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# 30 Artists Reflect on Metallica's *Black Album* Turning 30

Metallica's self-titled 1991 LP alienated a lot of the diehard fans who once clawed onto their every downstroke. The trade-off? A genre-defining album and a sphere of influence that still burns bright three decades later

Written By **Jason Pettigrew** | September 10 2021, 9:00 AM ET

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These days, **Metallica's** self-titled fifth LP (aka the Black Album) is hailed as a bona fide classic. Quite admirable, considering how upon its 1991 release date, diehard fans spread buyer's remorse faster than **COVID**. In this writer's tenure as a surly clerk for a mall-based record-store chain, he remembers the true believers complaining about everything from the shortened song lengths to James Hetfield's lyrics to uber-producer Bob Rock's framing of their heavy metal hellions. Back then, insufferable customers got their cash refunds while others continued to bitch like mad with the subtext that "maybe it would grow on me."

Now 30 years and approximately 35 million sales later, the Black Album is downright canonical. Sure, the Bay Area thrash-metal mavericks were indeed architects (alongside the other members of the legendary "Big 4" metal cabal: Anthrax, Slayer and Megadeth) for erecting cathedrals in the name of violent, crushing rock. Metallica certainly helped load the 174-bpm nail gun that affixed the coffin lid on hair-farming glam-metal. But you could see why fans expecting More *Justice for All...* were confused by Metallica's concise attacks: songs that traded light-speed ferocity for menacing girth and crunch. Clearly, the band's visions and dreams were larger than what the tape-trading metal underground could ever support.

Put the sales accolades and touring history on the back burner for a second and consider the *real* heat emanating off the band. The Black Album was that crucial flashpoint where Metallica were no longer the dominion of the heavy metal community: They belonged to the *world*. Radio stations saw the response and adjusted their playlists. Suddenly, metal was being used in more than a couple mass-market commercials for everything from cars to caffeine-laden *anything*. **Anthrax were featured** on an episode of the hit TV comedy *Married... With Children*. We're not throwing shade, we swear: You don't see Five Finger Death Punch in court stopping Victoria's Secret from attempting to name an eyeshadow after them. Avenged Sevenfold have never been summoned to Brian Eno's studio. But Metallica aligned with **Lou Reed** for *LULU*, the last recorded document of one of underground/alternative rock's patron saints. Metallica shed their underground battle jackets (and *Young Ones* tees) for the greater fabric of popular culture.

In an effort to convey the dizzying scope of the band's influence, *SPIN* asked 30 artists testifying to both Metallica and *Metallica* as a fulcrum for their own sonic *raison d'etres*. That scope features everyone from genuine legends to hip-hop notables to ska bands to classical pianists to militant Asian feminists. Some of these performers appear on *The Blacklist*, a compilation of 53 artists interpreting tracks from the classic album, now available with a newly remastered version of the original LP. However you feel about it, owning a copy of the Black Album feels like a rite of cultural passage alongside your first beer, car and psychic headbutt with an authority figure.

## Josie Cotton



CREDIT:Rio Warner

As a power-pop spawn of Wanda Jackson and the Troggs, I must [state] that I am in no way qualified to be voicing an opinion on Metallica's Black Album. What were you thinking, *SPIN*? Let it be known that I was in fact forbidden from ever entering the hallowed Viking halls of heavy metal. But I am a huge horror movie fan and the parallel aesthetic does not escape me. So maybe I am the right person. Otherwise it would be an embarrassing love-fest which I'm pretty sure is the exact opposite of what this band represents.

So I listened, from beginning to end and I have to say, the pure musicality, production and the lyrics on songs like "Enter Sandman" and "Sad But True" are simply epic. No way other way to describe them. "Nothing Else Matters" surprised me immensely... it's undeniable.

I'm officially setting my funeral ship on fire to commemorate my conversion, with a caveat. Is the record at times corny beyond measure? No doubt. Is there some cultural foreshadowing going on here? Sure. But I can't help but think there's a tongue-in-cheek element happening here as well, taking itself to the full extreme of natural and unnatural law with its adorable "fangs of rage."