

Harley's War

If there's one man synonymous with NYHC it's the inimitable Harley Flanagan. From his teenage years he has eaten, breathed and slept the music of his city. From drumming at the ripe old age of eleven in the Stimulators to being the founding father of Cro-Mags, who's milestone 'Age Of Quarrel' record is celebrating its thirtieth anniversary. Now after a tempestuous few years he's back with a new solo record, simply titled 'Cro-Mags'. Ian Glasper spoke to the man himself to get the low down from the streets.

WITH his notoriety often overshadowing his musical abilities, it's easy to forget that Harley Flanagan is an incredible bassist – and drummer! – and has written some of the most potent hardcore music ever recorded. Specifically that stunning debut Cro-Mags album from 1986, 'The Age Of Quarrel', not to mention some of the other, more overlooked, Cro-Mags records like 'Best Wishes' (1989) and 'Revenge' (2000), but, as his new album, aptly entitled 'Cro-Mags', so ably demonstrates, he's still got chops, and still has exciting new music to share with us.

The new album is an incredibly intense work, inspired by all the negativity Harley has endured the last few years, in particular the Webster Hall incident in 2012, where he was accused of stabbing two members of the current line-up of Cro-Mags, but was later acquitted due to lack of evidence. Harley, who was also stabbed himself in the altercation, maintains that he was attacked backstage and was merely defending himself. For those who've been asleep under a rock these last few decades, this is just the latest in a long, bitter dispute between ex-members of the Cro-Mags, whose incredible musical prowess has

almost been overlooked due to the infamously bad blood. So, is that why Harley chose to name his new album 'Cro-Mags', to remind people what it's about: the music?

"There was a few reasons. The Cro-Mags was my name and my band; I started it, I wrote the music, and I came up with the name. I am just re-claiming what is mine, a valuable name that has been misappropriated and dragged through the mud for nearly 20 years by a fraudulent band that didn't write any of the music. Hopefully this record puts an end to that by showing people once again who the writer was."

And 'Cro-Mags' is literally dripping anger, with song titles like 'I'll Fuck You Up' and 'Fighting The Urge To Kill', but writing angry has always made for the best hardcore records, and as Harley himself points out in the sleeve notes, 'When I started working on this album a lot of bad things were happening in my life... I took all the anger and frustration I was feeling and poured it into this album – I feel much better now!'

"When I write a song or an album, I am always very honest with my lyrics," he explains, "I just dig in and what comes out is what comes out. I have always written from my experiences. To me that was one of the things that made

hardcore different from metal. And with the Cro-Mags, 'Age Of Quarrel' era, we always wrote about what we were living, about survival on the streets etc.

"Metal bands were writing about the devil and fantasy shit, killing people, and stuff they have never done or experienced; it

went right along with the inflatable dragons, the big Eddie puppets... I was never a Kiss fan, I was never into fantasy rock; I just wrote what I knew. It is sometimes weird to re-visit those places lyrically, but they are parts of my life, so it's in me, it's in my memory. It doesn't go away."

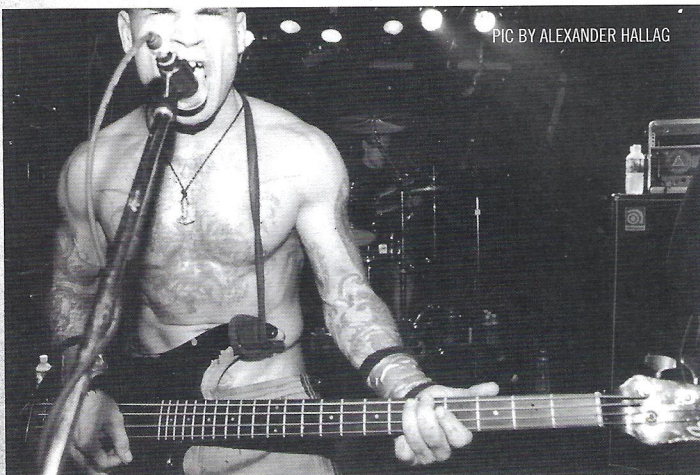
Songs like 'I Come In Peace' and 'Guilty Until Proven Innocent' make some very pointed observations about the current NYHC scene, so how does Harley feel the current NYHC scene compares to the glory days of the Eighties? Are there any modern NYHC bands that he rates?

"It just doesn't compare to the early scene, they're two different worlds, two different scenes, with totally different values and a different mentality. They talk the same shit about 'P.M.A.' [i.e. positive mental attitude] and 'unity', but it's all just empty words. I haven't been a part of the scene in years, ever since it started turning into lots of gangs and crews; I got bored with it when all my old friends started joining crews and gangs to stay relevant, and everyone started doing blow and thinking they were gangsters. I completely lost interest."

The new album is an amazing statement of intent, whatever inspired it, but was originally scheduled to come out through Southern Lord. It's now been issued on Harley's own 171-A Records.

"Southern Lord had some issues with their distributor and decided they couldn't sign any new bands," he explains. "Greg is a really great guy and they helped me out a lot and paid for the recordings etc., but as it turned out they were unable to release them and thus I was able to release it myself."

"171-A was a rehearsal studio run by Jerry Williams, R.I.P, where the Bad Brains recorded the legendary 'ROIR' cassette; they and my old band, the Stimulators [who Harley drummed for in his pre-teen years], used to practice there and they had gigs from time to time in the basement. They had a record store, Rat Cage Records, which



PIC BY ALEXANDER HALLAG

HARLEY FLANAGAN

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also put out the Agnostic Front ‘Victim In Pain’ album and the Beastie Boys’ first single, as well as The Young And The Useless. So I put it out on ‘171-A Records’ as a tribute to that place and Jerry Williams...”

And it would seem that ‘Cro-Mags’ will be chased into the racks by another Harley Flanagan release sooner rather than later, as he’s in a prolific mood right now – but how does writing today compare to writing when he was younger? Older but wiser, perhaps?

“Everything is the same, I write what feels good to me. I write a song or record some riffs every day. It’s one of the first things I do in the day and one of the last things I do at night.

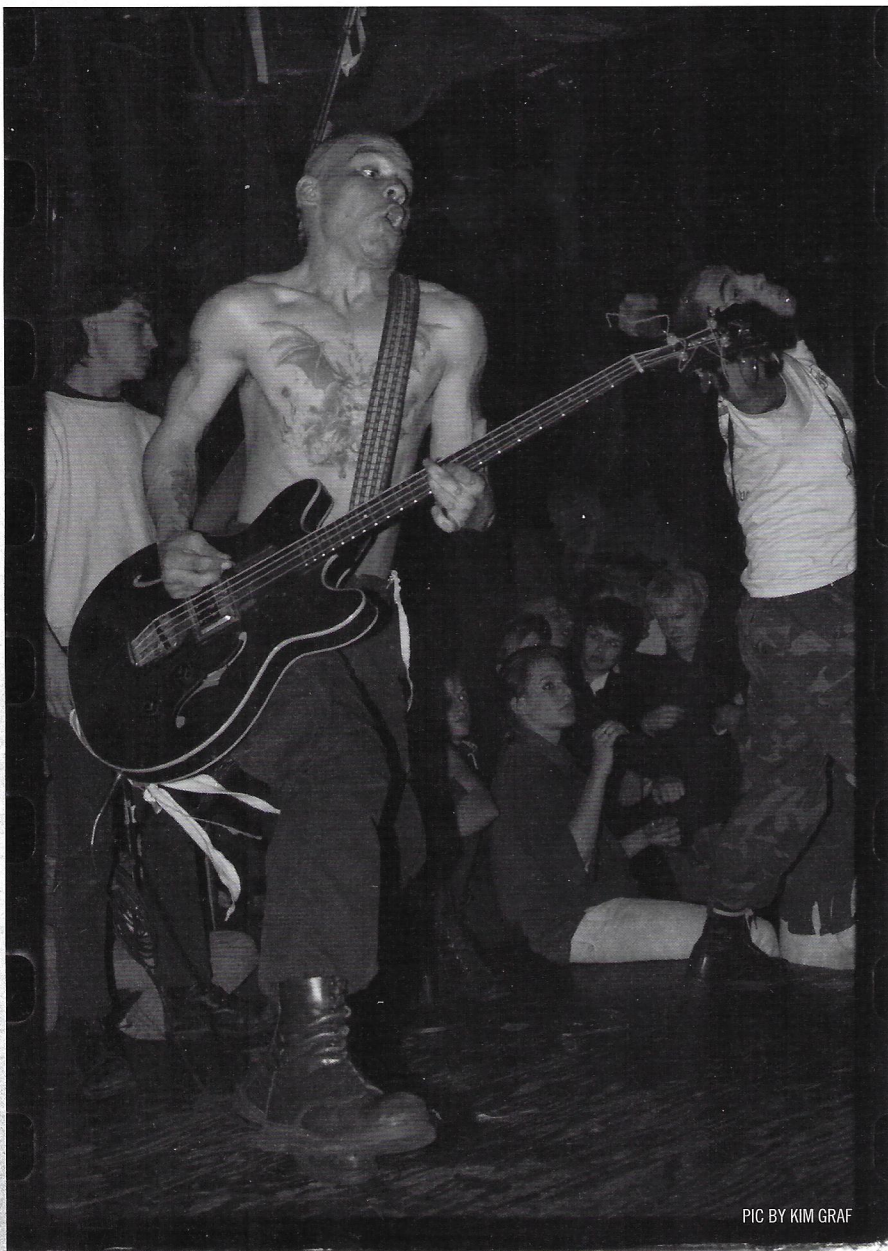
“I am going in the studio again in a few weeks because I have a lot of new material; some songs I didn’t have time to track on this last one, and a whole bunch of other new ones...”

“Well obviously ‘Age Of Quarrel’ had the most impact,” he says, as talk turns to his favourite – and least favourite – Cro-Mags records, “But I also think ‘Revenge’ is one of the best ones. ‘Best Wishes’ has a few good songs on it, and I like the Harley’s War ‘2012’ release (MVD Audio Records). But I think the new one is the closest to the ‘AOQ’ style and sound than any of the other ones that came out since... so if that’s what you’re into, I think you will like it.

“Alpha Omega’ had a few good parts, but it

was one of my least favourite Cro-Mags records, and ‘Near Death Experience’ was garbage; I don’t even consider it a Cro-Mags record. It had a few riffs that were good, but John [Joseph, Cro-Mags vocalist] and his band of thieves completely ruined any shot that had at being a good record; none of them wrote anything; they just tried to steal and re-create riffs, and they failed miserably.

“Unfortunately a lot of the Harley’s War stuff I released was demos, so they didn’t have the production value or the time and effort put into them that they should have had. But that’s life. I look at it like this: just track it, keep moving forward, don’t sweat it, and just keep writing. If it didn’t turn out the way I wanted, I just keep writing, keep playing, and have fun doing it; it’s all good.”



PICTURE BY KIM GRAF

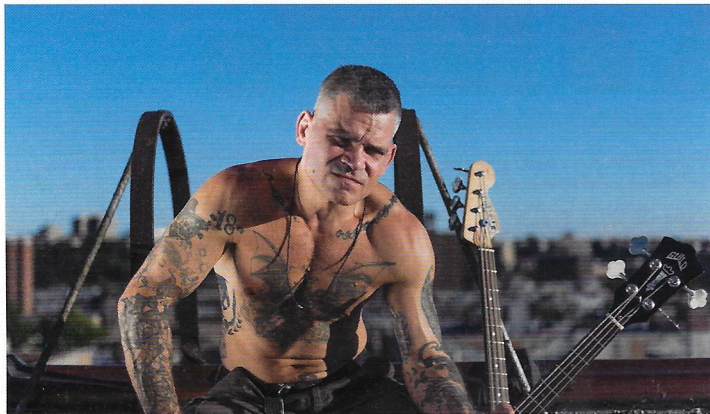
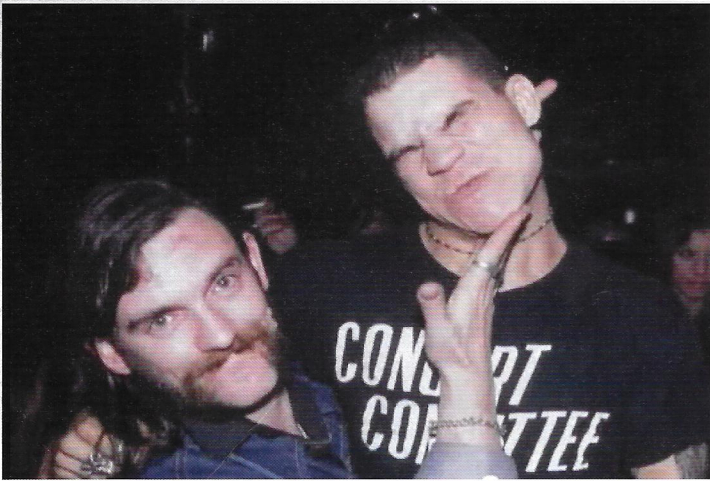
Harley’s prowess as a bassist is not to be sniffed at, with his uniquely aggressive style primarily coming from the fact he was a drummer before a bassist, so his playing is exceptionally percussive. And it’s fair to say he leaves it all up there whenever he steps on a stage.

“It was at The Peppermint Lounge in NYC, in Times Square, opening up for my old band, the Stimulators, and it was fun!” he says, recalling his first ever live appearance as a bassist. “It was the first incarnation of the Cro-Mags before the members that appeared on ‘Age Of Quarrel’ had joined. We did some originals, a Dead Boys cover, a Black Flag cover, and we did the song ‘Motorhead’ by Motorhead... but with all the wrong lyrics! We didn’t have the lyrics to anything, so it was more of a messy jam...”

“When I first started learning how to play bass, it was bands like the Sex Pistols, the Damned, and then Cockney Rejects, basically old punk stuff that was influencing me; this was before hardcore existed, of course. Then bands like Bad Brains, Motorhead and Black Sabbath changed everything; that’s when I really started to develop my style of playing. But my single biggest influence would have to be Darryl [Jenifer] from the Bad Brains.

“Some people have pointed out that I play three parts at once, and I guess I kind of do. I play the drum parts by laying down the kick and snare pattern with the rhythm of my strumming or picking, and I lay down the bass line with the droning notes of whatever the key of the song is in, as well as the rhythm or the guitar melody over it, all of this within my strumming. So in a way I do play three parts at once, if that makes sense?”

“I really like the freestyle jam at the end of ‘Alpha Omega’, it’s a hidden track,” he adds, when pushed for his favourite Cro-Mags bass-



line. "I don't know, I like 'em all... it's always fun to write and record and play them live. I honestly don't know which ones to pick! There are a couple I have gotten tired of playing over the years, but besides that, I don't know.

"I like the sound I got on the original 'Age Of Quarrel' demo [re-released by Cro-Mag Recordings in 2000 as 'Before The Quarrel'...] and on 'Best Wishes', but I think the best playing and sound was on 'Revenge'. But my playing is better now than it ever was, and I'm looking forward to writing and tracking new stuff."

And what is he playing on – and through – these days?

"Ampeg SVT is my go-to amp of choice, but I'll play anything. I can make anything work. As far as basses go, I have wrecked so many basses over the years, going nuts onstage, that I won't buy anything expensive anymore. Besides, I think it's in the hands more than in the bass so I'll play whatever: as long as the intonation is good and the action is good, I'll play it.

"Lately I have been playing bullshit Fender copies and getting a great sound out of them. I still play a Guild Star Fire; they are really sweet. I play my son's Ibanez too. Like I said, I'll play anything; I just like to play. I'll play a 2 x 4 with a rubber band on it... just gimme an Ampeg SVT to plug it into and I'll make it work!"

Harley certainly seems in a happier place, with not only the new album out there and receiving a great response, but his much-anticipated book, 'Hardcore: Life Of My Own', finally due out in September through Feral

wife and kids, keep me focused. My life is going great, I am happier than I have been in years; I am surrounded by people I love and respect every day of my life, and at my work, and there is no greater feeling. I truly appreciate what I have; I am a lucky man and I know it, I feel blessed, I really do."



o, in keeping with the positive vibes, will we ever see Harley bury the hatchet with his ex-band mates from the Cro-Mags for what would surely be the most hotly-anticipated reunion ever?

"I don't think it will ever happen... and it's less important to me every day. I would like it to happen for the fans, the real fans, and I'd like to do it just to get together with those guys again, even if it was just one time in a rehearsal studio with no audience... just because. It meant a lot to me, and they all at one point meant a lot to me. So yes, it would be great to get that closure, but in truth, it means less and less to me, especially with all the nasty shit they still say about me. I just don't care that much anymore."

With all the adversity he has had to face down, has there ever been a time when he seriously considered giving up music altogether?

"Everyday," he replies, without hesitation, "But not because of

House. Years in the making, it tells his life story, and should be a must-have for any fans of the Cro-Mags, or hardcore music/lifestyles in general. On top of all this, he's a top instructor at the Renzo Gracie school of Brazilian jiu jitsu in Manhattan, a martial art that has allowed him to channel his frustrations positively.

"Yeah, things got a bit nuts a few years back, but jiu-jitsu helped me keep my focus. I try to apply what I learn on the mats to what I have to deal with in life; that, and my

music - because of people, and fans, and the music business. I don't really like any of it. But I am an artist; music is in my soul, and I would be playing music even if I was alone on an island, and had never been in a recording studio, and never been in a band.

"I always hear rhythms and time signatures and chord progressions and melodies, it's not something I can shut off. If I could, I would have a long time ago, 'cos I can't stand people and all the shit that goes along with being in a band, and I hate the hardcore scene - at least in NYC. I really don't know much about the 'scene' anywhere else, and it really doesn't mean that much to me. I am an adult; scenes are for kids and desperate people who want to be popular. When that shit became a popularity contest, I stopped giving a fuck."

Given his time over again, would he have done anything differently then?

"Well, for starters, I would have never played with Parris [Mayhew, Cro-Mags guitarist] or John! Why? 'Cos I would have been fine without them... but you've got to just live life; try not to complicate it, it's hard enough. Check your ego at the door, 'cos you don't mean shit, and death will take care of you in the end, just like it does every-fuckin'-body-else. So shut the fuck up, and live life while you can, and enjoy it - because it will be over before you know it."

And there you have it, some words of wisdom from a man that's been there and done it, bought the T-shirt and got it covered in blood. Hopefully we'll see him out on the road again soon, playing these new songs where they need to be played - in front of a live audience.

"Well I have been jamming with most of the guys I toured with in Harley's War, Sean Kilkenny from Dog Eat Dog and Will Dahl; I have also been jamming with Gabby Abularach who played with Cro-Mags and Harley's War. I have been playing with a lot of guys, so I guess we shall see. I'm just looking forward to making more loud music with my friends." 🐾

'CRO-MAGS' IS OUT NOW ON MVD

