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## Metallica's Black Album revisited

Kris Griffiths 7 August 2021



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**In honour of its 30th birthday, we take a look at the riveting story behind  
Metallica's self-titled album**

August 12 marks the 30th anniversary of the release of Metallica's self-titled fifth LP, known as the *Black Album*, which was their biggest-selling and transformed Metallica into the stadium band they remain today. But it was also their most controversial—to this day seen as the pivot on which the band's trajectory forever changed, for better or worse. To mark the anniversary, here are five things you might not know about this seminal work.

**The band wanted it to be their equivalent of AC/DC's *Back in Black***



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By the end of the 1980s Metallica had amassed a groundswell of followers on the back of the thrash genre they had pioneered: fast and aggressive songs but complex in nature and protracted in length. Their 1988 album *...And Justice For All* was a culminating point for this “prog metal”, with two of its songs clocking in at almost ten minutes.

"We realised (they) were too f\*\*\*\*\*g long," said lead guitarist Kirk Hammett to *Rolling Stone* in 1991. "I remember getting offstage one night after playing *Justice* and one of us saying...that's the last time we ever play that f\*\*\*\*\*g song!"".

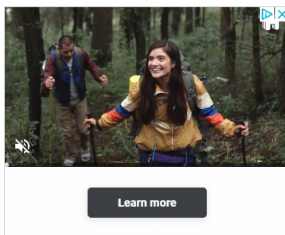
Drummer Lars Ulrich agreed: they needed to “reset”. He later clarified, to *Uncut* in 2020: “The new challenge was to write shorter songs. A little more bounce, to make the music more physical than cerebral.” A certain 1980 hard-rock masterpiece became the new benchmark. As Kirk explained: “We wanted to come up with a *Back in Black*—an LP stacked with singles.”

***"The new challenge was to write shorter songs. A little more bounce, to make the music more physical than cerebral"***

The producer they chose to execute this plan later received death threats from “betrayed” fans



Metallica producer Bob Rock, source: *Wikimedia Commons*



The first sign that Metallica were willing to risk their reputation for their musical ambitions was choosing producer Bob Rock (actual name) despite not being big fans of who he'd previously produced (*Bon Jovi*, *Mötley Crüe*) and he not being a fan of Metallica. The working relationship quickly became fraught, with Bob repeatedly clashing with James and not accepting the band's usual way of doing things.

But they eventually warmed to his MO, particularly the instruction that they play live together in the studio rather than individual parts, as well as detune their guitars down for “Sad But True”. “When we walked out of the studio a year later with the *Black Album* in our pockets, I don't think any of us thought we'd see each other again,” said Lars last year.

However, Bob would go on to produce their next three albums, but each with ever-diminishing returns critically from the press and fanbase, unimpressed with the more mainstream direction he had helmed. “He got some horrible death threats and s\*\*t from fans,” revealed Hetfield in 2014. “A lot of blame was put on him for something we wanted. Blame us for everything.”

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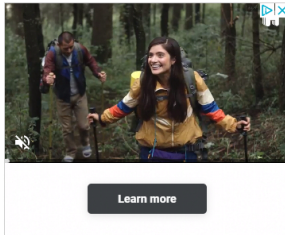
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## *"A lot of blame was put on him for something we wanted. Blame us for everything"*

"Enter Sandman" was the first song they wrote for it but the last James wrote lyrics for, and was Metallica's response to the grunge scene

As the 1990s began, the prevailing sound on US radio was the more brooding angst of alt-rock and grunge, which opened the door for a reborn Metallica to enter the fray. "I was listening to a lot of stuff out of the Pacific-Northwest... (which) changed the look and style of a lot of bands," recalled Kirk in 2020. Lars a bit more explicit: "You could feel the imminent death of the whole hair stuff and that wanky f\*\*\*\*\*g radio bollocks...bands like ourselves, Alice in Chains and Nirvana were ready to enter the 1990s with a different aesthetic."



"Sandman" encapsulated the new-look-and-sound Metallica: a twisted lullaby rooted in a snarling riff by Kirk, evoking childhood nightmares of beasts beneath the bed. However, the song had lyrically started out even darker, about cot death, which the rest of the band advised against, convincing James to "lighten up" the lyrics to make it the breakthrough radio smash it became. It

remains Metallica's signature anthem and helped propel the *Black Album* to the top of the charts, only a month before Nirvana's *Nevermind*.

Kirk was bewildered by "Nothing Else Matters" while James worried it would make fans vomit

It was another first for the thrash pioneers: a ballad, complete with strings and sensitively-crooned lyrics, written by a home-and-love-sick James while on tour and talking long-distance to his girlfriend. The band were, at first, split, with Lars convinced it was right for the album, James not so sure as it was "not meant to be played for other people", and Kirk scoffing, "All I could think of at the time was: James wrote a f\*\*\*\*\*g love song to his girlfriend? That's just weird."

So it's little wonder Hetfield felt anxious at the huge preview party they arranged for 19,000 fans at Madison Square Garden. "(Waiting) to see if these people just look at each other and throw up!" he recalled in 1992 book *Metallica Unbound*. The eventual response "was pretty amazing," relievedly. Upon release as a single the song reached #6 on the UK chart and entered top-tens around Europe. All that worry for nothing.

## *"All I could think of at the time was: James wrote a f\*\*\*\*\*g love song to his girlfriend? That's just weird"*

Lars was initially indifferent to the album's success but later "mindf\*\*\*\*\*d", while Kirk lost a car over it



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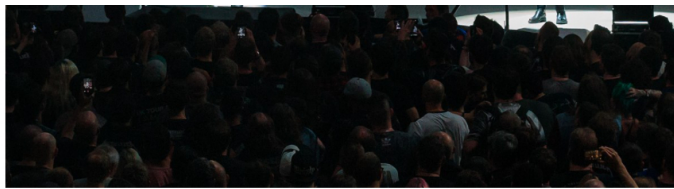
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Metallica performing in London in 2017, Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The *Black Album* defied all expectations, topping the charts in the US, UK and several other countries, and becoming one of the biggest-selling albums of all time by any artist, elevating Metallica's stardom into international superstardom that has never waned since.

Soon after its release Lars received a fax from management announcing its early success. However, as he told [Rolling Stone](#) in 2009, "I stood there in my hotel room, and there was this fax that said 'You're #1'. And it was, like...just another f\*\*\*\*\*g fax from the office." Fast-forward to 2016 though, and the news that the album was still selling 5000+ a week in the US: "It's pretty amazing...I think you file that one under 'mindf\*\*k.' I'd like to meet #3267 last week...did it just show up on your radar?"

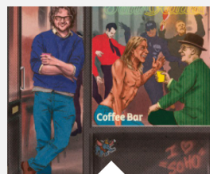
For Kirk, however, his modest expectations proved costly, as when their tour-manager predicted it would sell 6,000,000 by a certain date, Kirk bet his Porsche that it wouldn't. "And guess what? It happened," he explained to Gibson TV last year. "I had to give him my Porsche 911 Carrera." Sad but true.

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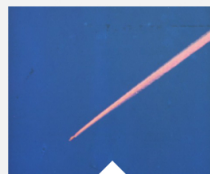
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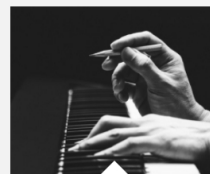
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