of attention from the metal faithful, even making it onto MTV's Headbanger's Ball with their cover of The Sweet's "Set Me Free". But it wasn't until 1991 and the release of Victims of Deception that Heathen really nailed it. David White's vocals are quintessential thrash, ringing clear and true. The amazing guitar work of Lee Altus and Doug Piercy takes a cue from all the metal that had come before them (razor sharp rhythm playing, twin guitar leads, searing solos) and turns

it up a notch. Darren Minter's drumming is a clinic of thrash rhythm, and with the guest bass player (Marc Biedermann) is the glue holding the whole structure in place. Even the lyrics aren't the usual yukking about sex and booze and leather codpieces drying in the sun, but rather questioning everything from mass religion to people's fascination with tragedy.

I wish I knew which TV evangelist is sampled for the album opener... it sounds like Swaggert, but I could be wrong. It never fails to make chills shoot through my spine, though, perhaps because I know what's about to drop. The first three songs are classic, from opening barn-burner "Hypnotized" to the mega thrash anthem "Heathen's Song", with the technically savvy "Opiate of the Masses" squeezed in between (great drumming on that one, Darren!). And then... oh man... and then they rip into a cover of Rainbow's "Kill the King", which is the best cover I've ever heard of that song, bar none. Hell, I like it better than Ritchie and Ronnie's version, and that's saying something, 'cause I'm a Rainbow slut from hell. I have a clear, perfect memory of trashing my living room with that song at full blast on the old Panasonic stereo.

"Fear of the Unknown" starts out with some odd guitar pieces but quickly settles into its groove, with a beautifully melodic chorus as David really stretches out his voice. The guitars duel and dance during the solo, a trademark of Heathen's attack. "Prisoners of Fate" features some nice picking during the intro, nothing too special but it fits the song, which is essentially a thrash ballad with fatalistic and yet strangely uplifting lyrics... kind of like "Fade to Black". Then another burner with "Morbid Curiosity", and this was the one that Ken put on the mix tape for me which piqued my interest. In a strange case of symmetry, I was listening to that very song as I went by a wreck on I-10 and they were pulling the sheet over the guy! After that is the instrumental guitar showcase "Guitarmony"... and yes, that's how it was done back in the day. The album closes out with "Mercy Is No Virtue" (that's how a breakdown is done!) and "Timeless Cell of Prophecy", and on this Metal Mind re-release they've included "Hellbound" which was only available on the Japanese version.

I guess you can tell I kind of liked this album. Well, it was a pleasure to be in the thrash club when this was released. Obviously things have changed now, we've seen several metal sub-genres rise and fall since 1991, but damn it, this album is a classic of a bygone era; thank you, Heathen, for making my young adulthood so memorable.

S.Gregory