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REVIEWS

Dead Child's tales of the grotesque and arabesque

By David Pajo



Dead Child

Hello LEO readers, I'm David Pajo, and I play guitar in Dead Child. That's right, Dead Child. I know, it's a terrible name. Terribly cool, that is.

Who do we think we are by calling ourselves a heavy metal band? Aren't we all indie guys? In other words, we're posers, right? Death to false indie metal!

I don't have an answer to such questions. But I know that the only thing "false" about me is my front four teeth. In 1983, bikers at the Iron Maiden concert knocked out the real ones. I turn 40 this year. Do I really have to prove that I've earned my metal stripes?

But I understand when the young-uns say we aren't metal. By today's standards, we're more akin to Styx or Journey. We aren't about extreme brutality like most contemporary metal bands. Our agenda is simple: Make music that gets the blood flowing. Philosophically, I guess we're more aligned with punk than anything else. But rhythmically, we're inextricably combined with the notion of headbanging.

You have to keep in mind that I'm an old-timer playing music based on the crossover thrash metal scene in the mid-'80s. That's around the time I left metal for hardcore. Punk was fast, raw, urgent and direct. I was too impatient to wait around for the ascent of death metal in the early '90s. So when I say that we're a heavy metal band, I'm defining it in the classical sense (i.e., Judas Priest, Ozzy, Slayer).

But all this is starting to sound jive. What gives us the right to wax lyrical about ourselves anyway? After all, we're just five Joes with different lives who like to get together once in a while and use sound waves to raze our immediate surroundings. What's so special about that? I'm well aware that we are one of a million heavy rock bands out in the big ass world. Louisville has a jaw-dropping legacy of God-like bands. What do we bring to the table? Attack.

One of those times when we got together we decided to make a record called Attack. I should mention that this is our first album. I don't know if it's genius or generic, but we obviously dig it since we're releasing it. In this situation, it would be prudent to follow the wise words of the Joe Perry Project, "Let the music do the talking!" But since LEO was kind enough to ask, I'll tell you a little bit about it.

Side 1
I was a developing delinquent in the '80s, so I still think of recordings as vinyl albums, not compact discs. So when choosing the order of the songs, we had to consider the side breaks. If one side of an album is too long, you start to lose fidelity. It took a little juggling to find the perfect order that maximizes sound quality — 23.5 minutes per side.

1) Sweet Chariot
If you're going to name your album Attack, the first song better be a thrasher. Some people think this is an old gospel tune, but it's actually a Starkiller song. (Guitarist) Michael (McMahan) wrote it years before Dead Child existed. (Drummer) Tony (Bailey) and (bass player) Todd (Cook) gave it a good stomp and a twist; Michael and I down-tuned it to sub-atomic levels. Lyrically, it reminds me of the Norse folk legend of Oskerei or "Wild Hunt" — a legion of dead souls that fly across the sky on horseback, setting fires, causing ruination and whisking living persons away with them.

2) Never Bet the Devil Your Head
We call this one "The Classic," because it was the first song we ever wrote together. If you don't like this jam, you'll never like us. I use it as a measuring stick for new riff ideas: The tighter the execution, the better it sounds. This is one of a handful of songs that are directly inspired by gothic horror fiction, specifically Edgar Allan Poe.

3) Twitch of the Death Nerve
Wild and Woolly Video regulars will recognize this title. It was the 1971 Italian horror film (also known as "Bay of Blood") that inspired young American directors like Sean Cunningham, Wes Craven and John Carpenter. Basically, it was a pioneering work that became a template for slasher films a decade later. I just thought it was a good combination of words. (Singer) Dahm also references the Argento classic "Suspiria" with his lyric, "Maggots in your pretty hair." Todd wanted this song to open the record, and as far as I'm concerned, everything previous serves as an introduction. After the initial tempo changes, key modulations and guitar harmonies, the song doesn't find its gear until about midway through, when it settles into a Sabbath-style shuffle. It's this precise point where the album truly kicks in.

4) Screaming Skull
Dahm based this tune on a bit of horror fiction written in 1911 by F. Marion Crawford. I wrote the main riff when I was living in a tiny closet in the East Village of Manhattan three years ago. Later, Michael fleshed it out into a real song. I would drive down from Columbus, Ohio, to work on this with the band over many weekends. When it was finally arranged, it was a little over a minute long. I couldn't believe I spent all those hours driving, all that money on gas, all that time away from loved ones, for one single minute of thrash! Eventually it extended in length until it reached a distended and bloated two minutes.



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5) Rattlesnake Chalice

I don't remember how this title came about, except that we all thought it was really funny, and it kinda stuck. We gave Brad (Wood), our producer and engineer, a pimp chalice for Christmas with the inscription "Cheeks" — long story. I love the bass solo. Britt Walford (of Slint) said there is a drum fill in this song that sounds like a severed head hitting the floor.

6) Eye to the Brain

Dahm's description: "When what you see makes its way to what you think and the distorted process in between." This is also a tip of the hat to Bad Brains and an experiment in string skipping.

Side II

7) Armies Up Ahead

Kicking off Side II with a puff of dew, an unlikely Beatles-esque melody rears its wizened head. Something tells me this is a set-up. The clean guitars contrast with everything previous, but melodically, it is a misty, foreboding cloud.

8) The Coldest Hands

For those ill-informed mouthbreathers who say we're not heavy, gag on this for a cuppa two-tree minutes. I had the song in my head for nearly a month before I had a chance to release it. I was very ill and, at the apex of my fever, I stayed up all night and assembled it during a heavy thunderstorm. Listen for the repellent Peter Frampton talk box effect!

9) Angel of the Odd

Chris Owens (of Lords) did a really cool recording of our first five songs that eventually came out as an EP. At the time we didn't even know what we sounded like because, collectively, we'd never been in the same room at the same time — there was always someone missing. After playing it live for a few years, we managed to sharpen the edges ("practice makes perfect") to a tense and uncertain point. Inspired by the Poe short story of the same name.

10) Wasp Riot

This is probably our strangest song in that the main riff is more akin to ESG than SOD. In my mind, I wanted a bitter, repetitive groove to give the illusion of stability. This would make the middle section seem lower, deeper and more reckless. This song is as incongruous and misshapen as Leatherface's mask.

11) Black Halo Rider

Straight-up metal. Of all the songs on the album, this one is perhaps the most anti-social and taciturn. I wish I could shoot bullets of this song out of my eyes to everyone who annoys me. It's our anthem: "We're not dead, we're here." At our first show, Dahm left the stage, got on his bike and rode home while we kept jamming the ending riff. This was an effective, James Brown-like way to end the show and to shirk responsibility for breaking down gear and loading the van.

In closing, I'd like to say that we're really not as stupid as the photo on the back of the record would make us appear. Todd did not wear a teddy bear T-shirt to the photo session. David Yow (of Jesus Lizard) sprinkled some magic Photoshop dust on us to give us those delicious, subtle deformities. With all these bands trying to look pretty and/or wacky, we thought we'd take the opposite route. Now we can sleep at night knowing that we succeeded at being the ugliest band in Kentucky.

Check out Dead Child on MySpace at www.myspace.com/deadchildmusic. Contact the writer at leo@leoweekly.com

Dead Child plays this Friday, April 11, at Cahoot's.

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