

**This interview with Lars Ulrich, of Metallica,
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on May 27, 2016.**



Lars Ulrich of Metallica

LOC: As you geared up to make the album “Master of Puppets,” did you have something specific that you wanted to do with this album that was different from, say, your previous release” Ride the Lightning” (1984)?

LARS ULRICH: I think, looking back at those records and years, they were all very instinctual. And we continued that--going on instinct. We were fortunate to have started out very young. We made our first record when I was 19; our second when I was 20. So I was just 21 when we made “Master of Puppets.” We were very impulsive. I don’t think we thought about it too much or tried to intellectualize it.

I think the biggest difference between our first album, “Kill ‘Em All,” and where we were when we made “Master of Puppets,” is that we had added two additional writers and players to the band and they were very gifted. They brought to us a different kind of educational background and perspective. It greatly broadened us. We were allowed to cast our net wider, so to speak, creatively. We could look at everything a little differently and experiment more.

We had, earlier, found a dynamic and balance, with the earlier record, that we continued with on “Master of Puppets.” I think, on “Master of Puppets,” we felt comfortable enough to work in different melodies, try acoustic, even try ballads. I think we embraced a far more dynamic range. That is what that album afforded us.

LOC: Did you have more time to spend on this album than you had on your previous releases?

LU: We had a little more time. “Master of Puppets” was the first album we did with *major* major label support. But we were still fiercely independent and autonomous. Our managers kept the record company out of the studio and the songwriting.

Actually, why we went with Elektra in the first place was for greater autonomy. There was a time in the mid- 1980s when record companies were fiercely protective, invasive, and we didn’t want that.

So, of course, having a major label did afford us some additional studio time. This was in the summer of 1985, we were in the East Bay area in San Francisco, but we were interested in recording in LA. So we went down to LA, we even invited out engineer Flemming Rasmussen, and we did studio tours.

But, at that time, we felt we... well, LA was, still, as far as music, [it] had a sort of assembly line mentality to it. And we felt that we, in LA, were too close to the center of the action, so to speak.

And we realized that, for the same money that we were given [by the label], we could have more studio time out of LA. You know, something you don't hear about too much in music today, but, at that time, we benefited from the currency exchange rate! [Laughs.]

LOC: Yes, you recorded in Denmark, didn't you?

LU: Yes, so the currency exchange rate between the US and Europe allowed us a lot more in the studio to make the album.

So, instead of recording for six weeks, like we did for "Ride the Lightning," we got three, three and half months of studio time. It gave us time and freedom and a chance to explore the production and the dynamic of the record.

LOC: This is almost a pure craft question: but how do you as a band come to the studio? Do you already have songs written or do you prefer to create them in the studio?

LU: Generally, more the former. Of course, we've been making records for 35 years now, so we've skirted around both, done both.

Primarily, we would write songs and then go in and record them and, for lack of a better word, execute them in the studio.

But, sometimes, we take the time to write the songs, and use the time to get to know the songs. For example, for [the album] "Master of Puppets," we had seven songs done, and we needed one more. So, "The Thing That Should Not Be" was finalized, primarily, in the studio.

In those years, there was for us no "extra" songs; it wasn't, "We have 12 songs and we'll take the best eight for the record." We recorded eight songs. I guess we were under an almost arrogant mentality [laughs]. We did the "weeding out" process *before*, early, in the life cycle of a song, so, if it wasn't worthy enough, we didn't do it.

Specifically, for "Master of Puppets," we had seven completed songs and "Thing That Should Not Be" was, like I said, finished in the studio.

LOC: Metallica is known for their incredible concerts. When you are recording do you ever think, "How will this sound live"?

LU: It occasionally enters into it and, usually, when it enters, it is dismissed! They are two different elements and two different processes. Our objective [in the studio] is always to make the *best* record. That was especially true at that time, maybe it was more so then than now.

At the time of "Master of Puppets," we were infatuated with the overdubbing opportunities and with all that we could do in studio. It was all new to us, and the technology and all the studio set up, it was so intriguing... going through morphing, continually having new stuff happening. It was very much the *modus operandi* of rock records then: how does it sound, how is the production, how's the clarity, what about the separation of the instruments....

You know, ideologies change, they go through arcs. Now it's all "Garage Band," but that's just a small piece of the overall puzzle. At *that* time, though, there was an evolution happening and people took it very seriously.

The record we are now working on is more about capturing a mood, making it sound raw and not overproduced. But it was a different vibe then and we were comfortable with it. And we were excited about multi-tracks and all the gadgets.

LOC: The group produced the album with Flemming Rasmussen, what did he (or any good producer) bring to the process?

LU: First of all, he brought an incredible ear. He had an ear for time, tuning, tightness, all of that sort of stuff which was unprecedented to us at the time. We had never been in proximity to someone with such an ear for detail!

He brought us a great balance between being loose and fun and encouraging but also being very strict about the particulars and the result. He let us be ourselves and let us play. But he also pushed us to get things done at the most intense level possible.

The greatest thing that can happen in a studio with a producer is to have *trust*.

There has to be trust. When that trust is established, as an artist, you feel free. You are safe and you can kind of run with it and not have to worry about it.

We knew we were safe with Flemming.

LOC: Do you still play all of the “Master of Puppets” tracks live?

LU: We’ve played all the songs live. “Battery” was our perennial opener for years and sometimes it still ends up being our opening. It’s played frequently.

“Master of Puppets” is one of the four or five [songs] that we always play.

“That Thing That Should Not Be” we enjoy playing, it’s a great mood changer. It’s got kind of a slow tempo thing happening.

“Sanitarium” is one of our great ballads. It’s one of my favorites to play since, on the drums, it has a lot of freedom in it; I play it differently every time.

“Disposable Heroes” is great; it’s seven to eight minutes of very intensive...and you gotta be on your toes when you play it or you’ll miss the next change.

“Leper Messiah”—not frequently.

“Orion” is our favorite instrumental to play, it’s a fan favorite.

“Damage, Inc.”—occasionally, not frequently.

Really, all eight songs are part of our shows. About twelve to thirteen years ago, we were trying to change the set list and we mixed things up. But, “Damage, Inc.” we’d throw in occasionally and it’s fun to play.

On our last tour, we had about 60 songs in the arsenal and all eight of those [“Master of Puppets”] songs would get played.

LOC: Why do you think, out of all your albums, “Master of Puppets” still resonates so strongly with the public and critics and fans?

LU: I'm probably not the one suited to answer that [laughs]. I'm almost biased in the *other* direction. It's sort of like asking someone "Who is your favorite child?"

I have a close relationship with all of our records. When I hear them now, I find things I like and I'm fond of and then things that I question and things that I dislike and things which I've grown to appreciate....

To me, all the records are a time capsule, a photograph, of what our abilities were, and of that particular situation, and how it played a role in the making of the album.

In 2014, we did a tour called "Metallica by Request"—we basically had 30-40 dates across different parts of the world. And we said we'd play any song from our catalog and fans could vote and, basically, they'd build the set list. It was done on our website and was completely transparent. And then we'd play the top vote getters. And "Master of Puppets" was the number one, all the time, all across the country, hands down!

And I can't tell you why!

Obviously, the album has resonated with not only the Library of Congress, but with fans and critics. I'm thrilled and humbled by it. I'm not sure I can sit down and listen to it though and not yell, "Will someone turn the reverb down!" [laughs].

I guess there is a cohesiveness in the songwriting and the production. It works really well as a cohesive landscape, a musical territorial. I'm happy it all lined up.