

“Master of Puppets”—Metallica (1986)

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Essay by Daniel Bukszpan (guest post)*



Album cover



Album label



Metallica

“Master of Puppets” is the third full-length album from San Francisco’s Metallica. It was released in 1986, and it’s hard to overstate the significance that it had upon its release, as well as its continued relevance today.

Formed in 1981 by drummer Lars Ulrich and guitarist and vocalist James Hetfield, Metallica is one of the most popular bands in the world. Its self-titled 1991 album was certified platinum 16 times over by the Recording Industry Association of America, and the band has sold overall 125 million albums.

However, before any of that happened, Metallica was about as underground as it got, and the idea of them achieving their current commercial status was once inconceivable. “Master of Puppets” changed all that and, at the same time, broke the thrash metal movement wide open for mainstream acceptance.

Metallica stood at the forefront of the 1980s thrash metal scene, a commercially unpalatable genre that alienated most mainstream listeners, many of whom didn’t even recognize it as music. The songs were too complex, the tempos were too fast and the guitars were too bludgeoning. From the first listen, you were either on board or you weren’t.

The band’s two previous albums were influenced by the New Wave of British Heavy Metal (NWOBHM), personified by bands like Motorhead, which stressed fast tempos and unpolished production. Metallica took that sound on the road and built their following through relentless touring, finally gaining enough notice to be signed to a major label, Elektra Records.

When “Master of Puppets” was released, it sold half a million copies, with almost no commercial airplay, no music videos and no mainstream promotion. Its success was 100% an organic product of fan enthusiasm, and the mainstream music industry had no choice but to embrace the group and give a forum to this genre of music, at least for a few years.

While the album is widely acknowledged today as an unassailable classic, it's worth noting that upon its release, some fans actually believed the group had sold out. While it's true that the performances, production and songwriting are all more polished than those on the band's previous LPs, "Ride the Lightning" and "Kill 'Em All," no impartial person could characterize "Master of Puppets" as a sop to the mainstream in any sense. The mainstream came to Metallica and not the other way around.

The source of the "sell-out" accusations is the softer, more melodic and more dynamic sections of the album. On 1984's "Ride the Lightning," the group had already started moving in that direction with "Fade to Black," a ballad with alternating acoustic and electric textures that set them apart from Slayer and Anthrax, contemporaries who were mostly preoccupied with aggression and speed. To this day, there are those who have never forgiven the band for it, and who see it as the first step in the group's lurch towards commercialism.

The detractors are correct, to the extent that the album has three songs that use alternating soft-to-loud dynamics, and rather than using those moments as a brief pause in the high-speed wallowing, these softer sections are developed to slow crescendos, used for dramatic effect.

Credit for much of this evolution should go to bassist Cliff Burton. Unlike most thrash metal bassists, who took a backseat in the music, he was aggressively upfront in his approach to his instrument, used effects pedals not commonly associated with it, and displayed music theory chops that many thrash bassists simply didn't bother with. On "Ride the Lightning's" "For Whom the Bell Tolls," his bass was so overdriven and prominent that many listeners assumed it was a lead guitar, and he pushed this approach even further on "Master of Puppets."

The album begins with "Battery," a traditional thrasher that begins with an acoustic guitar introduction, just as "Fight Fire With Fire" did on "Ride the Lightning." The difference is that "Battery" expresses something in the music only hinted at on previous Metallica albums--a melancholy, a yearning, an emotional sophistication that you won't find on any other thrash metal album. It doesn't compromise the group's aggressiveness, but it made it very easy for listeners to connect with the album.

After "Battery" comes the title track, the first of three eight-minute epics that serve as the album's tent poles. A song about drug addiction, it doesn't compromise on the speedy, chromatic riffs, but it embarks on a surprising middle instrumental section with sophisticated textures. This portion of the song takes its sweet time building back up to the heaviness, and it is masterfully executed.

The album's fourth song, "Welcome Home (Sanitarium)," is another legitimately poignant piece of music. Lead guitarist Kirk Hammett should be commended for his performance, which owes a debt to the guitar playing of Scorpions virtuoso Uli Jon Roth.

After “Disposable Heroes” and “Leper Messiah” is the instrumental “Orion,” the album’s third and final epic. Its centerpiece is its middle section, an almost classical waltz featuring harmonized guitars and a heavily overdriven bass solo that many people assumed was a lead guitar until Burton’s isolated bass track turned up on YouTube.

The final song, “Damage, Inc.,” is a bit of a throwaway, but it doesn’t matter. Its purpose is to end the album on an aggressive note, which it does, and it would be one of the best songs on any other album. Unfortunately, it shares space with six other songs that are so boundary-pushing and expressive that it seems a bit mediocre in comparison.

Cliff Burton died in a bus accident on tour in 1986, just as the band was making its breakthrough. They replaced him with Flotsam and Jetsam’s Jason Newsted, a more than capable musician who stayed with the group for 15 years, but through no fault of his own, the band was never quite the same again. They achieved greater commercial heights and have reliably sold out stadiums all over the world, so their decision to stay together after Burton’s death has certainly been vindicated by the marketplace. Still, more than 30 years after its release, “Master of Puppets” remains the group’s defining work and the album that opened the floodgates for the thrash metal movement.

Daniel Bukszpan has been a writer for 25 years. He's written for “Fortune,” “CNBC,” “Condé Nast Traveler,” and is the author of several books, including “The Encyclopedia of Heavy Metal,” published in 2003 by Barnes and Noble. He's also contributed to “Iron Maiden: The Ultimate Unauthorized History of the Beast,” “Rush: The Illustrated History” and, of course, “Metallica: The Complete Illustrated History.”

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.