

Chapter 6: A Name for a Band

Heavy metal. Just say that again, slowly. Hheeaavvy mmeettaall. Savor the way it rolls off your tongue. Admire its tone and timber. Know that there is no finer, no better form of musical expression on Earth. Mozart was an idiot. Beethoven was clueless. Now, Metallica, or Motorhead – THAT was real talent!

I was first introduced to heavy metal music via a high school friend of mine, Jim. Jim was a nice guy. I was a nice little nerd with straight-A's in 9th grade, and he taught me how to slouch, wear dark clothes, talk about people behind their back & basically disrespect everyone. He also gave me a musical appreciation for early heavy-metal pioneers like Kiss and Jimi Hendrix. He had moved away, but we kept in touch. He wrote me once & mentioned he liked some song or other because it was real "heavy metal." So, I went to the local record store & asked for the heaviest metal they had, & sent it to him on his birthday.

"Whoa, Mark, what IS this stuff?" he wrote me. "Where'd you get this? This stuff is awesome! This band makes KISS sound like a bunch of wimps!"

After that, I had to hear it for myself, so I bought an album & I was hooked. In case you're not familiar with this particular genre of music, let me give you a little introduction. If it sounds loud at any volume, the guitars sound like they're giving birth to octuplets, the drums sound like they're being pummeled by King Kong, and the lead singer can hit notes higher than a chipmunk undergoing electro-shock, it's heavy metal. And if you see the musicians, and you're scared thinking about running into them in some dark alley, and you can't see their eyes for all the hair and they're wearing at least 90% black, it's heavy metal. And if you see someone listening to it, and he looks like a kid who just got expelled for selling drugs or smashing the principle's windshield or maybe stuffing a dead cat into a cheerleader's locker, and it's hard to hear yourself think it's so loud, and you start having thoughts of violence and rebellion and total mayhem, it's heavy metal.

My particular taste in music was in the purest form of heavy metal; raw and non-commercialized. You'd never hear bands like Titan or Slayer on the radio. Speed metal is what I called it. I figured, if a band slows down, I turn it off. The absolute, best band I've ever heard was called Watch Tower. And no, they're not associated at all with the Jehovah

Witnesses. They had a drummer that could blow Neal Peart away, and a guitar player that went so fast I think he had to fireproof his guitar neck. Now, the bass player was what I really liked. I've never heard anyone play as good as he did, ever. It's a shame guys like that have to stay in small-time bands like Watch Tower. He had long hair, played without a pick, and moved all OVER that fretboard. Man, he was awesome.

We used to go see them in Austin. We'd go down to 6th street to a place called the Ritz. It was only a few bucks to get in. One time, before college, we made the trip just to see Watch Tower. They'd be jammin' away on stage, with Jason the lead singer throwing his hair around like a rag doll having a seizure. It'd be so loud you could feel your chest move three inches with each bass note. We'd listen, slam dance, listen, slam dance. Those guys in Austin were crazy. The local concerts in Houston had freaks that stood there, smoked their funny-looking cigarettes & pounded the air with their fist while yelling "All right!". But in Austin, the group by the stage would thrash about, slamming into each other, pushing, shoving, all while banging their heads around. People would get on stage, thrash their head around & pretend to play guitar, then run out & JUMP on top of the crowd. You'd get an elbow in your ribs, a boot in your neck, people would fall onto you. It was fun. By the end of the evening, we were sore from head to toe, and our ears rang, but we were still glowing from having brushed with greatness. What a band!

We tried to play like Watch Tower, but in the beginning, the best we could do is try to imitate some of the tamer bands, like Judas Priest. It was just me & Crash. Crash bought a mail-order guitar from Carvin, and I bought a 4-string Ibanez bass my high school senior year from the music store. We played together at his house, talking about how we were going to be really famous some day. But we needed a name. What were we going to call the world's next legendary heavy metal band?

Fresh from our first semester at college, over Christmas break we were discussing a few options. I came up with a couple of ideas. "How about 'The Thrashers?' Or 'The Trashers?'"

"Nah, I don't like those," Crash said. "Maybe we could be called 'The Brothers of Hell' or 'Death Death Death.'" That last one sounded

pretty good. I don't think the name's been used yet, except there is a band called MegaDeath (they aren't very good).

"Let's go for a walk & maybe we'll think of something," I said. It was early – probably not even midnight yet. We put our gear down & made our way over towards the elementary school.

We were walking through the soccer field, when I noticed a car driving down the street that we had just crossed. A big old car, maybe a cutlass or something, and the exhaust was smoking pretty bad. The guy looked like he wasn't paying very good attention to what he was doing. His tires rubbed against the curb, he ignored the stop sign & made a big u-turn before stopping next to the soccer field. After the cloud of exhaust cleared away, I thought I could see him stagger out & head our way. I didn't care. We saw all kinds of people when we walked around at night. Besides, we had an important issue to resolve.

"How about the, uh, The Killers? Or, Metal Death?" Crash's ideas were pretty good, but we needed a great name, not a good one.

"Or the, uh, Crazies? Or The Scream Team?" I thought that was an awfully good try. I mean, it rhymed. It's hard to think of words that rhyme.

We reached the playground & were sitting on the monkey bars. Crash looked thoughtful. "How about the, uh, the uh..." He straightens up a bit & says with a smile, "That's it! We'll be called Theuh. Thea!"

Brilliant! That was great! What an awesome name. Thea. Sounded gothic, or medieval or something. "Cool. I like it." I can just see the headlines now: "Thea goes platinum!" "Tonight at the Astrodome: Thea in concert for 6 nights! (sorry, all sold out)." "Thea music blamed in death of 3 teachers!"

We were walking back to Crash's house for some more practice, when that guy from the car sees us. He's big, he's black, and he can't walk straight.

"How you boys doin' tonight?"

"Uh, fine, cool. How are you?" Hope the guy can't tell I'm a little nervous. I mean, he was big, and his eyes were all red. For a second, I think, maybe this isn't a good idea, meeting a big drunk black guy in the middle of the night, behind the school where noone can see us.

“Oh, I’m OK.” He sounded harmless enough. His voice was low and raspy (probably too many cigarettes) but he almost sort of smiled. “My car stopped working back there. I think it has a dead battery.”

Crash pipes up, “You need any help? I think my dad has some jumper cables.” Crash always cared about people. He was a real humanitarian.

Mr. Big Black Guy turns to Crash. “Nah, it’s cool. I leave it for a few minutes, it’ll charge up. What are you boys doin’ out here so late?” So late and all alone, I think to myself.

“Aw, we’re just hangin’ around, talkin’.” I didn’t want to tell this guy about the band idea. He didn’t look like the kind that would appreciate fine music like we did.

“I know what you doin’. I seen boys like you all over the place. I killed bunch of you’s too. You think you’re cool, you’re smokin’ dope & stealin’ cars. Probably dropped out of school too, huh?” Uh, excuse me? What was that bit about killin’?

Crash shoots me a glance. “No, we don’t do any of that. We don’t steal or anything.” What is this guy? Some sort of vigilante? Goes around killin’ teenagers? “And we’re still in school, too,” he added.

Mr. Black sways back to the right & looks at me, more or less. “That true? I know how you guys are. You think you’re all cool, don’t want no school, don’t want nobody tellin’ you nothin’. You got it all figured out. Well, let me tell you somethin’. I dropped outta school, I didn’t think I needed to know nothin’, I got me a job, and now I really got nothin’. You boys need to get your little asses back in school and make somethin’ of yourselves. You got a future, know what I mean? Are you hearin’ me?”

“Actually, we’re both going to school at the University of Texas,” Crash says. I notice he’s talking kind of loud & slow for some reason. “We’re electrical engineering majors. We’re just on Christmas break.”

“Yeah,” I add intelligently.

The guy looks kind of surprised. “No kiddin’? No way, you guys are in college?” Guess he doesn’t see too many long-haired smart kids hanging out in black concert jersey’s behind the school at 1am. Go figure.

“Yeah, we both go to college,” Crash affirms. Crash is getting a little more relaxed, and shifts his weight and puts his hand on his back pocket. The Big Man’s eyes follow his motion.

“Don’t do that, man. I know what you’re doin’. You got some kinda blade back there in your pocket. You don’t wanna do that, I’m tellin’ ya,” he warns. I’m thinking, listen to the man, Crash. The last thing you want is this crazy guy thinking you’re about to attack him.

“I don’t have a knife in my pocket,” Crash says very matter-of-factly. Doesn’t seem concerned at all. “And I don’t think you have to go to college to become a good person. There’s lots of ways to learn about life. I mean, do you think the only way to become smart and successful is to get a college degree?” Crash the philosopher. Good job, Crash. This is a perfect guy to have an intellectual argument with.

“I’m tellin’ ya, y’all need to quit what you’re doin’, and get back in school. If you don’t do nothin’, you won’t get nothin’.” Crash reaches up to scratch his nose, then puts his hand back on his pocket. Mr. Crazy gets a little more agitated. “I told you, leave you knife in your pocket! You gonna get hurt thata way.”

“I told you, I don’t have a knife in my pocket.” Crash is amazing. Most people would be just trying to get rid of this guy. Crash wants to raise his blood pressure some more. “I know what you’re saying, but what about other countries? What about places where people are poor and they can’t go to college?”

“I said, you don’t do nothin’, you won’t get nothin’,” says Mr. Blood Pressure. He’s staring Crash in the eye now, poised like he’s ready to jump on him & squeeze his throat to the size of a toothpick any instant.

“Yeah, I know, but I think there’s a lot of different ways for someone to get an education. Like, the Hindu’s on the mountaintops. They go talk to the guru, and he’s not at the college. They probably know more than we do.”

“I’m tellin’ ya, you don’t do nothin’, you don’t get nothin’!” He pauses for a moment & looks a little thoughtful. “Why haven’t I killed you guys yet?” Crash leans over onto the other leg. “You askin’ for trouble, with that knife, boy.”

“But I told you, I don’t have a knife.” Crash is totally unconcerned that he’s about to be turned into flesh pâté.

I can’t take any more of this. “Crash, he’s trying to say, if you don’t do nothin’, you won’t get nothin’!”

Mr. Killyou looks over at me. “Yeah, that’s what I’m sayin’.” He nods approvingly. “Glad at least one of yous understands. All right, then.” He’s not the only one that’s relieved. Whew, that was tense. Crash looks annoyed at me.

“Well, I bet my battery’s charged up by now, so I’ll be leavin’ you boys. Have a nice life, and stay in school!” And with that, he turns & stumbles off towards his car again. He stops a few paces later & turns back towards us. “I know what y’all are sayin’, there goes one crazy nigger, but you listen to me, I know what I’m talkin’ about. Y’all have a good life, now.” With a wave of his hand, he turns back around & disappears in the darkness. Me & Crash look at each other.

“That was weird,” I comment.

“Yeah, it was,” Crash replies. Neither one of us say anything for a minute or two.

“So, we got a name for the band, eh? Thea,” I say cheerfully.

Crash’s expression brightens up. “Yeah, Thea. Cool.”

We walk back to his house for more practice & chit chat. The car is gone from the street by the soccer field. I’m not thinking about the crazy black guy anymore. My mind is on my future. I’m sure we’ll make it big; really, really big. It’s just a matter of time.

Later that night, after my parents were in bed, I called Dino and told her the whole story. She got mad at me over the incident with the Black Murdering Drunk. “I can’t trust you to be alone over there. I can’t wait until next semester starts. I need to keep an eye on you. Don’t walk around at night any more!”

“Uh... OK.” I didn’t know what to say. She totally ignored the news about a name for the greatest musical group to ever walk the earth. Just wanted to have me around so she could control me & take care of me. I didn’t know anything about girls. I just figured they were all like that, you know, concerned about their man, worried about his safety, wanting to put him in a cage and tie him down for his own good, and

manipulate him and never let him out of their site. I think what she really wanted was to be with me 24/7, making sure I never went out at night or did anything dangerous or saw or (God forbid!) talked to another female ever.

I was beginning to loathe the idea of being tied down. But, as it turns out, Dino got her wish, just like she always did.

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