



Metal Magnates

Written by Silas Valentino

Metallica's latest notch in their ever-bulging belt is the double LP *Hardwired...To Self-Destruct*, the thrash band's 10th album in a career that covers 33 years, metal mastery, success marred by public bickering and a reputation with the Internet so sour they should consider working with Al Gore on a one-off single just for self-deprecation purposes. It's a silly scenario but it really couldn't hurt.

Their latest effort is immediately marked by their lengthy use of tradition (12 songs, 77 minutes); after all, the band hasn't had a studio album that's kept it under an hour since the late 1980s. The last time a new Metallica album was released—September 2008—the country was about to elect President Obama. *Hardwired...* arrives a mere nine days after the election of Donald Trump, a jolted stomp to whatever the last eight years meant. If it took the band this long to release a follow up (the eight-year difference is their longest break yet), *Hardwired...* must enter the books as a time capsule that captures metal's biggest band during a bout of political progression. In the cohesive passages that comprise the album's 12 numbers, steady subtleties are reflected (the seamless flow from song to song, the nonstop thrashing) suggesting that Metallica, it would appear, still have something to shout for.

Produced by Greg Fidelman, a seasoned sound engineer who's been producing each Metallica album since their 2011 collaboration with Lou Reed, the ill-fated *Lulu*, *Hardwired...* finds the aural sweet spot between overpowering head banging and crystal clarity. Glossy but commendable; Metallica have traveled far from their Sunset Strip upbringing.

Opening with their shortest song in decades, "Hardwired" captures the political mood surrounding the album's release date rather succinctly, and all within 3 minutes: "We're so fucked/Shit out of luck," James Hetfield roars, letting us know the time early and during the chorus. Lars Ulrich gives a galloping drum-roll section that quickly joggles memory back to Metallica's earlier and more concise thrash metal origins. Lyrically, Hetfield takes a shot at writing the most intense bedtime story used to explain climate change ("Once upon a planet burning/Once upon a flame") while crunchy rock riffs fly out of Kirk Hammett's lead ESP LTD guitar like a three-snakes-in-a-can practical prank. Brevity is seldom a word used to encapsulate Metallica but *Hardwired...*'s introductory track does in a few minutes what the next hour or so continues to bash over and over again: it fucking rocks.

The record's centerpiece is "Halo On Fire", a melodic mid-tempo song whose girth is matched by its dominance in structure. The rhythmic guitar lick Hetfield plucks during the song's verses is a smooth throwback to the band's more pop-friendlier tendencies but in no way is this the *Black Album 2.0*; just as the band appears to be resting on their laurels by resorting to cheap, heavenly gimmicks, the thunderous crack of Ulrich's snare drum rips us back down to earth, or to the netherworld.

Longtime fans may have qualms with *Hardwired...*'s two tribute tracks: "ManUNkind" and the penultimate track "Murder One." A dexterous bass line begins "ManUNkind" courtesy of Metallica's junior bassist Robert Trujillo who confirmed the groove was a "tip of the hat" to the band's hugely influential bassist Cliff Burton who died on a fatal bus accident in 1986. Trujillo's tribute is fitting and warm but the overlapping guitar notes from Hetfield cloud the homage and could have been cut and left on the floor. The other reverence was for Lemmy during "Murder One" but as one lifelong fan noted when privately asked when I wrote this review: "It sounds like Metallica hated Lemmy and never got to know him, but had to cash in on his death." Sad but true.

Metallica embodies metal and always have been. After listening to *Hardwired...* it's safe to assume they'll continue doing so until Hetfield and Ulrich ultimately clash for the final time. After all, this album is practically only credited to their writing—Trujillo's sole credit is "ManUNkind" and Hammett lost his iPhone in 2014 while in Copenhagen, effectively losing all of his 250 musical ideas for this project which rendered him relatively silent in *Hardwired...*'s creation).

With this latest double LP, Metallica appear to say that they have plenty more to play.

Artist: Metallica
Album: *Hardwired...To Self-Destruct*
Website: metallica.com

★★★★★

Label: Blackened
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