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Pestilence - Spheres CD review

Dutch metal trailblazers Pestilence - along with contemporaries like Death, Cynic and Atheist - stood at the creative forefront of the late-80s death metal movement. They defined the sound, the stylistic vacuum-cleaner roar



of the genre's vocals, and the instrumental fusion of fast-n-furious thrash with deliberately bone-crushing heavy metal...and tens of thousands of teenage listeners swapped their white t-shirts in for logo- clad black cotton battle armor.

For many of these bands, though, the purebred expectations of death metal and its rabid fans became chains to restrict their sound rather than supporting the expansion of their creative endeavors. Such as it was with Pestilence - the band charted its course with a pair of brutal, razor-blade bulldozers in 1988's *Malleus Maleficarum* and the following year's *Consuming Impulse*. They navigated off the map with 1991's *Testimony Of The Agents* though...when vocalist Martin VanDrunen left the band over creative differences, guitarist Patrick Mamelì took over on vox...and the new helmsman steered the band towards a more progressive musical course.

Conservative death metal fans disliked that album, but not nearly as much as they hated 1993's *Spheres*, Pestilence's

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fourth and final effort. Mameli took his talented crew into uncharted waters with this masterpiece of complex, elemental, progressive metal that literally took the normal, accepted death metal blueprint and set it on fire, then drowned it in a vat of boiling oil. The first half of *Spheres* more or less walks a conventional death metal line. "Mind Reflections," for instance, offers up enough machine-gun drumbeats, tortured guitarwork, guttural vocals and manic energy to satisfy any died-in-the-wool heshier. "Multiple Beings" starts to get a little loosey-goosey with song structure, serving up some head-snapping time changes and discordant, Fripperian six-string squonk. "The Level of Perception" hides a complex and maddening rhythmic construct beneath its concrete-smashing fury.

The album's first "musical interlude" - the atmospheric "Aurian Eyes" - tip-toes not-so-elegantly into the avant-garden of composers like Phillip Glass, its stark beauty and crashing horizon painting a dark psychological portrait in a mere 92 seconds. By the time that the polyglot instrumental frenzy of "Soul Search" hits the listener's ears, the corpse-paint has been peeled from this edifice...*Spheres* has clearly entered into newfound, and dangerous territory. Mameli's six-string mangling throughout "Soul Search" is disturbingly brilliant, a chaotic tangle of razor wire, rusty chains and glass shards that shatters the artificial barriers of death metal propriety.

"Personal Energy" comes at you like a voice from the inner recess of your mind, the muted albeit industrial-strength rhythms complimented by a taut jazz-fusion guitar line that Stan Lassiter or Al DiMeola would have been proud to crank out. "Voices from Within," the second brief though incredible musical interlude on *Spheres*, sounds like Ralph Towner on steroids, second guitarist Patrick Uterwijk's electronically-altered axe carrying the Pestilence crew dangerously close to the siren's shore of Sun Ra's dreams. Steering away at the last minute with the raw, dissembled title track, its familiar cranium-crushing brutality should have soothed any disaffected death-kiddies' fears...until the third brilliant instrumental break of the album combines a chilling lead with a stabbing riff. The song ends with a cool prog-styled keyboard run, strictly anathema to young early-90s

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The martial "Changing Perspectives" foreshadows Sepultura's mid-90s work on *Roots*, Mameli's vocals reduced to a mere howl, tribal rhythms and muscular riffs creating a dense framework upon which the guitarist lays down more of his incredibly adventurous six-string embroidery. The last musical interlude, "Phileas," treads closely to the ambient work of Brian Eno, or maybe Stephan Micus. Although most metal-flakes tuned out and turned away from *Spheres* long before "Demise of Time" had a chance to properly assault their speakers, the loss is theirs, not ours. The song is a grand experiment of what could only be called "math metal," a cacophonous blitzkrieg of sound and fury that melds rapid-fire signature changes with crystalline string-bending and a hurricane of tumultuous rhythms and blustery vocals.

Sadly out-of-print for years, *Spheres* has been resurrected by the good folks of Poland's Metal Mind label, the disc distributed by our friends at MVD Audio in the United States. A limited edition of 2000 copies pressed onto a gold disc, including a booklet with informative liner notes and song lyrics, this deluxe reissue of *Spheres* adds four bonus tracks, including remix versions of "Soul Search" and "Demise of Time" that emphasize Mameli's freelance six-string work and bring the keyboards to the front of the mix, emphasizing the band's Killing Joke influences. Live versions of "Mind Reflections" and "Multiple Beings" showcase Pestilence's Godzilla-strength performance chops, the band bludgeoning the audience with a blistering drone that sounds like the ass-end of an F-14 Tomcat.

By the time that Pestilence recorded *Spheres*, the band had clearly jumped onto a higher musical plane. Mameli's fretwork was both more nuanced and literate as well as heavier, diamond hard. Drummer Marco Foddis hits the skins with the finesse of a jazzman and the power of a jackhammer, and his matured lyrical abilities veered sharply away from the stuffy death metal confines of doom-and-gloom to explore themes of psychology, philosophy and the cosmos. Bassist Jeroen Paul Thesseling is as creative in his realm as Jaco Pastorius was in his, while guitarist Patrick Uterwijk is a crazy, inventive player.

Altogether, the four created a metallic masterpiece that,

although disdained and discarded at the time - **Spheres** reportedly sold about 25% of the copies of any of the band's previous three titles - the album's stature has nevertheless grown through the years. Pestilence's experimental metal paved the way for modern explorers like Nile and Meshuggah, and deserves to be respected and revered for the groundbreaking effort that Pestilence risked its career to lay down on tape. Yes, with the genre-expanding **Spheres**, Voidvod's **The Outer Limits**, Atheist's **Elements** and Cynic's **Focus**, 1993 was a great year for metal! (MVD Audio/Metal Mind)

*(Click on the CD cover to buy **Spheres** from Amazon.com)*

Pestilence - "Mind Reflections"

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POSTED BY REV. KEITH A. GORDON AT 10:41 AM 

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