

Heaven Shall Burn's *Veto*: Politicised heavy metal

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12 August 2013

The metalcore band Heaven Shall Burn, from Saalfeld in eastern Germany, released their seventh studio album in April of this year, simply entitled *Veto*. The album, coming after their *Iconoclast* trilogy (*Iconoclast—Part 1: The Final Resistance* [2008]; *Bildersturm—Iconoclast II [The Visual Resistance]* [2009]; *Invictus [Iconoclast III]* [2010]) is full of the same heavy metal sound infused with lyrics of a socially conscious nature.

“Death metal” is primarily a form of heavy metal music found in Europe and the US, although in the last half-decade, it has become increasingly global, producing bands such as Bhayanak Maut from India, Crackdust (Botswana) and Seth.Ect (Turkey). For those who are not fans, death metal is not an easy genre to get into, and the politicised message is somewhat lost when the lyrics are hard to make out without having the liner notes at hand. This sort of music certainly isn't for the casual listener.

The new album is everything that Heaven Shall Burn have showcased to date and, as a death metal band, they utilise an assortment of heavy guitars, blast-beating drums and screeching vocals, along with synthetic effects that give the songs added depth.

To some extent, the band lacks musical innovation because they are limited by the death metal genre, which is now well established and suffers from genuine stagnation. However, they do push the boundaries with their use of synthetic elements.

The band is also unusual amongst its contemporaries in the genre for its use of “political” lyrics, described on allmusic.com as “highly controversial and politicised death metal.”

Not many bands in the genre address socio-political concerns—the 2003 Iraq war being one of the few events that really took the heavy metal scene by storm. There

are a few major self-styled “anarchist” bands, including Arch Enemy and The Agonist, and attempts by other acts to release the occasional “politicised” track. However, the depth and seriousness of Heaven Shall Burn lyrics are somewhat refreshing in a genre whose themes are generally nihilistic or empty-headed.

The band has a tendency to reflect on “folk heroes” of the Left, often bourgeois nationalists or other figures promoted by the former Stalinist parties. The album *Antigone* had songs about Víctor Jara, the murdered Chilean Communist and songwriter, and African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela. Presumably, growing up in East Germany has something to do with the band's political inclinations.

The current album's second track, “Land of the Upright Ones,” is dedicated to Thomas Sankara (1949-1987), the first leader of Burkina Faso, touted as “Africa's Che Guevara.” It is a song of resistance, and the bridge gives a brief pause to the sustained heaviness of the track, to proclaim over melodic keyboards,

This life, this future, we'll build a new foundation.

A new era we will bid welcome

The theme of the third track, “Die Stürme Rufen Dich (The Storms are calling you),” is overt anti-imperialism, with reference to genocide, despotism and the looting by “Northern Kingdoms.” The track is very stark and bleak in its recognition of the horrors committed by Western imperialism.

“An unseen genocide, a world war on the enslaved ones

Shieldless, Facing despotism,

This is the time of awakening”

“You Will Be Godless” and “Like Gods Among Mortals” (the sixth and ninth tracks, respectively) are directed specifically at the oppression of the ruling elite. “You Will Be Godless” suggests that the Vatican

has a long history of corruption and collusion with the aristocracy and bourgeois classes, with religion used to suppress the spirit of the oppressed—

An isolated super state

Lead and controlled by rotten tyrants

Detached from the world and disconnected from reality

Maintaining power is the highest destination

Suppressing real enlightenment and ruling by oppression

Misanthropic doctrines, committed only to their profit

The song closes with the lyrics “Ancient traditions of justifying dark suppressors.” It’s a very heavy and brutal track, even for death metal music, highlighting the band’s feelings of hostility towards the Vatican and its corrupt nature. However, whether such a violent song will have the apparently intended effect of making the listener question religion is another matter.

“Like Gods Among Mortals” is a quintessentially heavy death metal track. It strikes up an antagonistic tone towards the “democratically elected” elites of the world, alluding to the Bilderberg Conference and the latest assaults on democratic rights (which, with the recent Edward Snowden revelations, resonates even more strongly):

Deathmongers, elected and legitimised

Sitting in secret councils

Corrupted henchmen, no beholder

Fraternity is wiped from the face of this earth

The song title lends itself well to the name of the band, which despite its rather Satanic overtones, is a reflection on the end of a system that falsely promises self-enrichment while actually exploiting all but a very few excessively wealthy individuals. In an interview, a band member explained, “We use the term *heaven* as a metaphor for some kind of a fake paradise that people create in their heads. Some people close their eyes and don’t see the truth surrounding them. So this kind of fake heaven should burn.”

The opening track (and the inspiration behind the cover art), entitled simply “Godiva,” is a very unusual take on the legend of Lady Godiva—the thirteenth century noblewoman who rode naked through the streets of Coventry, pleading with her husband (the Earl of Mercia) to alleviate his heavy taxation of the populace. It requests, “Godiva, promise me, convey our hate and screams” and to give “new hope to all the

fallen ones, To all the silenced, to those unheard.”

The cover-track, “Valhalla,” written by another German metal band, Blind Guardian, and featuring a cameo role by its frontman Hansi Kürsch, is a complete departure from Heaven Shall Burn’s politicised topics. The style of the track is (while remaining essentially a metal track) a somewhat light-hearted interlude in an otherwise heavy and dark album.

The final track attacks the “European Super State” and questions poetically,

Why are the proud descendants of Plato

Paying off more debts accommodating NATO?

We the caretakers of democracy

No longer tolerate this hypocrisy

Heaven Shall Burn should be congratulated for their concern with today’s political and social conditions. There are limitations in the genre itself and in the band’s approach, but their music’s aggression and thoughtful lyrics can provide the acquainted listener with a powerful sense of fury at the injustices of capitalism. How many of their listeners take their social attitudes seriously remains an open question.



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