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## HOTT ISSUE

STARRING...

# DOWN'S PHIL ANSELMO

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TRYING TO CAST RECENT TRAGEDY AND LONGTIME SUBSTANCE  
ABUSE BEHIND HIM, A NEWLY HEALTHY

## PHIL ANSELMO

RETURNS TO THE PUBLIC EYE WITH THE LONG-AWAITED THIRD  
ALBUM FROM HIS SOUTHERN-METAL SUPERGROUP,

DOWN

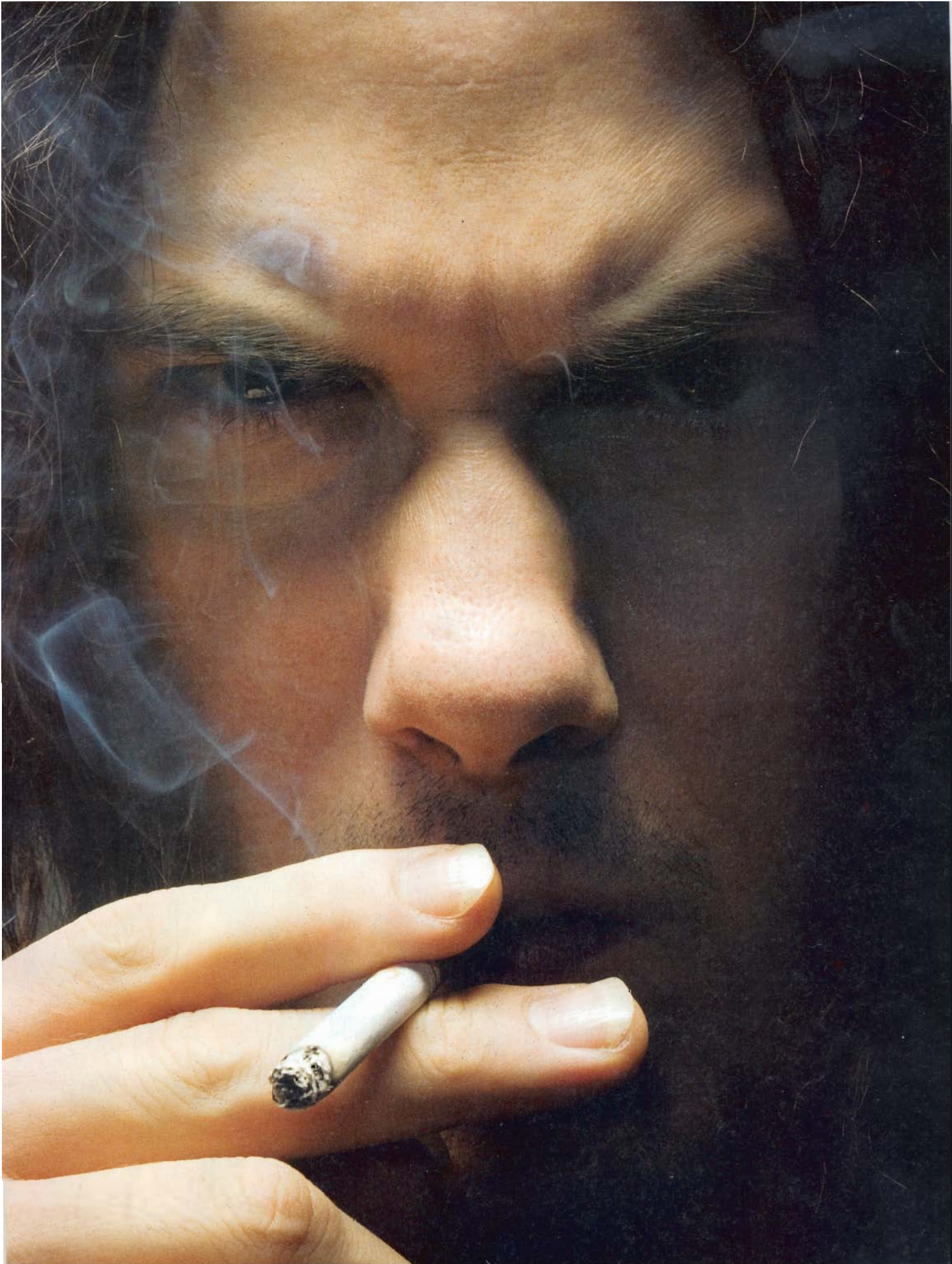
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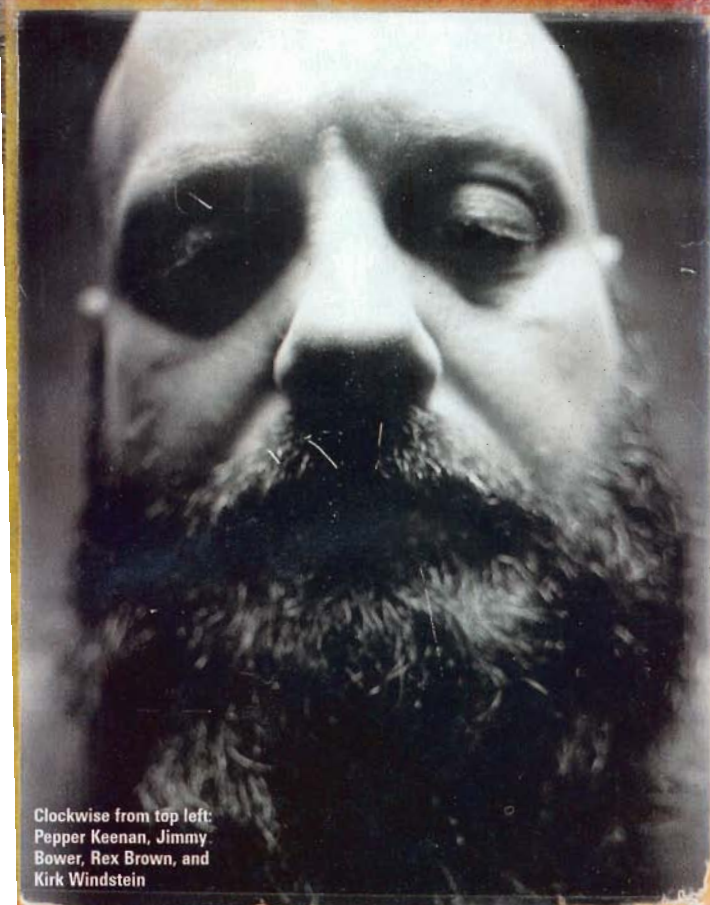
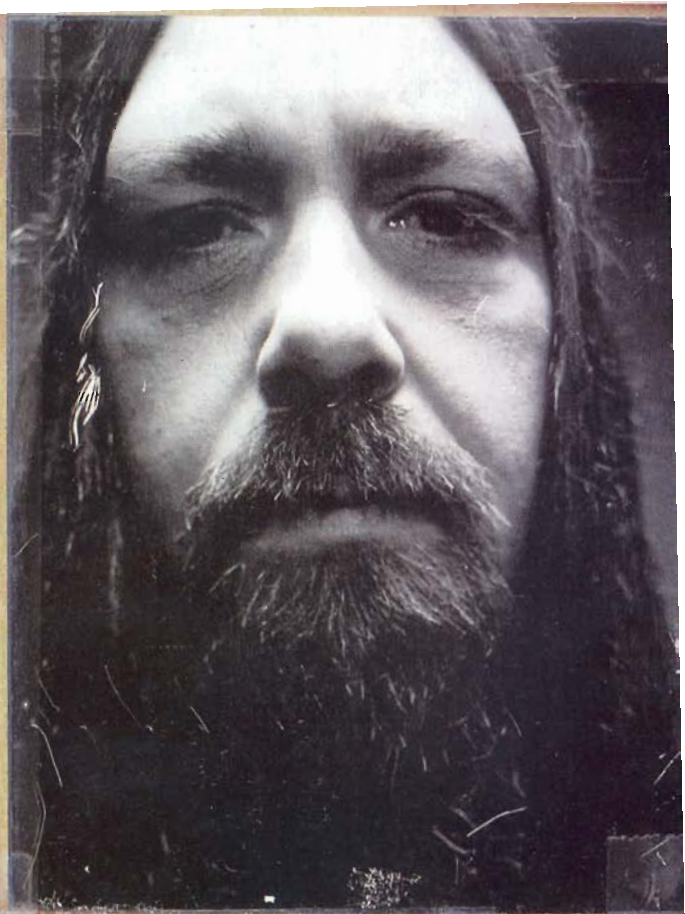
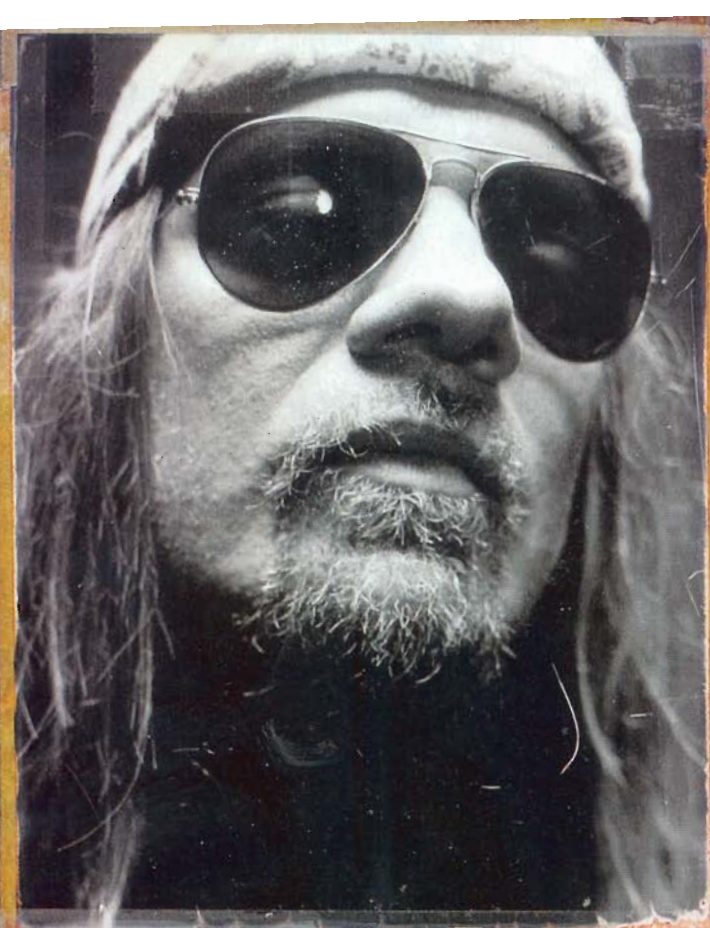


**“LET’S GO SOMEWHERE FANCY TO EAT SO I CAN LOOK REALLY OUT OF PLACE,”** chuckles Phil Anselmo to ex-Pantera/current Down bassist Rex Brown. It’s Brown’s forty-third birthday today, and the two are trying to figure out where to hold the night’s celebration.

In his sleeveless Discharge T-shirt, revealing his heavily muscled, heavily Paul Booth-tattooed arms, Anselmo would cut a striking figure in most settings, but what makes him stick out now—sitting in L.A.’s SIR studios, where his band Down have just finished practicing for an imminent two-week Australian tour with Heaven and Hell—is that while guitarists Pepper Keenan and Kirk Windstein are putting back cans of beer, the former Pantera frontman is drinking SoBe green tea and eating edamame (Japanese-style steamed soy beans). It’s an almost absurdly healthy snack for a man who has spent most of his legendary career pumping his body full of toxins—everything from cigarettes and alcohol to a lethal overdose of heroin in 1996, from which he was miraculously revived. It’s also evidence that the 2004 murder of his longtime bandmate, founding Pantera guitarist Dimebag Darrell, and the 2005 decimation of his hometown, New Orleans, by hurricane Katrina has indeed left Anselmo a changed man, as he repeatedly claimed to *Revolver* the last time we talked to him.

BY BRANDON GEIST — PHOTOS BY TRAVIS SHINN



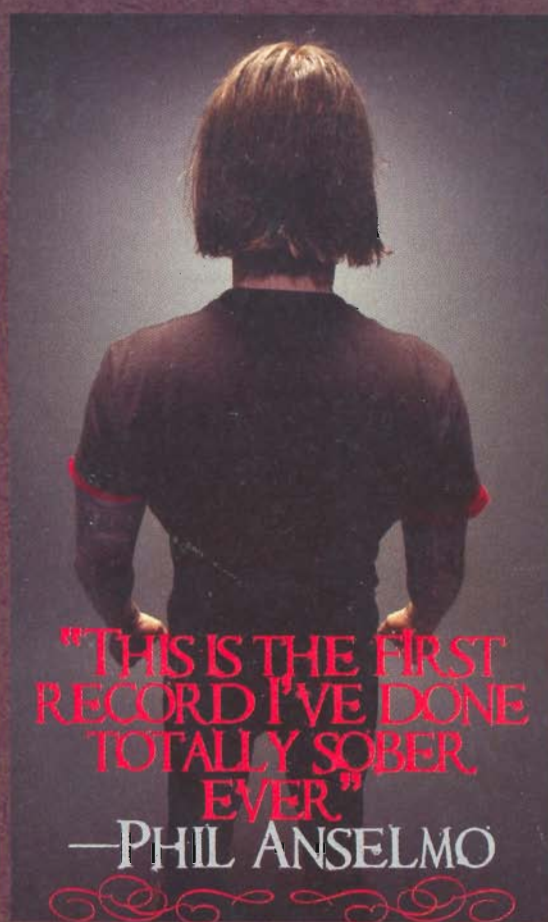


Clockwise from top left:  
Pepper Keenan, Jimmy  
Bower, Rex Brown, and  
Kirk Windstein

That conversation (recounted in *Revolver's* February 2006 issue) took place more than a year and a half ago, and it was Anselmo's first interview since Darrell's death—in fact, besides his appearance in VH1's *Pantera: Behind the Music* special, it was the only interview in which he talked about the tragedy. At the time, he received us in his Louisiana home with a vice-like handshake and the gruff command "Sit down"; by the time we were done talking, he had broken down in tears. Now, when we meet up with him before rehearsal at the 101 Café in the Hollywood Hills, he greets us with a warm smile and (vice-like) bear hug. While the natural and unnatural catastrophes of the past few years still weigh heavily on him, Anselmo is in high spirits as we chat over our iced teas, and for good reason. He's finally gotten the back surgery that he says he's needed for the last decade. He's kicked the hard drugs and painkillers that, over the same period, did so much damage to his mental and emotional health and, as a result, to Pantera. He's stopped drinking. And, perhaps the culmination of his apparent personal revolution, he and his bandmates in Down have just completed their first album in five years and their finest yet, the epic and cathartic *Down III—Over the Under* (LGN/Warner).

While Anselmo and Brown are heading to dinner after practice, Keenan is off to the Lynyrd Skynyrd concert at L.A.'s Greek Theatre ("I got teary eyed," he says of the show the next day) and drummer Jimmy Bower is going to see the Melvins at the Troubadour (his report: "I left early—I'm so short, I couldn't see anything"). The two musical choices might seem to have little in common, but together they go a long way in explaining the sound of *Down III*. One part soulful Southern rock, one part gut-rumbling Sabbathian sludge, it's the sort of album you might dream would come from fans of both Skynyrd and the Melvins, if not from a supergroup comprising members of Pantera, Corrosion of Conformity (Keenan), Crowbar (Windstein), and Eyehategod (Bower).

Of course, *supergroup* is not a term that the bandmates use themselves. "A bunch of schoolyard kids who still hang out" is how Keenan has described the group. Formed in 1991 with then-Crowbar member Todd Strange on bass (the lone non-New Orleans native in the band, Texas-bred Brown didn't join until 1999), Down



really were just old-time NOLA pals jamming together for the fun of it. Anselmo met Windstein, his oldest friend in the group, some 27 years ago, and the two would play pickup games of football against each other as kids—"Whenever he would return a kickoff or something, I would just get outta the way," the singer jokes after rehearsal. "I mean, look at those calves," he says, pointing out Windstein's massive lower-leg muscles, which could have been transplanted directly from Popeye's forearms.

The incipient Down had little thought of putting out albums, touring the world, or winning fame and fortune. In fact, the band's main songwriters, Anselmo and Keenan, who were both deeply involved in the underground tape-trading scene, would swap Down's first three-song demo with fans of their main bands without even telling them who was in the group. Copies of the demo spread, and the next thing the two bandmates knew, kids around the globe were trading the tape back to them, asking them if they had ever heard of "this band called Down."

It wasn't long before the entire metal world would be able to answer that question with a resounding yes. After the group made its live debut with a small hometown show, major label Elektra learned of the band members' identities and got in touch, ultimately releasing Down's 1995 sweet leaf-smoking, Rebel Flag-waving debut, *NOLA*. In a year when groups like Green Day and Silverchair topped the rock charts, the album shocked the music industry by going platinum.

Despite such success, after a brief 13-date tour, Down were put on indefinite hold as the band members refocused on their main projects. They would resurface in 2002 with

*Down II—A Bustle in Your Hedgerow*, but the album, written and recorded in just 28 drug-and-booze-fueled days in Nödferatu's Lair, the barn/jam room on Anselmo's Louisiana property, was much rawer and more disjointed than *NOLA* and, consequently, less well received. Soon the band members went their separate ways again, with Anselmo and Bower shifting their attention to their crustcore outfit Superjoint Ritual.

But Down, much like their frontman, is a beast that simply refuses to stay dead, and *Down III* is a comeback record in the truest sense. From the hard-swinging "On March the Saints," a tribute to the New Orleans NFL team whose 2006 playoff run rallied their hometown post Katrina, to the crushing "Mourn," which addresses the painful aftermath of Darrell's murder, the album sees the band returning to the unyielding sonic and emotional heaviness of *NOLA*, and wrenching musical triumph from real-life tragedy. Anselmo, in particular, sounds like a man reborn, singing with a raw-throated melodicism and bare-hearted emotion he hasn't approached in at least half a decade, if ever.

During rehearsal it becomes even clearer how different this Anselmo is from, say, the one who took Down out on Ozzfest 2002, or Superjoint Ritual out on Ozzfest 2004. Often obviously drunk or drugged up or both, that frontman spent nearly as much time onstage rambling, chest-thumping, and bullying audience members as actually playing songs; in interviews, he frequently came across as surly, egomaniacal, and/or virtually catatonic, almost a caricature of the junkie metal singer he had become. This frontman, in contrast, is not only focused and energetic in his performance but good-humored and self-deprecating between songs. After a rock-solid rendition of "Lifer," the barefooted Anselmo jumps and spins counterclockwise in a hilariously awkward leap that's half Ozzy, half gawky frog. "That's my new move," he announces to his bandmates. "Every time, just as we're kicking into a heavy part, I'm gonna do that from now on." He pauses then adds, "Ah, who am I kidding? I'm so old that if I tried to do it for real, it would come out like that."

But the truth is that the 39-year-old Anselmo is in better shape, both physically—"I weigh 170 lbs," he notes at one point. "I haven't weighed 170 since [Pantera's 1992

album] *Vulgar Display of Power*,"—and spiritually, than he's been in recent memory. Old-time Pantera fans remember Anselmo as a goofy, enthusiastic fanboy eager to whip out a dead-on impression of Suicidal Tendencies frontman Mike Muir or shoot a laughably lo-fi splatter-film sequence (examples of both can be seen on the Pantera DVD *3 Vulgar Videos From Hell*); observing him now as he ad-libs a song about "Bruised Balls" to the tune of "Blue Moon," raves about the last Celtic Frost record, and generally displays a seemingly encyclopedic knowledge of all things related to metal, horror films, and boxing, it's hard not to feel like *that* Phil Anselmo is finally back.

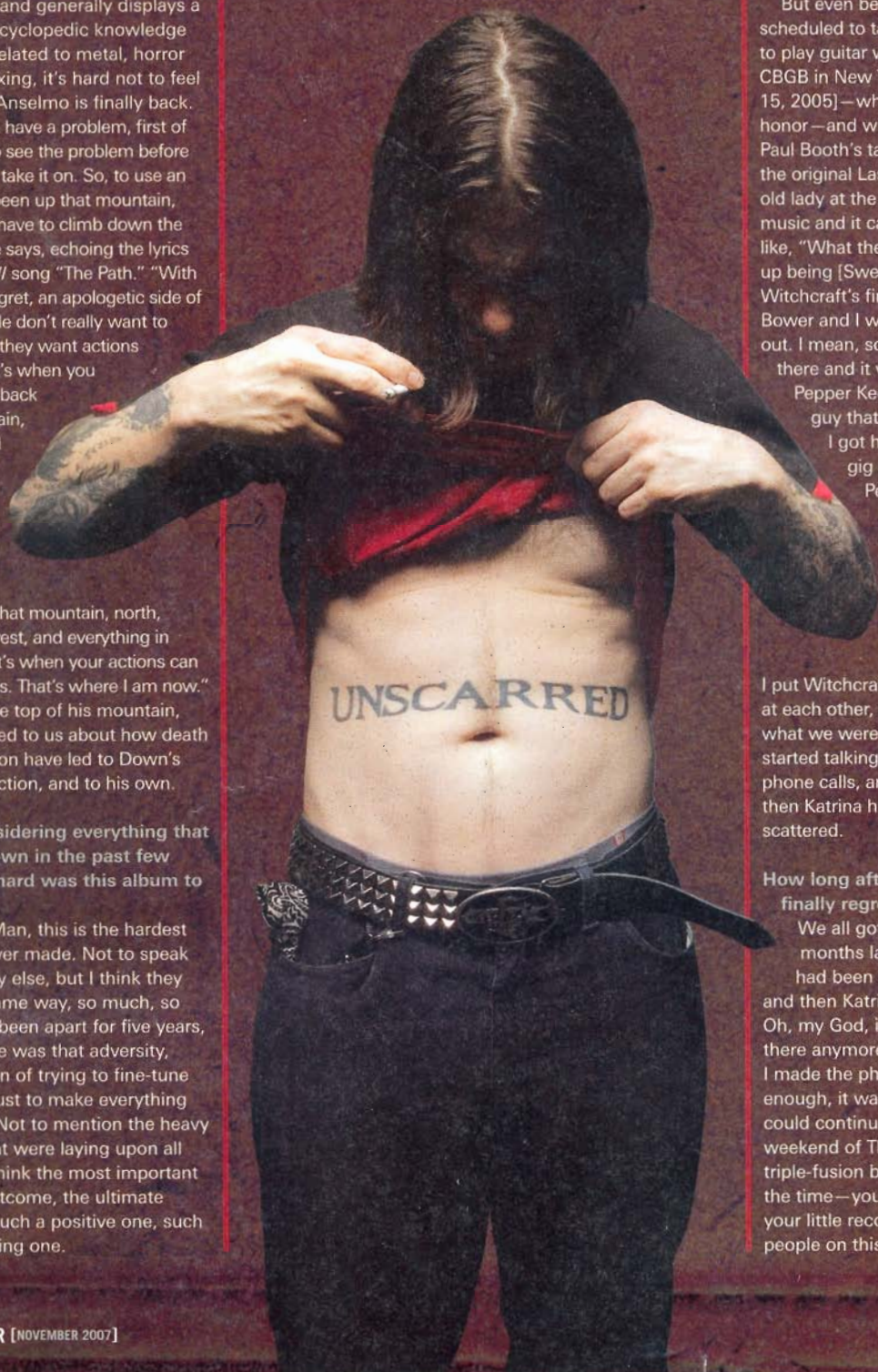
"When you have a problem, first of all you have to see the problem before you can try to take it on. So, to use an analogy, I've been up that mountain, and then you have to climb down the mountain," he says, echoing the lyrics of the *Down III* song "The Path." "With that comes regret, an apologetic side of you that people don't really want to hear because they want actions to speak. That's when you have to climb back up the mountain, and you stand on top and you breathe the clean air. And you can see for a million miles, every side of that mountain, north, south, east, west, and everything in between. That's when your actions can speak volumes. That's where I am now."

So from the top of his mountain, Anselmo talked to us about how death and destruction have led to *Down*'s latest resurrection, and to his own.

**REVOLVER** Considering everything that has gone down in the past few years, how hard was this album to make?

**PHIL ANSELMO** Man, this is the hardest album I've ever made. Not to speak for everybody else, but I think they all feel the same way, so much, so much. We'd been apart for five years, man, so there was that adversity, the frustration of trying to fine-tune everything, just to make everything work again. Not to mention the heavy emotions that were laying upon all of us. But I think the most important thing, the outcome, the ultimate outcome is such a positive one, such a strengthening one.

"LEARNING  
HOW TO WALK  
AGAIN WAS A  
HUMBLING  
EXPERIENCE."  
—ANSELMO



How did the guys in *Down* end up coming back together? Who made the first move?

Well, I think it was up to me. I was the guy that was sick, I was the guy that was injured, I was the guy that needed to be repaired. I needed to become a whole man again. And I was on my way—I had been cleared for neurosurgery, and I was like, God, thank you. I had waited for that for over a decade. And finally, you know, neurosurgery has come so far, and I found the right doctor.

But even before the surgery was scheduled to take place, I was asked to play guitar with Eyehategod at CBGB in New York City (on August 15, 2005)—which was such an honor—and while there, I stopped by Paul Booth's tattoo shop, Last Rites, the original Last Rites, and Paul's old lady at the time was playing this music and it caught my ear. I was like, "What the fuck is this?" It ended up being [Swedish stoner-rock band] Witchcraft's first record. Jimmy Bower and I were just, like, freaking out. I mean, something else was out there and it was real, and I was like,

Pepper Keenan. He was the first guy that came to my mind. So

I got home from doing the gig and I went straight to Pepper's house. Man, it's almost midnight, and we hadn't really talked in some two-odd years, but he lets me in, we catch up, and then I'm like, "Check this out."

I put Witchcraft on, and we looked at each other, and it was pretty clear what we were both thinking. We started talking, and everybody made phone calls, and we got excited—and then Katrina hit, and everybody was scattered.

How long afterward did *Down* finally regroup?

We all got home about three months later, and like I said, I had been cleared for surgery and then Katrina hit, so it was like, Oh, my God, is the hospital even there anymore? So after I got home, I made the phone call and sure enough, it was amazing, yeah, we could continue as planned. The weekend of Thanksgiving, I had a triple-fusion back surgery. And at the time—you can check this in all your little records—I was one in 10 people on this planet to have this

type of surgery, which is called noninvasive back surgery. So instead of splitting of you wide open, the guy makes five small incisions—and he even spared my Venom tattoo! [Anselmo bounces out of his seat, turns around, and lifts his shirt to reveal the Venom Black Metal tattoo on his lower back, which has two long scars on either side of it.] I had been told that I would never be able to touch my toes again—well, pardon me while I show off. [He bends and touches his toes, grins, then returns to his seat.] Physical rehabilitation, I can't say enough about that. It made me a new man, put regimen into my life. No time for hangovers anymore.

Learning how to walk again was a humbling experience; Katrina was a humbling experience. Compassion, untapped compassion became the rule of the day. The kindness in people astounds me, the strength of the people that I was surrounded by—everything they had was gone: ghettos, old neighborhoods. But everybody was on the same page, and we helped each other out. And that's really what has spawned so much of this music.

**When you guys finally did get back into Nödferatu's Lair, what was it like jamming together clean and sober?**

Even as far back as 1988, when I recorded *Power Metal* with Pantera, I was at least drinking a beer, if not shots of whiskey, before playing. Honestly, I still enjoy a little...herbal influence. I see no problem with that, so "Hail the Leaf," if you will. But the point is, this is the first record I've done totally sober...ever. And it did do things to the writing process. I'd get up in the middle of the night to go take a leak, and I'd be sleep-writing; I'd be changing around parts of the music that I had been working on. I mean, this record consumed us—we spent over a year working on it. And all of us were extremely hard on ourselves, let alone on each other.

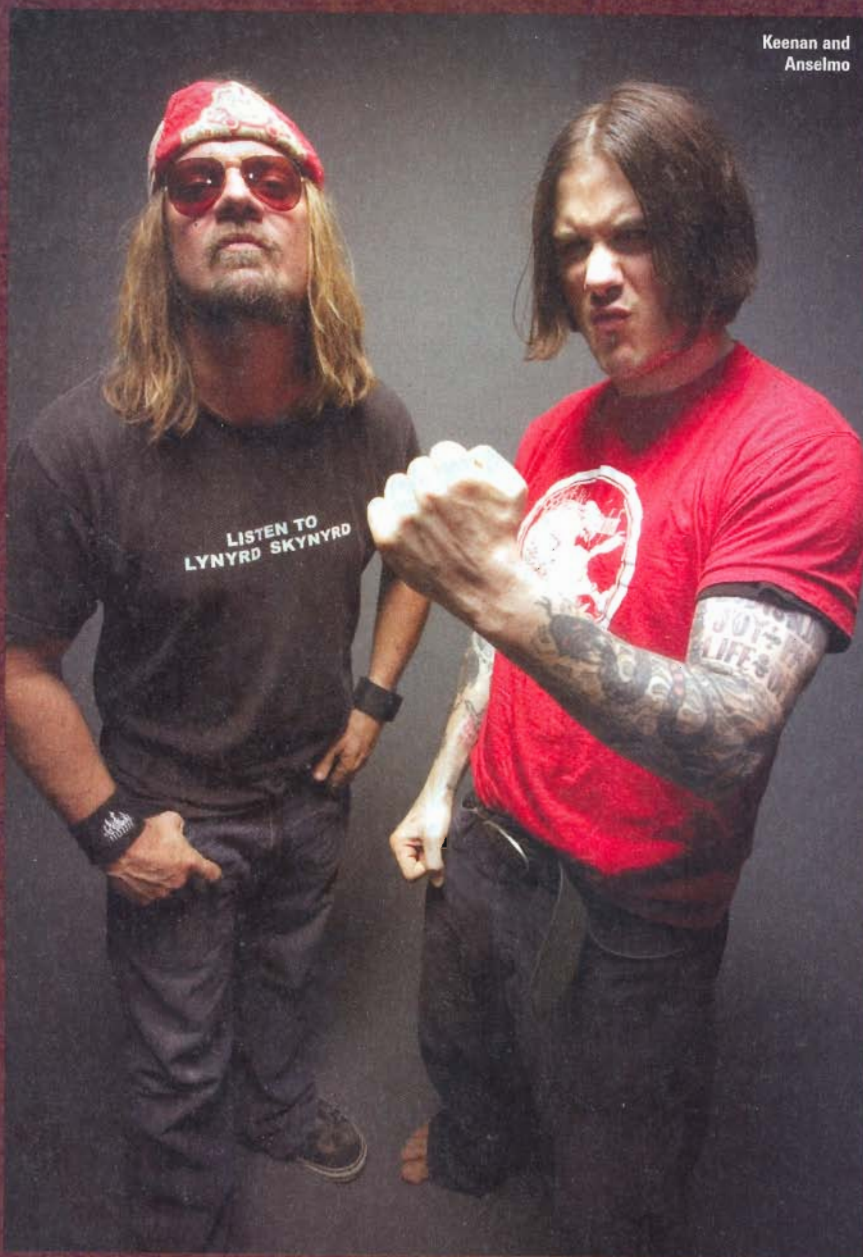
**How about performing live clean and sober? You guys have toured Europe, Canada, and the U.S. over the past year. How different is it for you now than when you were onstage back in 2002 or 2004?**

I can see every face now. I could see them before, but I couldn't see them. Now I see every eye, every crease; I don't care where you're at, I will find you. Man, the overwhelming emotion of playing live is the best high known.

And it's almost tear rendering, the support I've felt while on tour. I cannot thank enough the fans who have been loyal, the ones who don't buy into sides of fences that people really have no business to even think one way or another. They weren't there in '86. I was there when we were both teenagers—Darrell and I were the youngest in the band. We were teenagers; we grew up together. That's the truth, and no one else can pretend to know.

**Speaking of Dime, I have to ask you about the song "Mourn."**

That's a very hard, hard song for me to really...honestly, the song speaks for itself. It's about feeling isolated



Keenan and Anselmo

from my family in Texas, feelings about the obvious...deep, deep, deep feelings every day. You know, I've been very quiet ever since the incident, but it's all good. Everyone else has aired their laundry, like on VH1. I'm sorry, I thought what VH1 did was awful. They glossed over everything that Pantera did to and for metal, and not once...I'm not really sure how it was put, but there was a segue or something that described [Darrell's] killer [Nathan Gale] as "what many feel was a disgruntled fan angry that Pantera had broken up." But not once did they go into the psychology of the killing, and how he was dishonorably discharged [from the Marines], that his mother bought him the gun for Christmas because he was depressed, how he had been kicked out of the same club a weekend before for acting strange. He was going to shoot whoever, and it happened to be one of my best friends, one of my brothers, and one of the most beautiful people...

I decided a while ago that, yes, absolutely, there is a proper time to mourn, and that he deserves a celebration of his life, and that's the path that I've chosen. Every action I do, I think of him. Every pushup I do, I think of him. Every time I hit a line, or I'm working in the studio, I can hear him saying, "You can do better." So that's what gets me through the hard times, the trying times, is his positivity. And that's what I wanted to do with [Down III]: to celebrate life. ☠