

# METALLICA

goes back to its roots

Five years after the critical and commercial disaster of 'St Anger', the members of Metallica are back to save metal — and save themselves in the process

BY STEVIE CHICK  
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"In the immortal words of Noel Gallagher, I'm gonna live for ever," says Lars Ulrich. Sitting in Metallica's backstage complex at the Reading festival in southern England, which they call "the Barrio," the drummer is considering how long his band — one of the biggest live draws in the world, the group that reinvented metal and made it credible — can continue. The question of the famously combustible group's lifespan, is Ulrich admits, "the US\$64,000 question. The Rolling Stones are setting a great precedent, but Charlie Watts doesn't play drums on songs like *Fight Fire With Fire* every night, no disrespect. "Will we be able to play the shit we do when we're 65? I don't know. When it becomes a joke, we'll stop."

Some people feared Metallica had reached that point a few years ago — certainly their new release, *Death Magnetic*, is being promoted as the "return to form" album, and there is a sense they need to prove both their mettle and their metal all over again. Their last album, 2003's *St Anger*, topped the charts around the world, but sold just 1.8 million copies in the US, a fraction of what Metallica's previous few offerings had sold. Instead of being the back-to-basics exercise the band had intended after a decade spent meandering away from their thrash-metal origins, it captured a band in crisis, a period recorded in the group-sanctioned documentary of the sessions, *Some Kind*

of *Monster*. Bassist Jason Newsted had left after 14 years of being undermined as "the new boy" (he had replaced Cliff Burton, who died in a road accident in 1986). Singer/guitarist James Hetfield — Ulrich's co-leader — had gone into rehab. The band hired a therapist to try to hold everything together, only for him to try to offer creative input to the band. The documentary played like a tragi-comic hybrid of *This Is Spinal Tap* and *The Larry Sanders Show*.

"*St Anger* happened because it had to happen," says Hetfield. "It sounds very disjointed to me when I listen to it now. One-dimensional. Relentless. And that's exactly how we felt at the time: We were disjointed, and I think the resentment we felt towards each other was relentless."

*St Anger* was, Ulrich contends, "an isolated, one-off experience. Things aren't like that now." Their new album, is something of a make-or-break then, where the world will see whether Metallica is still creatively vital, whether their future holds more than living well off their legacy and back catalogue. Bob Rock — who became Metallica's producer with 1991's eponymously titled release, which has come to be known as the "Black album" — is no longer at the helm in the studio, and gone is the more polished, accessible sound that he brought. The hope is that his replacement, Rick Rubin, will achieve what he did for Johnny Cash and Slayer: in the first case, rejuvenate a drifting career; in the second, focus an aggressive, fast metal band to produce their best work.

"Rick's initial seed for motivation, his mission statement, was 'essence of Metallica,'" says Hetfield, meaning he wanted to return to the sound of the albums that made the group's name: 1986's *Master of Puppets* and 1988's... *And Justice for All*.

"We had stayed clear of the sound of those records for so many years," says Ulrich. "We were scared of going near them, because if we tried to repeat them again, there was a chance we could dilute them, or ruin them. We basically ran screaming in 28 other directions for the

next 20 years, almost."

Hetfield describes the process as "getting back to the skeleton of Metallica," which promises much: the group's 1980s purple patch remains an apex for heavy metal, their ambition a match for the landmarks of any genre. But in the years that have passed, everything surrounding that skeleton has changed, not least the members of Metallica themselves.

Ulrich is an unlikely American metal star. For a start, he's Danish. His father was a professional tennis player, who also played jazz and ran Copenhagen's Blue Note club. Ulrich Jr moved to California in his teens, to perfect his own tennis, but any sporting ambitions were derailed by a trip to England in the summer of 1981 to see the band Diamond Head play at Woolwich Odeon in east London. Ulrich was besotted with Diamond Head and ended up staying with them for several weeks. On his return to California he placed an ad in a Los Angeles paper, which read: "Drummer looking for other metal musicians to jam with Tygers of Pan Tang, Diamond Head and Iron Maiden." And so began a career that, among top-flight metal bands, has been surpassed in longevity only by that of Iron Maiden.

Metallica released two albums on independent labels before Elektra signed them for *Master of Puppets*, which became the first thrash metal album to break the US Top 30. The death of Burton during the subsequent tour threatened to derail them, but they soldiered on with the recruitment of Newsted, who made his debut on... *And Justice for All*. (As part of the hazing of the new member, his bass playing was mixed to inaudible levels on the album.) The moment at which they broke through into the mainstream came at the 1989 Grammy awards ceremony. Though ageing prog-rockers Jethro Tull were the unlikely winners of that year's Best Hard Rock/Metal Performance award, Metallica gave their first nationally televised performance.

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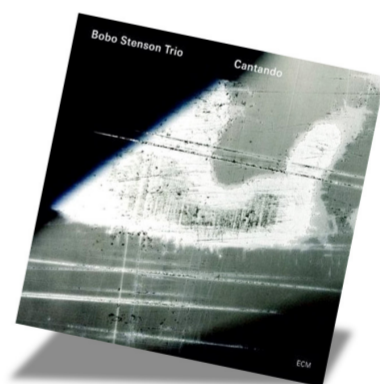
**DO YOU KNOW**  
Epic/Columbia Nashville  
Jessica Simpson



**THE STAND INS**  
Jagjaguwar  
Okkervil River



**ME AND ARMINI**  
Rough Trade  
Emiliana Torrini



**CANTANDO**  
ECM  
Bobo Stenson Trio

Jessica Simpson's fifth album finds its groove in the second song, *Remember That*.

"Remember," she sings, "how he told you you were stupid." For a moment it seems as if she might be referring to her public image as a lip-biting, aw-shucks simple girl who rose to fame on the heels of marrying young and consenting to have the accompanying foibles televised. But then the song shows its hand, morphing into an angry rumination on domestic violence, sung with vigor. And something unexpected becomes clear: Simpson, the erstwhile pop singer and failed actress, has found a backbone.

Here's hoping it remains stiff when faced with those who would dismiss her foray into country music out of hand. (Simpson is not alone. Many stars of other genres, including Jewel, Kid Rock and Darius Rucker of Hootie and the Blowfish, have recently attempted to make inroads to the country crowd.) Ignore that this album was made by Simpson, and it's still utterly competent. Acknowledge that — especially given her history of making unmemorable pop songs — and it almost qualifies as an accomplishment.

Almost. On *Remember That* she's believably incensed, and on the impressive, brassy ballad *Might as Well Be Making Love*, she sounds certain as

she tells a lover not to let a fight come between them. Simpson has a strong voice, but it has little nuance, rendering her exercises in self-empowerment (*Pray Out Loud, Still Don't Stop Me*) particularly banal. And inevitably she falls victim to familiar Nashville traps: hackneyed lyrics about the tireless love of Johnny and June Carter Cash (*Sipping on History*) and several references, veiled and not, to faith and God, which seems less like pandering in light of Simpson's days as a youth Christian singer, but not by much.

But she avoids references to anything rural: shockingly there isn't one mention of her Texas roots here. Rather this is an album that assiduously avoids specificity. For a pop singer seeking refuge in country music it's a smart move. It doesn't seem as if she's trying too hard, when of course she totally is.

Every song is a short story for Will Sheff, the songwriter and singer of the Austin, Texas, band Okkervil River. Usually his stories are first-person monologues, their drama stoked by Sheff's fearlessly disheveled voice: crooning like Morrissey, quavering like David Byrne, cracking, aching. The band matches his mood swings and eggs him on, harking back to the 1960s and 1970s with folk-rock, new wave, country and an occasional stately ballad, sometimes

sprinkled with mariachi horns or sleigh bells or banjo.

Over a decade of prolific recording and steady touring, Sheff has been thinking more and more about the life of a performer. That theme runs through Okkervil River's 2005 album, *Black Sheep Boy, The Stage Names* from 2007 and its new album, *The Stand Ins*, which was recorded at the same sessions as *The Stage Names* but easily stands on its own.

On *The Stand Ins* Sheff contemplates all sorts of entertainers and hangers-on: singer-songwriters (there's a song called *Singer Songwriter*), a movie star, a supermodel, a faded movie star, an actor's fan, a backstage fling and an imagined interview with the 1970s glam-rock Jobriath (whose albums, coincidentally, have just been reissued). There's a sailor too, who sings (in *Lost Coastlines*), "Every night finds us rocking and rolling on waves wild and white."

Sheff is fascinated by the permeability of truth and deception and by the way people willingly let themselves be deceived by art's fantasies. At the center of the album is *Pop Lie*, a frenetically catchy new wave song about "the man who dreamed up the dream that they wrecked their hearts upon, the

liar who lied in his pop song." Self-conscious as the lyrics are, the music is uninhibited: lurching into motion like a bar band, picking up speed, piling up instruments and letting them fall away. Okkervil River builds each flimsy illusion as if, for the moment, it's all that matters.

On her enchanting 2005 album *Fisherman's Woman*, the singer-songwriter Emiliana Torrini sang small, ruminative songs in an intimate hush. She seemed watchful and a bit careful, with the stir of stringed instruments framing her voice like a cushion beneath a gem. So it's no surprise that Torrini begins a song on *Me and Armini* with an airy suggestion — "Let's stay awake/And listen to the dark" — against a fingerpicked acoustic guitar. The sound, like the image, feels right.

But that's just one moment on this new album, which presents Torrini as a bold eclectic, musically and emotionally. Produced by her longtime collaborator Dan Carey, *Me and Armini* includes electronic textures and jostling grooves, along with spacious reverb. Its title track is a portrait of obsessive infatuation, set over a deceptively breezy reggae lilt. Another hymn to dislocated affection, *Ha Ha*, pairs its spiteful lyrics with a brooding guitar part traceable to the

Velvet Underground. A song called *Big Jumps* literally urges risk taking, before yielding to a chorus of multitracked nonsense syllables.

A native of Iceland, Torrini must endure her share of Bjork comparisons, especially since she has dabbled in trip-hop and electronica. Here, on *Ha Ha* and the archly seductive track *Gun*, she suggests another steely chanteuse, Keren Ann. And *Me and Armini*, with its palatably diverse array of moods, has a parallel in *The Reminder*, which propelled a certain Canadian named Feist into the pop mainstream.

What sets Torrini apart, if ever so slightly, is her incisive way with romance. She captures the bloom and decay of love with equal vigor. Smack in the center of the album are two songs in which she observes a thrashing in her ribcage. "My heart is beating like a jungle drum," she cries, giddily, in one. Then, at the outset of the next: "Hold heart, don't beat so loud/For me keep your calm/As he walks out on you."

This record, by the Swedish pianist Bobo Stenson, embodies two qualities that usually don't go together: extreme breadth and extreme humility. Often when a jazz bandleader serves up a program as mixed as *Cantando* — folk song, an Ornette Coleman jazz tune, lieder, tango, free improvisation — he wants to show you that he has a battling

spirit: he can't be classified; he hasn't bought into any particular aesthetic. An assertiveness of touch tends to go along with that.

But Stenson makes fairly sublime piano-trio records without overarranging, overplaying or over-bandleading. In his mid-60s now, he's the repository of half a century of the development of free jazz, in particular the European post-1960s kind, with its folk and classical leanings. Yet he wears it all lightly. In his recent records you don't hear strategies or contentions, but a natural working flow.

On *Cantando* he's comfortable sharing equal space with his long-time bassist, Anders Jormin, and his new drummer, Jon Falt. It's a thoughtful, moderate performance, using bass and drums more for coordinated melodic counterpoint and color than for groove or swing. And this moderation continues for nearly 80 minutes: *Song of Ruth*, a beautiful melody by the Czech composer Petr Eben (so beautiful it appears in two versions here) has the same quiet confidence as *Pages*, a long track made up of several different free trio improvisations fused together. It's all relatively quiet music, and not too stylized. It's pulsating, lumpy with long improvised phrases; it's alive.