



# Metallica

BY DEBORAH FROST



**H**appy families, Leo Tolstoy noted, are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. That goes double, if not quadruple, for bands, particularly those who achieve greatness. The picture has never been painted so graphically as in *Some Kind of Monster*, the 2004 documentary that chronicled the previous three years and crack-up of Metallica, at the very pinnacle of its fortune and fame.

Of course, few bands hold on to the wild ride of the bitch success for twenty minutes – never mind twenty years. Perhaps not since *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* or Ingmar Bergman's equally vituperative and excruciating *Scenes From a Marriage* has *Monster's* load of dirty laundry and überdomestic drama been dumped on any screen. Only, this odd couple was real. Lars Ulrich and James Hetfield – teenage misfits from almost parallel universes crossed by a 1981 personal ad in the *LA Recycler* – gave improbable birth to what quickly became the biggest heavy-metal baby in the universe and must now, in 2009, be legitimately acknowledged as one of the most important, influential, not to mention lucrative, rock bands of all time.

*Some Kind of Monster* was one of the most shocking risks anyone, particularly superstars of heavy metal – a genre predicated upon the glorification of male power and invincibility – has ever had the balls to thrust in front of an audience. But even for iconoclasts whose entire ethos and career has been about making music, not to mention money, their own way, *Some Kind of Monster* defied the cardinal rule of showbiz – you never show the strings and wires. But perhaps more shocking, it revealed once and for all the ultimate taboo of hard, macho rock, which has nothing to do with sex, drugs, or debauchery (after all, we've seen that all before) but something perhaps more rare, particularly in a world and business that prides itself on numbers sold, arenas filled, decibels blasted, tonnage carted, and statistics toppled: vulnerability and humanity.

From the moment a diminutive Danish motormouth who'd been around the world a handful of times before kindergarten fast-talked his way onto an indie compilation though he'd barely assembled a trap kit, never mind a band, Metallica has always marched to its own drummer. The son of a bohemian tennis pro who dabbled in arts criticism and the godson of jazz saxophonist Dexter Gordon, Lars Ulrich could not fit into a mold – much less that of a typical heavy-metal fan or musician – if you paid him. By the time his family relocated from Copenhagen to L.A. in 1980 so the sixteen-year-old could make the leap from the junior circuit to follow in the old man's sneakers, he'd been seduced by European punk and the new wave of British metal that emulated its DIY philosophy and breakneck tempos.

"I'm sneaky," he confided to me in his first interview for *Modern Drummer*, in 1987. "All of my influences are unknown drummers. The biggest were Iron Maiden and Def Leppard. But there were hundreds of smaller bands that had records out on completely unknown labels. The punk attitudes that sprung out in '77 and '78 hit a lot of the heavy-metal bands, and a lot of the bands found they could do it themselves. They didn't just sit around and wait for the majors to come to them. That whole attitude really gave me the kick to do it myself. I landed in L.A., where none of this was going on."

James Hetfield's blue-collar Christian Science upbringing in Downey, California, was relatively conventional until his father bailed before his mother succumbed to cancer halfway through his junior year of high school, forcing Hetfield to take refuge with an older brother in Orange County. Following an initial, shaky jam session, Hetfield rejected Ulrich's overtures to form a band. But after the drummer returned from a summer crash course in Budgie's brain surgery and Diamond Head gigs in England, and wrangled a cut on fanzine publisher Brian Slagel's *Metal Massacre 1* album, Hetfield was in. Dubbing themselves Metallica, a name batted around as a possible fanzine title by Ulrich's pal Ron Quintana,

Metallica in 1986: Kirk Hammett, Cliff Burton, Lars Ulrich, and James Hetfield (clockwise from top left)



Masters in the making: Burton (left) and Hetfield live in 1981



Rocking Chicago: Metallica live in 1983



Enter Newsted: Backstage with new bassist Jason Newsted (second from right), Chicago, 1989

they drafted Hetfield's housemate Ron McGovney to play bass. The fledgling group was so inexperienced that the guys delivered a cassette of their four-track debut "Hit the Lights" rather than a finished master for Slagel's project — which mislabeled the band as METTALICA on the initial printing. They experimented with Hetfield sometimes singing and sometimes just strumming, until recruiting Dave Mustaine to play lead and discovering Cliff Burton doing things they — or few others — had ever imagined with a bass and wah-wah pedal in a bar band called Trauma.

As Hetfield reminisced in 1993 to *Rolling Stone's* David Fricke, Burton "was not your basic human being. He was a character. The first time we saw him, we heard this wild solo going on and thought, *I don't see any guitar player up there.*" Hetfield and Ulrich immediately introduced themselves and enticed him to join them by saying, "We're looking for a bass player and think you'd really fit in. Because you're a big psycho." Burton joined on condition that Metallica relocate to San Francisco, to which Ulrich and Hetfield immediately agreed. L.A., where their ripped jeans, complex warp-speed passages, and apocalyptic imagery baffled the lipsticked, three-chord hair wonders who flocked to the local clubs in search of chicks who looked like them, only fueled the anger that motivated early material like "Seek and Destroy," as well as their ambition. A cassette demo, *No Life Til Leather*, was recorded, and copied and sent by Ulrich to anyone who might possibly listen. One who did was Jon Zazula, who'd graduated to a little record shop, Metal Heaven, after years of car-trunk sales and record-collector shows. At his behest, Metallica drove in a purportedly stolen U-Haul to New York, where they lived in Anthrax's rehearsal cubicle, ate from toaster ovens, shot pool at CBGB, played a couple of shows, and parted ways with Dave Mustaine before ever getting into the studio to make the album Zazula had proposed. Mark Whittaker, who had managed Exodus in San Francisco before joining Metallica's crew, recommended Kirk Hammett. He arrived in New York on April 1, 1983.

"If Kirk hadn't worked out," Hetfield told me in 1987, "I don't know what we would have done. We flew him out, and we had no money to send him home. I look back now, it's like, *whoaaah*. He plugged in; me and Lars just looked at each other and said, 'Yeah!'"

As a preschooler during San Francisco's Summer of Love, Hammett was surrounded by his teenage brother's music. "Jimi Hendrix, Cream, Santana, Beatles, Grateful Dead, Stones, Tull, Moby Grape, Jefferson Airplane," he said. "All of that music was very important to me." By 1980, he began delving into heavier metal, including the new British wave that similarly obsessed the teenage Ulrich, as well as classical music, performing Haydn and Bach in a high school trio. Immediately prior to joining Metallica, he had embarked upon an ambitious program of study with Joe Satriani, who taught him more of the formal theory, modes, arpeggios, and harmonies that have since distinguished his lead work with Metallica.

*Kill 'Em All*, released in late 1983, and incessant touring spread the band's reputation among the burgeoning international underground scene. Its sophomore indie effort, 1984's *Ride the Lightning*, cemented it. Recorded by a more experienced engineer and producer, Flemming Rasmussen, under better conditions and with a bigger budget, the album revealed a band developing in such quick, enormous bursts as

musicians and writers that it might have been riding lightning indeed. This generated enough buzz to attract a major label, Elektra, and major managers, Q Prime's Cliff Burnstein and Peter Mensch, who signed Metallica in 1984. On its major-label debut, *Master of Puppets*, the band perfected its definitive sound and obsessive recording techniques.

What may present itself to a listener – and certainly to the live audience – as spontaneously demonic thrash is actually the result of torturous, separately recorded drafts, infinite punch-ins, and laborious overdubs. Mixed in L.A. by the veteran Michael Wagener, and released in early 1986, *Puppets* was – despite the absence of radio or video play or any recognition by the mass market whatsoever – instantly heralded as a landmark by heavy-metal cognoscenti.

Metallica's breadth and depth immediately came across via its galvanizing arrangements, rip-stop time signatures, intricate acoustic detail sandblasted by pulverizing power-chord assault, Burton's counterintuitive melodically throbbing bass, Ulrich's counterpunching lead drums (he plays as if he might be serving and volleying, smashing and lobbing for the championship at Wimbledon), and Hetfield's stentorian delivery, deeply introspective lyrics, and politically charged worldview. Distinguishable from the rest of its heavy-metal peers – Anthrax, Slayer, Megadeth – Metallica was like that rare horse or athlete, a Michael Jordan, or Tiger Woods, who breaks away forever from the pack; *Master of Puppets* announced loudly and clearly once and for all that there was Metallica – and there was everybody else.

Ozzy Osbourne invited them to tour, further legitimizing their claim as heirs to the heavy throne as they easily won the approval of his faithful hardcore and attracted burgeoning young legions of their own. The album shot to the Top Thirty on the charts and soon went gold in the United States.

And then, in the middle of the night of September 27, 1986, their tour bus skidded on black ice and overturned in Sweden, killing Cliff Burton. The survivors pulled together immediately, if for no other reason, in remembrance of Cliff, as Kirk insisted not long after. "The spirit of Cliff Burton is in Metallica," he recalled in *Guitar World*. To fall apart or not continue would have been an unthinkable insult to the memory of their friend and all that he had worked for.

Jason Newsted, one of the band's most devoted and musically adept fans, of Arizona contenders Flotsam and Jetsam, was equally determined to memorialize Burton, as well as earn his spot. "Cliff would have been proud," noted Kirk on the eve of Newsted's album debut, . . . *And Justice for All*, after an eleven-month world tour. . . . *And Justice for All* spawned two singles, but more important, established the band as an MTV presence with its first video, "One," which was based upon the tale of the wounded soldier in Dalton Trumbo's classic novel, *Johnny Got His Gun*.

In 1991, Metallica leapfrogged to the top with its eponymous (a.k.a. Black) album. New producer Bob Rock helped the band refine shorter songs, space-filled arrangements, varied instrumental textures, and more melodic vocals and harmonies. The Black Album shot to Number One around the world, stayed there, sold more than 15 million copies, and contained several hit singles, including the megalithic "Enter Sandman." The band toured in its wake for three years, becoming bona fide stadium headliners in the process.

It would be difficult for any artist to top, much less adequately follow up, that kind of massive aesthetic and commer-



In the Nineties: Ulrich, Newsted, Hetfield, Hammett (from left)



Heavy-metal fist jab: Lars Ulrich at the drums, 1989



Ride the lightning: James Hetfield, 1994



Hetfield, Ulrich, Hammett, and Newsted (from left), 1994

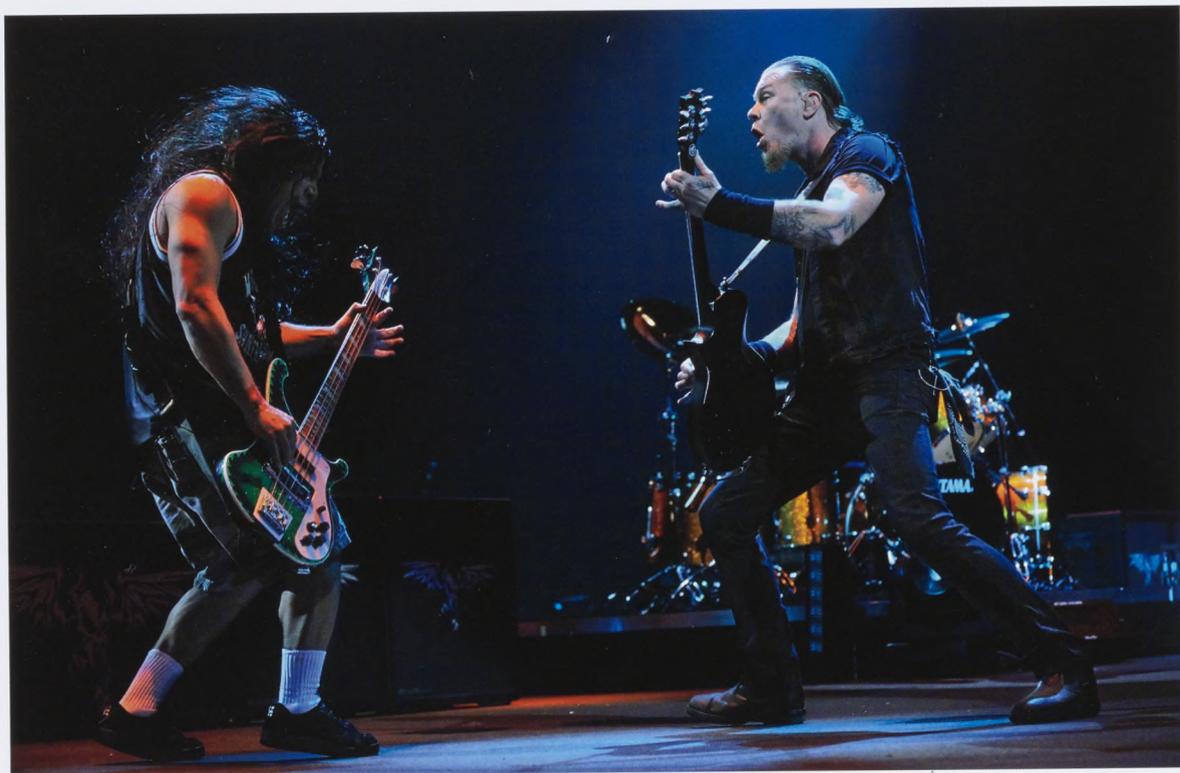
cial success, and few ever have. Metallica experimented over the next few years with looser collections of songs: *Load*, its companion, *ReLoad*, and perhaps most unexpected, *S&M*, a symphonic collaboration with conductor-arranger Michael Kamen that produced one of the band's most interesting efforts – a double disc and DVD of the genuinely spectacular concert experience. And even when not producing yet another groundbreaking studio masterpiece, Metallica continued to push the envelope and boundaries of live performance with each successive tour, giving audiences marathon sets and utilizing technology and staging that no one had ever dreamed of, much less used, before.

En route, Ulrich, who had always permitted fan taping and bootlegging (a cherished part of the metal underground that allowed Metallica to exist in the first place), got involved in a massive legal controversy that ultimately put Napster out of business and threatened to make criminals out of 300,000 or so of its college-age users. And then, in 2001, in front of the cameras of award-winning documentarians Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky, who'd been hired to make what they – and Metallica – assumed would be a fairly straightforward promotional film about the making of the next Metallica album, it all began to fall apart. Jason Newsted walked out of the band, precipitating a crisis, which, as seen in the film, gave new meaning to the term “group therapy.” Hetfield checked himself into a real sanitarium – instead of just singing about one nightly – to deal with depression and addiction issues that had plagued him since the turmoil of his adolescence and from which music no longer provided rare comfort or escape. But although the actual album that resulted, *St. Anger*, may be one of Metallica's less ultimately satisfying efforts, it was, by any other band's terms, a success.



Rocking Atlanta, 2000

More important, as the film that provides an unprecedented view into the creative process of any rock band attests, it, like Newsted's sacrifice, was a brave, necessary risk that the band members had no choice but to take in order to survive – if only to throw themselves into the lion's den of stadiums again. As demonstrated by subsequent tours with bassist Robert Trujillo, who has ably staked his claim to the next chapter of the band's continuing legacy, Metallica's always-extraordinary bonds with its audience have only been strengthened. The 2008 album, *Death Magnetic*, further reinvigorated by the presence of producer Rick Rubin, is a return to classic, new, improved form and finally makes good on the promises from last time around: This monster lives – and is now a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. ♪



ABOVE: New bass in place: Newest Metallica member Robert Trujillo and Hetfield, St. Louis, 2008.  
OPPOSITE: Nothing else matters: Trujillo, Hetfield, Ulrich, and Hammett.

