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Brave Words & Bloody Knuckles



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Doom

Drowning In Doom

By Martin Popoff

Down

Amongst what's left of BLOOD AND GUTS ROCK 'N' ROLL IN THE '90S, WHO'S OUT THERE TRYING - REALLY TRYING - these days? IS ALICE IN CHAINS BAD-ASS? YEAH, THEY SORT OF ARE. THERE'S A DEPRESSIVE VIBE AROUND WHAT THEY ARE TRYING TO DO THAT IS WORKING. VELVET REVOLVER? NAH... THEIR BAD VIBE IS THE FACT THAT THEY ARE ACTING LIKE ROCK STARS (THEY JUST DON'T SEEM LIKE GOOD GUYS). AUDIOSLAVE LOOKED SO COOL ON PAPER AND THEN WERE TREATED WITH INDIFFERENCE FROM THEIR FIRST UTTERANCE ON. THE CULT, PUMPKINS - FOO! STRANGELY, MEGADETH HAS GOT IT GOIN' ON. I MEAN, THERE'S A PALPABLE MAGIC TO THAT BAND RIGHT NOW, AND MUCH OF IT IS PRECISELY FOR THE SAME REASON DOWN IS BANGIN' HEADS - A POTENT DISPLAY OF "NEW CLASSIC" METAL ABOARD THE HEAVEN AND HELL TOUR.



The brief goods (few of you smart BW&BK readers need a briefing): Down began as a COC/Pantera/Crowbar side-project. Their first album, *NOLA*, is unanimously considered a classic, given that it sounds like commercial, groovy Pantera - who doesn't like that? *Down II: A Bustle In Your Hedgerow...* I dunno, most fans consider it a bit impenetrable and sluggish. It didn't make the same impact as the sharp and groovy debut. And now there's *Down III: Over The Under*, a record one might class as drawing goodly attributes from both, possessing one half the steel and fire of the first one, and one half the murky atmosphere from *Down II*. To finish up on the hard facts: the lineup for the third record is same as that of the second, namely Pepper Keenan and Kirk Windstein on guitars, Jimmy Bower on drums, and one half of Pantera, Rex Brown and Philip Anselmo, on fat strings and broken hope poetry respectively.

"We've just been through a lot of shit; that's all I can tell you," begins Pepper, on the sodden road through Hurricane Katrina and halfway back. "But we're still here. We had a whole different set of eyes when we went in to record this record. We were a lot more focused on recording. We actually went into a proper studio and spent time to demo the songs, and quite a bit of time rehearsing and writing material. We've been through so much prior to recording; we just wanted to take a breather and spend some time at it. We recorded in Los Angeles, actually. There wasn't really anywhere to record in New Orleans. We thought it might be a good time to get out of here for awhile. And we were pretty focused in the studio. It allowed us to not have to worry about the daily grind of living in New Orleans,

getting to the studio in New Orleans, the power outages in New Orleans. But yeah, we hung out with a lot of people. We've got a lot of friends there."

"For Down II, we had more or less written the songs in different periods of time, and put it together really, really quickly," adds Rex. "I mean, recorded them real quick (laughs), trying to make the best out of them, from all the jams. This one was a more cohesive kind of monster. You know, when you listen to Back In Black, you can almost tell what songs are next. That's what we really tried to strive for on this record. So it's a much more focused record than Down II."

"I lived out here," continues Brown, down the line from LA, where the band is debuting the album. "So, I'd been here for a couple years. There are some really cool studios. We said, 'You

know what? Let's not do it at The Barn this time. Let's do it in LA, and do it proper.' Even though I hate proper fucking studios. It was just to get them out of their element and for them to come here and to record the record. Hell, it was just like working for me. I'm used to this fucked-up town. I've since moved back to Texas, to a ranch. There's too many fucking people here, man."

"Phil had all kinds of crazy fuckin' shrines inside the vocal booth and shit like that," says Rex, on getting the studio conducive to the Down vibe. "And you know, you bring your fucking incense or whatever, depending on the track. No, we didn't bring any tapestry bullshit. The places we recorded at were so kind of tripped out anyway, it was a good vibe anyway. These places were really cool."



DOWN GUITARIST KIRK WINDSTEIN CHECKS IN

By Aaron Small

Down II was written and recorded in 28 days. Down III didn't come together quite as smoothly. "It was intentional. After we regrouped and somewhat got over the storm (Hurricane Katrina), we decided to head over to Europe. Everything went really well. We got our feet wet, got back to playing together, hanging together. We took the better part of a year writing, demoing, recording, beating ourselves to death with these songs, re-doing them over and over again. We all just felt the timing was right for us to release this third record. We felt the importance of it. We wanted to take a different approach."

Thankfully Kirk was spared the full wrath of the aforementioned Katrina. "I had just bought a house and was going to move in that week. It didn't have any damage other than a few shingles - considering what went on, I'm not even going to call it damage. I didn't even file an insurance claim so it was a Godsend. Pretty much the rest of my neighborhood flooded at least somewhat. The FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) trailers are disappearing. There's still a few in the hood. It depends on where you're at. Where I'm at, the majority of people had two or three feet of water and it subsided quickly. It wasn't like 12 feet of water in your house for three fucking weeks that ruined it. I actually stayed through the storm with my mother. She didn't want to leave. She had been sick at the time and said screw it. If she's going to go, she's going to go in her own house. Where she was at also fared very well, which was very fortunate. But it ain't like that everywhere!"

When Down take to the road in support of III - Over The Under, there will not be an opening act. "We'll probably average an hour and 50 minutes. It depends on the crowd and how Phil gets rolling. One thing that will give us an advantage: ever bands that are a little more one-dimensional is our diverse and dynamic set list. It's not the same damn thing over and over and over. Crowbar for instance, it's useless for us to play more than an hour because it's really one style of music bashing you over the head. But with the different vibes and I feels on the Down stuff, I think we can really pull off doing a two hour set with everyone still being interested and not getting tired of it."

In order to bring the concert experience home, a Down DVD is in the works. "We had a professional crew

with us on the European tour last year with the intention of doing a movie of some sorts. Kind of like our version of The Song Remains The Same (Led Zeppelin's documentary from 1976). Not a DVD with backstage footage of topless chicks and dudes guzzling beer; a little more serious. It's not on hold; it's just taking a while to get everything rolling. We still fully intend on putting that out. The kind of band Down is, we feel it suits us a lot better and I think our fans will enjoy it a lot more. Put it this way - the tricks and all the goofy shit, Pantera's got that covered. To even attempt to keep up with that craziness and have people laughing all the time, we're trying to take the opposite approach and just get a feel for what it's like playing live and being on the road. That was our first trip to Europe. There's countless hours of stuff so hopefully we can get that together soon."

Plans are afloat to re-record the debut Down album, NOLA. Reason being, Rex wasn't in the band at that time and Kirk laid down the bass tracks. "What that's all about is, obviously we're no longer on EastWest. That record is hard to find in different territories. Basically, we're just trying to get it back. Our thinking on that was, if we're going to re-release it - I'm not a bass player. When you listen to Down I and III, you can hear what a real bass player sounds like. If you take a song like 'Rehab' for instance, in a sitting there hitting the damn A note. Then I'm hearing what's coming out of Rex's cabinet every night we do it live, you can't compare the two. If we're going to go ahead and redo it, we're going to make it worthwhile with a DVD, extra demo songs, unreleased stuff, old photos and at the same time, give it a little breath of fresh air. It's a classic record but it is 12 years old now."

As a result, Down III features a fairly organic, wet and bulbous sound, perfect for the band's juiced up doom sludge. Frankly, production like this would drag the thing into the waters if the songs weren't tight-knit and sharp.

"Yeah, we wanted to have the drums sounding really good; that was a major concern," explains Rex, on the album's production job. "We found this old stainless steel set of Ludwigs, and we basically mic'd all the drums, put a PA in the fucking room, mic'd the PA up, with the drums coming through, and it was just fucking monstrous sounding. Yeah, the drum sound on this album is insane. We had them closed mic'd and then we mic'd them from abroad, then we mic'd them through this fucking PA, and then when you turned the PA on and had the drums kicking in, it was louder than shit. We wanted to get that mammoth, big, powerful thing. And then the guitars and the bass... I just used my regular Ampeg set-up, but the guitar guys, they had like 50 different heads down there. There is no telling what they used."

Another thing one notices is the number of cool voicings Phil uses to get his morbid points across. "Phil spent a lot of energy and time working on the vocals," says a clearly proud Pepper. "He really wanted to get back a couple of notches to where he was singing. Because we were unveiling a lot of depth lyrically and musically, and he wanted to shine on that. A lot of doubling things, a lot of harmony things. There are also some backing vocals by me and Kirk as well."

It's no surprise that the ravaging of New Orleans by Mother Nature (and the folly of man), and the subsequent rape by omission of the area by the Bush administration has added character to the faces of the warriors in Down.

"Phil is very good at using his experiences to write songs," says Pepper, asked where the flood has seeped into Anselmo's train of thought on Down III. "I mean, 'On March The Saints' would be an obvious thing, but it's just a metaphor. There's a lot of information. 'Beneath The Tides' is another type of thing where the guitar playing is really fluid and watery sounding, kind of slippery. We just used all our experiences we've been through, to write music, trying not to use the negativity of all these experiences as a catalyst. Trying to take the high road, I guess you would say."

"I mean, everybody was affected," says Pepper, who took a direct hit when his bar was looted in the apocalyptic aftermath. "We lost relatives in the storm, people lost property, families lost property. For the most part we were fine, compared to the majority of people in New Orleans. But even that is heartbreaking - after all, it is your city. Things were once the way they were, and they're not that way anymore."

What is one of the biggest things that people don't know about the situation that the press hasn't picked up on?

"Just the severity of what's happened here. You know, I'm almost ashamed at times to be an American. If this were a different city, I think it would've been brought back to its feet quicker. You drive through some of these neighborhoods... the blatant lack of political leadership in this situation is embarrassing. It's basically every man for himself. Which is fine, but when the hurricane was coming, I knew damn well that George Bush wasn't going to save my ass. Anybody who thought he was is a fucking moron. And they died."

"Trust me, it's a daily grind here. I tell ya, an hour does not go by in this city when the word Katrina doesn't pop up. Or some semblance or reflection of that, or dealing with a symptom of that. It's different; it's a way of life down here. Crime is rampant. You've lost half the population, you've lost half your tax base. Our power bills are exorbitant. We had a power outage yesterday for a couple hours. Water pressure is low. It's not an easy place to live. Some of the schools are open but most of them are not, and not close enough to caliber. Hospitals, there's maybe one or two that are functioning. The streets are deplorable."

"For us, for the most part, everybody's all right," says Pepper, looking at his inner circle. "I'm the only person that

lives in the city. I'm in Orleans Parish. Everybody is still alive. We did lose several people through the storm, and their parents. People's parents and grandparents. A lot of elderly people did not pull through this thing. Even the ones who survived the storm, shortly afterward, were just giving up, basically. You know what I mean? Having your entire home wiped out when you're 60 years old, what are you going to do? You've paid for your house and now you've got nothing left. Where do you go?"

But aside from providing harrowing resonances of the flood, Phil writes in a number of directions all over this strident album. Says Pepper, "His Majesty The Desert" is an instrumental thing I wrote, and Phil had put words to it. It's just a cool little interlude for 'Pillamyd'. 'Pillamyd' is a pretty in-depth song about how people can ruin their lives with certain paths they choose; they will destroy you. Handful by handful you will build a pillamyd. Just too much. Get through it and get out of there while you still can."

Opener '3 Suns And 1 Star' sports a ferocious, memorable doom riff that would make Lee Dorrian proud. Lyrically, this one's special as well... "That's actually one of the first things that Phil had worked on, and it was kind of his take on the Pantera days. The three suns were the band, and the star being Darrell. So it was a cool way to look back at that - a brilliant idea, and a powerful song."

Does it look like there's been any thawing of relations between those guys?

"I don't think so. Vinnie is on his own doing his thing. Obviously everybody misses him immensely. I haven't spoken to him in God knows how long. Everyone wishes him the best. At least he's playing music, which is what he's always wanted to do."

"There's so much on here, I don't even know where to start," says Pepper, asked about tasty guitar bits on the album. "We put a lot of effort into this thing. There's a lot of information, a lot of different guitar amps, a lot of different guitars. I did slide guitar for the first time, on 'Beneath The Tides'. That's the first time I ever... I played slide before but never like that through an entire song. I mean, solo slide, Duane Allman fuckin' slide - no one's done that in our world for quite some fuckin' time."

Articulating the roles he and Kirk (ex-Crowbar) have adopted for themselves within the Down framework, Pepper figures that, "Kirk is more of an accurate solo player, faster. I'll be more the melodic David Gilmour dude. He's more of the fuckin' Frank Marino guy. That's basically, how you can tell the difference between us on the record - just keep that in mind when listening to it (laughs)."



"It just comes natural, I guess," muses Pepper on just why all this energy is applied to this particular corner of the metal genre - doom, stoner rock, sludge... those tags sum up Down pretty efficiently with no apologies for applying them need.

"We've all grown up playing that kind of thing. I mean, we're a southern band. Were not from Berlin, Germany. As far as playing that sludgy stuff or slippery stuff or bluesy stuff, whatever you want to call it, it's just because we consider ourselves to be southern musicians. We're not a bunch of stiff machines. It kind of comes naturally."

Are you guys Cathedral fans?

"Yeah sure. I don't think Cathedral has the depth we have. They're dealing with some different elements there (laughs). But I love Lee Dorian. He's one of the main reasons that Phil and I started this. Lee did a thing called Dark Passages a long time ago, and the early, early Cathedral stuff was just super doomy heavy shit."

Adds Rex, "People ask us all the time, 'Who are you influenced by?' Pretty much,

we're influenced by ourselves. You've got to think, five guys from four different bands. That's a lot of fuckin' music we put out over the years. But it is not stoner rock. If you have to call it anything... call it that, I don't give shit. I just call it Down; that's all there is to it. The minute we start sounding like somebody else, fuckin'... I ain't doing it anymore. Of course there is your obvious Sabbath overtones to it; we all grew up on that. And if there is any major influence, of course, being from the south, you've got blues, jazz and fuckin' Lynyrd Skynyrd - there you have it."

Finally, wanting to close on a high note, I asked the guys if they had any lasting impressions of kickin' it with Sabbath every night. "We hung out, we toured with them through Australia and New Zealand, and the Canadian thing," reflects Pepper. "So yeah, we'd gotten pretty tight over the last couple of months. They're still a fantastic band. They kicked the dog shit out of it every night, and it was an honour to hang out with them. Australia was interesting because we were flying to every show, so we were in the airport bar with them every day (laughs). Hanging out with Dio. Me and Kirk spent a lot of time talking to Dio, picking his brain about the old days."

Sure, Pepper's pickin' Dio's brain, but meanwhile, Rex is having an epiphany... "Oh yeah, this little anecdote. I'm walking in this hotel casino in Melbourne, and Tony Iommi waves over at me. Dude, if you could go back 30 years, back to me and my eight track tape of Sabbath in my hand, never in a million years would I would have guessed that Tony Iommi would be waving at me, walking through a fuckin' hotel. It was just too surreal. I'm going, 'Man, life doesn't fuckin' get much better than that.'"



PHIL'S BACK...

A life of extreme headbanging has banged up our favourite stoked croaker pretty good.

A few words from his bandmates on Anselmo and his back problems...

Pepper: "It's constant, man; his workout is constant. Plus we're not getting any younger. You've got to keep moving. Doing this thing for over half my life, your body starts taking its toll. Phil had surgery done on his back. He spent a lot of time doing what they call core strengthening. It's exactly what it says - core strengthening. He's in better shape now than he was when he was 20. He was on a lot of medication and it's tightening up, it's great. We had a blast on the last tour, in Australia. He's starting to enjoy life a bit, you know? But we're very focused on this music that we make. We've been holed up in a studio working intently on this. It's the first thing Phil has done since Darrell was killed. He's just taking everything very... he wants to say something and he wants to say it correctly and purely. That's for sure."

Rex: Phil's in the best shape he's been in. I mean, he still has to work out quite a lot. He has the plates in the back that sometime in the next year, have to be taken out. But his overall health and mental attitude and the singing is just... it's a fucking night and day difference. You've got to come see the show. I'll tell you, man, I'm kind of tired talking about this record. I'm getting ready to go out and play it! I really am, and we're playing some smaller venues. Just because we want to get to that point where you're feeling a fuckin' crowd again, you know? Those arenas get really fuckin' boring, you know? You're standing up there, and it's just so much more powerful when you've got the crowd right next to you and everybody is sweatin' and splittin'. Those are the coolest rock shows. There was a special intent purpose of trying to play theaters and places that are more intimate. *

Brave Pick

Cross Fire



DOWN

III: **Over The Under** (ILG)

Despite being one of the most consistently revered figures in metal history, by press and public alike, Philip Anselmo will always play the beleaguered martyr, and nothing short of blind adulation across the board will satisfy his ludicrous levels of self belief. It's gratifying, then, that *Over The Under* has no obvious weaknesses and is easily the equal of its predecessor, if not that majestic debut. The Sabbathian rumble of '3 Suns And 1 Star' kicks things off with plenty of fiery malevolence, and it's immediately apparent that Anselmo has rediscovered that strident, soulful voice that made him a star in the first place. Similarly, both the slithering, drunk's lament of 'The Path' and the edgy doom river ripples of '1 Scream' tell of a band that has been revitalized by a renewed sense of purpose and, most significantly, by a strengthened sense of unity that has been brutally forced upon them. Hurricane Katrina hangs over this record like Death himself, and there's a palpable sense that New Orleans' catastrophic recent history has left Down with fewer things to say and fewer ways to say them. Uniformly sombre, sorrowful and humming with resentment, these are songs all cut from the same cloth of despair, but thanks to the sheer joy and hunger with which Anselmo, Windstein, Bower, Keenan and Brown exorcise those demons, *Over The Under* ends up being a survivors' celebration, rather than a tearful post mortem. The closing 'Walk Away', a mellifluous, blues-infused hymn to beginnings, to ends, to music itself, says it all. Still down, still heavy but a long way from finished.

Dom Lawson [8]

DOWN

III: **Over The Under** (ILG)

My disdain for this album starts with its title: like, what the hell does *Over The Under* even mean? It sounds like something Phil thought was esoterically intel-

lectual or witty while bored and stoned on a tour bus somewhere. Straight up, it's a bad name. Anyway, in the interest of full disclosure I'll admit I've always thought Down was over-rated, and seeing them live (what I was told to do by the faithful) only reinforced that opinion: actually, witnessing Down in concert decreased the band's standing in my books, as Phil wrapped himself in a Confederate flag for a few songs - that's just unacceptable on a lot of levels. But, back to the music, keep in mind that many people are saying good things about this album and, if you're into stoner rock or Southern vibes, I guess I can strain to see where the appeal lies, especially amongst the Pantera diehards (of which there are still many). Eyehategod and COC (and Superjoint Ritual? Ha!) fans are in there somewhere too, as good dude Jimmy Bower and almost-rock-star Pepper Keenan unsheathe Down's thunder drums and axe respectively, rounding out this marijuana-obsessed vision to its toked-out end-point. That said, I really don't understand what all the talk is about: *Over The Under* is basically a collection of warmed-over b-side riffs played with the same delivery that keeps the worst band in the history of humanity - the pathetic Nickelback - going. Seriously, so much of *Over The Under* is middle of the road material, the listener begging it all to stop, especially when it hits Black Label Society proportions which, on a side-note, is another group that this whole review applies to. There are bands on Southern Lord, Meteor City and Tee Pee that are releasing way better output that's going to sell a tiny fraction of *Over The Under* and frankly that just sucks. What keeps *Over The Under* in 5/10 territory is the fact that one track, 'NOD', is actually pretty good and there are bits and pieces scattered all over the record (like up to 0:45 of '1 Scream') that make me feel like I should give Down a break. Then the rest of the song runs its course and my thoughts

on this NOLA collective become more steadfastly concrete.

David Perri [5]

DOWN

III: **Over The Under** (ILG)

Down are back on track after a second album came at the wrong time and went by quickly, despite a flurry of press, mainly over its unique recording circumstances. The third installment finds the band recording wet and wonderful like Cathedral but even messier, but for the most part plying a wide mid-paced spectrum. Jimmy Bower's drums go ka-pow and then echo like cannons in a bog. Rex plays bubbling, turbulent bass lines like the old school, although his note choices are barely discernible amidst the sludge. Pepper and Kirk dish the sinister Katrina-flooded sobbing riffery of moldy old clapboards left to poison and rot before being bulldozed. O'ertop, Philip turns in a bunch of singing styles which are powerful but sad, many of his pleas sounding from a drowned place, as the roil of Pepper, Kirk and Rex cascades over Phil frequencies that approximate those of the riffs and thus are a bit back behind the tool shed. There's a point to be made that there are many bands doing this kind of music as well and even better, but having five richly historic personalities in Down aids the story, and adds starry dimension to what's going on, especially given the fact that Phil is writing panic attack lyrics way above the stoner fray. I also find it endearing that these guys have agreed upon this kind of music as something inevitable because it's in their DNA, presumably not forced, a home. One supposes it's furthest away from the accumulated Phil catalogue than any of the other guys (and technically Rex's I guess), but nonetheless it's cozy, gauzy solace to hear these guys just put their heads down and pummel the groove, chase tone and let the wattage spill where it may.

Martin Popoff [9]