Clash Metal

WILL THE AMERICAN CARNAGE TOUR REOPEN OLD WOUNDS OR HELP MAKE PEACE BETWEEN THRASH TITANS SLAYER, MEGADETH & TESTAMENT?

LET'S NOT FORGET THE LAST TIME that Slayer, Megadeth and Testament [along with Suicidal Tendencies] toured Europe together 20 years ago as Clash of the Titans, it did not end particularly well. There was mostly just a lot of verbal sparring [example: Slayer's Tom Araya reportedly referred to Dave Mustaine as a "homo" from the stage], although Suicidal Tendencies vocalist Mike Muir offered to throw down with Mustaine in a ring onstage before one of the dates. Mustaine—*ahem*—politely declined. ✪ Not surprisingly, that 1990 tour was the genesis of a schism between Slayer and, go figure, Megadeth that seemingly lasted until the two bands did short Canadian and Australian tours together last year. And because the two heavyweights are back together on this historic triple-threat thrash bill, we're to assume that everyone's friends now and the American Carnage tour is going to be a traveling festival of friendship, goodwill and kindness, right? Well, that remains to be seen. ✪ But this isn't just about a 20-year-old beef between two of thrash's Big Four. All three bands' most recent releases are some of their best in a *long* time. Two of the three have [most of] their original lineups intact, and all no doubt want to prove that they are still vital and relevant to the current metal scene—that they can still connect with the next generation—and aren't just a fading buncha dinosaurs trying to relive past glories. [▸]

story by ADEM TEPEDELEN | *portraits by* NEIL VISEL

Can Testament Keep 'em Separated?

One thing that no doubt appeals to Testament vocalist Chuck Billy about the American Carnage tour is that, unlike his band's recent trip to India (their first), he presumably won't need any vaccinations before embarking on this particular jaunt. Though the dude is built like a goddamn inverted pyramid—all shoulders and chest—he proves to be a mere mortal when it comes to getting poked by needles. "No one likes getting shots," is his only reply when queried about his requisite doctor visit before flying off to the Far East.

This North American tour should see the band encountering far fewer potentially fatal diseases. But there may well be other perils to avoid since, as previously noted, the American Carnage "co-headliners"—a diplomatic, if not physically impossible term, since only one band will play last—Megadeth and Slayer have a "history." However, Testament's mostly original lineup, which reconvened in 2005 when guitarist Alex Skolnick (gone since 1992) rejoined, has had enough of its own drama to worry about over the years, including but not limited to Billy's cancer in 2002 and a revolving cast of members too complicated to even begin to try to sort out here.

In 2010, however, Billy is cancer-free and the band's classic lineup—which coincidentally includes former Slayer drummer Paul Bostaph in place of Louie Clemente—is finding that reuniting feels so good. "It felt like old times the first rehearsal we had together," says Billy. "It was like, ***OK, yeah, this is it. That's the sound.*** Alex and [guitarist] Eric [Peterson] definitely have a certain chemistry together. And the second day we were so tight, it was like we'd never [been apart]. You realize that's just the magic of having chemistry together."

In the five years since this lineup has been back together, their only new output thus far has been 2008's ***The Formation of Damnation***, which will be reissued (with bonus material) to coincide with the American Carnage tour, but that's mostly because they've been too busy touring their tits off. As evidenced by the recent trip to India, these guys are serious about reestablishing their rightful status as one of the true forefathers of thrash. "Since we kind of had our reunion with the original lineup, everybody said let's go for it," says Billy. "We just said, [let's] go ahead and book as many shows as [we] can, especially having a new record out. It all kind of worked out and so far we've had a good time with it."

They will, however, attempt to find time to record and release a new album in 2010, something Billy, Peterson and bassist Greg Christian are currently working on while Skolnick is on tour with the Trans-Siberian Orchestra. "We're just starting to write," says Billy, "and it's going really good. We're all excited to get going. Everybody's fired up." Skolnick ***will*** be part of the writing process, but probably not until after the American Carnage tour, since he'll only have a short break in January between the end of the TSO tour and the beginning of American Carnage. "[Alex] writes a lot on his own," says Billy. "He'll come in with a couple of his own songs and then we'll spend a couple of weeks working with him. We'll get them really fine-tuned—especially his lead sections—and get down all the harmonies with him and Eric. Then we're ready to go."

KEVIN HODAPP

Though all three bands' latest releases are some of their strongest in at least a decade, Testament, relatively speaking, have more to prove. This is a band that, in the late '80s, was on nearly equal footing with the Big Four (Metallica, Slayer, Anthrax and Megadeth). They were signed to a major label and releasing one classic album after another. And, quite frankly, their roots in the Bay Area thrash scene's nascence gave them practically the same ***bona fides*** as the others. But, for whatever reason, Testament haven't gotten the same credit. "Yeah, but

it's always been like that," Billy says. "What can I do but just keep writing and forging forward with the music I write and the message that I get across? We've got a lot of years under our belt doing it, and we're still loving it and enjoying it. Right now we're not looking for any of that [acknowledgment or recognition], but enjoying the time that we're doing with the original lineup. After I went through the whole illness, doing the tour with the original guys [in 2005] was real spiritual for me. And now, to get the opportunity to go out with Slayer and Megadeth—c'mon, it doesn't get any better for us in the situation were in."

Though the rumor-mongering about a potential Big Four tour leaves Testament once again on the outside, they do recognize that their legacy is being kept alive in a perhaps more lasting way: the many bands they have influenced over the years. "I've talked to a lot of those bands and seen them," says Billy. "Hearing how much of an influence we were is a good feeling. It makes you feel like you're worth something. [*Laughs*] Like something you did actually meant something."

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>
> CHUCK BILLY

So, the band steps into their slot on the American Carnage tour with humility and a good attitude. And, no doubt, relief that no vaccinations will be necessary. For his part, Billy is just stoked to be part of package—with his peers—that hasn't shared a stage in 20 years. "We've been friends for a long time," says Billy of his tourmates, "but we haven't really hooked up with those bands too much after the Clash of the Titans tour. We hooked up with Megadeth on the Priest tour last year, though, and it was like old times, old buds. We all kind of reconnected again. I think it's going to be a good family vibe [amongst the bands] out there. There's definitely not going to be any egos. I think it's gonna be good."

Until, of course, each band takes the stage. Then it'll be a little different vibe. "Every band's going to want to crush each other," insists Billy. "Everybody's going to bring their guns loaded; I know that. Whatever amount of time [onstage], everybody's going to try to pack it in. That's what makes a good show. Everybody's going to have to be on their toes, performing their best. And right now I think all three bands are, so it's gonna be good."

Slayer Bring the Pain Worldwide

There's always a price to pay, isn't there? Not in the sold-our-souls-to-the-devil-for-fame sort of way—although it'd be understandable if you thought that's the Faustian pact Slayer had long ago made. Rather a price for hitching your career, your life, your existence to a pursuit that compels you to make your head and neck do things that they probably weren't meant to do.

But this isn't a cautionary tale. That would imply that we might have some ambivalence about the choice of dedicating oneself to the unfettered pursuit of metal. Nope, the devout are pretty much lifers, so anything we may reveal here is purely anecdotal neither meant to sway or dissuade. Just know, there's always a price to pay.

Slayer vocalist/bassist Tom Araya—a lifer if there ever was one, now into well into his third decade of metal service—claims to have a high tolerance for pain, something that would surely come in handy in his chosen profession. Like a pro athlete—a gamer—who plays through injuries rather than taking himself out of the game, shit's gotta get real bad for Araya to shut it down, though it has happened over the years. Gall bladder surgery ain't something you can just put off. And a kidney stone won't pass without inflicting the kind of misery that makes grown men weep like a frightened child. And if he loses his voice—as happens from time to time—giving it "110 percent" won't let him be heard any better. So, over the years he has begrudgingly had to surrender to the mortality of his corporeal being.

But the neck pain he's suffered with for almost two years was enough to shut the Slayer machine down—albeit temporarily—just as their latest album, ***World Painted Blood***, debuted in the U.S. ***Billboard*** charts at number 12 and they were about to embark on Eastern Canadian (with Megadeth) and European tours. The timing was lousy to say the least. And now two months before the American Carnage tour is set to start in Seattle on January 18, Araya is not only discovering the fallibility of his flesh; he's been handed a "Payment Now Due" on a lifetime spent in the service of metal.

Though his doctors are still in the process of assessing where exactly the issue is and what the treatment will be, two things are indisputable: fixing it will require surgery, and his days of unfettered headbanging onstage are behind him. "They didn't have to tell me," he says of his consultation with the specialist. "I just looked at the guy and said, 'So, no more of this?' and I moved my head and my wrist. And he goes, 'nope.' Those days are over for me. It's tremendous the damage that I've done. After 30 years of doing that, it's severe."

Another inevitable cost of this lifestyle and being in the public eye for three decades—especially now that we have the Internet—is that people will want to take their shots. Every dickhead with a computer can now publicly talk all kinds of shit with pretty much no fear of retribution. And inevitably other bands—frequently one's peers—will use this same public forum (or some other form of media) to do the same. However, there is at least a reasonable opportunity for retribution when one's peers do the shit-talking.

Despite having toured Western Canada and Australia in 2009 with Megadeth, there has been that aforementioned animosity between the bands over the years. And, since Dave Mustaine is the only remaining original Megadeth member, we don't need to spell out for you exactly where the nexus of whatever [▸]

tension between the two bands lies. The war of words has mostly been waged through intermediaries (i.e. the media), though this tour will provide ample opportunity for things to become more, um, personal should the need arise.

Slayer guitarist Kerry King, briefly a member of Megadeth in its nascence, is not one to measure his words or speak particularly cautiously in interviews. Nor is he a loose cannon. But if someone asks his opinion, he's prone to sharing it. Thus, he and Mustaine have fired jabs back and forth over the years. The dates the two bands played together in 2009—which should have been called the Never Say Never tour due to the unlikelihood of the pairing—perhaps allowed both parties to at least humanize whatever beef may still exist. And for King, it also brought back some surprisingly positive memories. "The Clash of the Titans [tour] was fun," he recounts. "The early first record or two of Megadeth, the bands hanging out. I thought about it and went, ***You know, I don't think I've talked to this guy*** [Mustaine] ***in 15 years***. It put some perspective on it for me. Jesus Christ, it's been 15 years—maybe I should talk to this guy and see what he's about these days. I need to spend some time [with him] and get a new opinion, because my opinion is outdated."

Both King and Araya, who is doing whatever it takes to get his neck injury taken care of before the start of the American Carnage, see a larger picture beyond whatever feelings they may or may not have about their co-headliners. "Whether I thought Dave [Mustaine] was the worst dude on the planet," says King, "I never would have shot down the tour, because I think it's great for the fans. That's how drastically I can avoid what's going on in my close circle and say, 'Hey, man, the fans deserve this.'"

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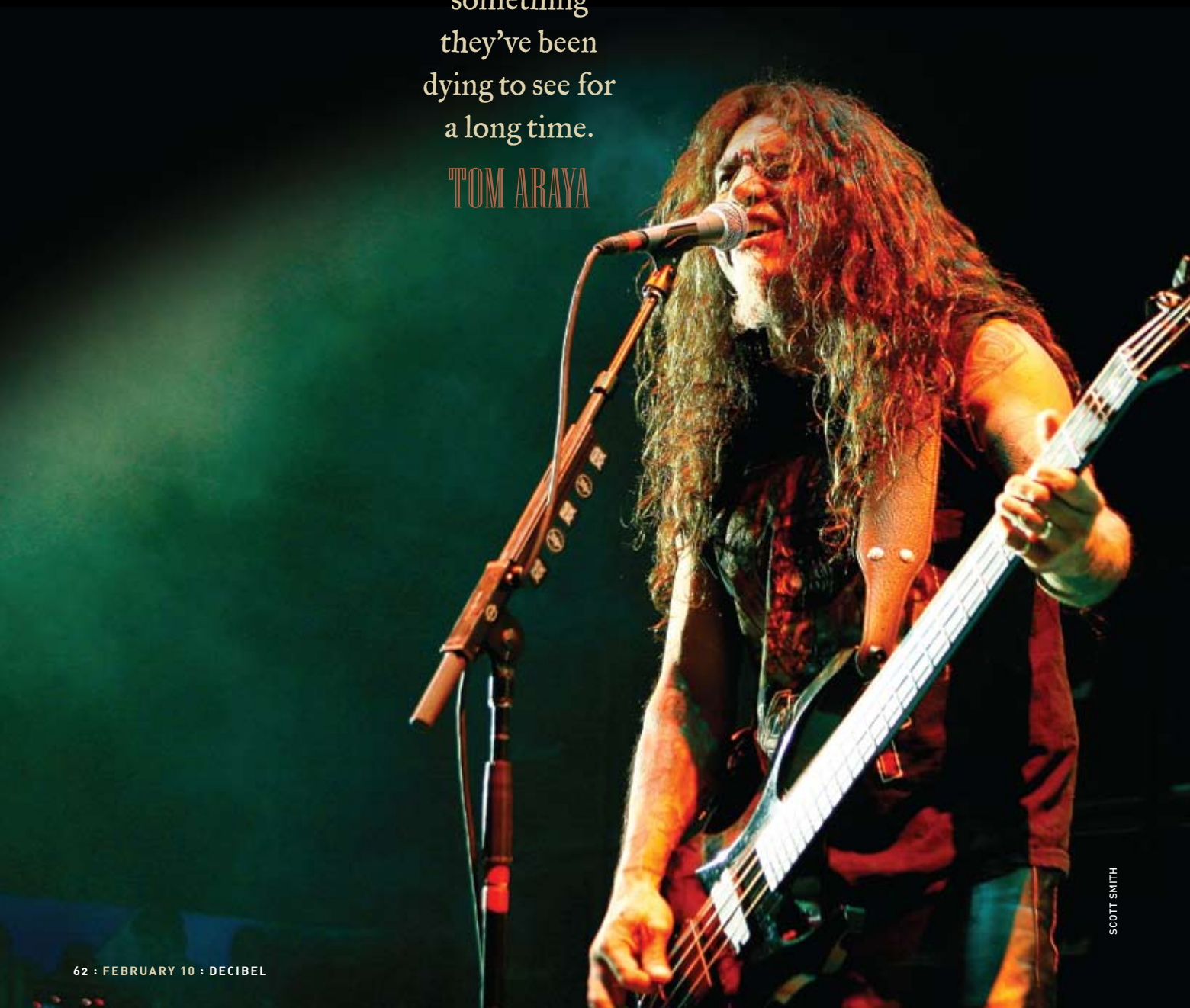
>
> TOM ARAYA



SCOTT SMITH

Araya echoes King's sentiment, adding, "It's not really about will we get along; it's about will the fans enjoy the show? What to me is important about this tour is that it's what the fans want to see. They want to see Megadeth and Slayer together. That's something they've been dying to see for a long time. And what metal fan wouldn't want to see Megadeth, Slayer and Testament?"

The things they have control over—such as getting along with their tourmates—are far easier to deal with than Araya's injury and the impact it had at a particularly crucial time for Slayer. While King is not unsympathetic to his bandmate's pain, sitting at home without any immediate means to help the band's new album continue to stick around the upper echelon of the charts isn't sitting particularly well with him. "It's weird having an album out for a month and not being on tour," he says. "We were just going to start rehearsing when the dates got postponed."

In fact, the American Carnage tour will be the first time that Slayer gets to properly introduce a full slate of new songs from an album that has been rightfully praised as their finest since the holy trinity of ***Reign in Blood***, ***South of Heaven*** and ***Seasons in the Abyss*** in the late '80s. King, the band's official decider of such things, had only gotten as far as mulling what new songs might be incorporated in their set before things got put on hold. "Psychopathy Red" was, of course, part of the rotation even well before ***World*** was released, and the title track was added as the set opener while the band toured Australia with Megadeth last fall. The others are as yet question marks because of the unorthodox (at least for them) way the album was recorded, with a lot of the material written in the studio. Basically, the band doesn't know how the songs will gel because they haven't actually played them together. "There's so much shit on the new album that we're into," King says, "we'll probably play five or six." Choosing which ones make the cut won't happen until they're able to properly rehearse, but King mentions "Snuff," "Beauty Through Order" and "Public Display of Dismemberment" as likely to be part of the mix.

Though it's standard operating procedure for bands to be, at least publicly, effusive about their latest album ("Every record we've done has been fantastic," Araya actually does assure us), and most are probably sincere, Slayer seem to share the enthusiasm fans and critics have generally shown toward ***World Painted Blood***. Though they're not entirely sure what makes it different, they have some theories.

"I think kind of going back to how things were initially done with this band is probably why it sounds the way it sounds," says Araya. "After ***Seasons***, a lot of the songs came in pretty much musically done. And it would be after the songs had sat around for awhile before we even thought, OK, we're ready to record. This time we went in with about half the songs written, and the other half just came together in the studio, so there was no time to sit and reflect. If it sounded great, we went with it."

"I think overall it sounds kind of retro," says King, "and as I thought about that, I thought maybe it's because [the writing process was] the most like how we used to make songs up in Tom's garage in the '80s. Back in those days, me and Jeff [Hanneman] would always be in Tom's garage—me playing guitar and him playing drums until everyone else showed up. We were kids; that's all we did."

In a lot of ways, this tour is for the "kids" who, like Hanneman, Araya, King and Dave Lombardo in the '80s, are in the process of immersing themselves in all things metal. "They've opened their eyes to metal, so they're discovering the old bands," says Araya of the youth movement getting turned onto thrash. "But in that process, new bands evolve that want to try to [play thrash]. Then the new generation gets into the new bands because they're more their age and these are ***their*** bands. It's a whole new generation that has discovered this, and now they want to make it their own."

And it's only fitting that Araya—he of the fucked-up neck—be the one to indoctrinate them. Or at least let them know what they're in for. "There's some [bizarre] things going on the left side of my body," he says of his headbanging-related infirmity. "I'm having these crazy muscle spasms..."

Straight From the Mouth of Megadeth

Although we don't necessarily agree with ***The Office's*** Michael Scott's opinion that Wikipedia is "the best thing ever" because "anyone in the world can write anything they want about any subject, so you know you are getting the best possible information," we do love the fact that there is an entire page—complete with detailed references—dedicated to "Dave Mustaine feuds and rivalries." (In contrast, Kerry King only has a sub-section of his Wikipedia page dedicated to feuds, while Chuck Billy and Tom Araya have nothing regarding any feuds at all on theirs.) Clearly fussin' and a-feudin' has, over the years been a part of the Mustaine M.O., something that becomes very apparent after just a brief conversation with the Megadeth founder.

Unlike King—at least on this occasion—Mustaine ***is*** a loose cannon. Allotted a mere 15 minutes to interview him for this cover story, he at least has the courtesy to fill up every one of those 15 minutes with alternatingly bizarre, titillating and random anecdotes and pronouncements. A question regarding his recollections of the first European Clash of the Titans tour in 1990 ultimately results—after a rather circuitous route in which he completely fails to address the actual question, even slightly—in this unprovoked revelation. "There was talk about the Big Four [tour] happening, but it's not happening," says Mustaine. "I'm here to tell you right now. You're getting a scoop right now. The offer that we got just wasn't what we felt was fair."

So, unless Mustaine changes his mind or is offered more coin, we might have to be satisfied with the "Big Two" (plus Testament!) for now. But if Mustaine and King are making inroads to patching things up, who knows what the future holds for the rest of the people on his Wiki feud page? (Hugs for Fred Durst? A bouquet of flowers for Riki Rachtman?) For his part, the Megadeth frontman seems ready to mend fences. "There was a period where we didn't get along," he admits. "[But] I was in my dressing room in Japan last month and Dave Lombardo comes in and said some really great stuff to me. Then I get off stage and Kerry is in there. It's like, wow, this is really, really cool. I took [King] aside and said, 'What did I do that pissed [▸]

you off so bad? Because I'd really like to go back to when we were friends.'"

He is also apparently contrite for past transgressions. Sort of. "Whatever I said [in the past], whatever I did was regrettable. Probably a portion of it was not necessary. Probably a portion of it ***was*** necessary for me, but that doesn't mean that it was necessary for anybody else. We all say stuff... that's 19 years ago."

And, given the opportunity to prove his loyalty with, uh, brute force, Mustaine is willing to go there, too. "If Kerry and I were ever anywhere and somebody was trying to hurt him," he says, "I would stand by his side. I may not be his friend, but I consider him a friend of mine. For whatever has been said or done, I have been forgiven for a lot of terrible stuff, so how can I not forgive anybody? I've apologized to those guys, and I think we're on really good standing right now."

Thus, at least one part of Mustaine's Wikipedia feud page can be updated—by anyone in the world, apparently—to reflect his newfound camaraderie with Slayer (just be sure to use this article as your reference, so it's "official"). But you just never know what can happen over the course of a 15-minute chat with the man. Again, pertinent to nothing I asked, he offers an opinion regarding a "Big Five," instead of Big Four, that leaves tourmates Testament entirely out of the picture. "For me, I always kind of thought it was like the Big Five," he postulates. "If you think about it, you've got Megadeth, Anthrax, Slayer and my old band. But what about Exodus? They were there, too, man. Let's not forget. But I think just because of instability and stuff that goes on with bands, that they weren't included.

"The funny thing is that if anyone was unstable over those years, it was me," he concludes with a laugh.

The scads of Megadeth members who have come and gone over the years can no doubt attest to some of that instability. Mustaine nonetheless managed to keep all but Canadian guitarist Glenn Drover (who was replaced by ex-Jag Panzer guitarist Chris Broderick) around from 2007's ***United Abominations*** for his latest, ***Endgame***, a definite return to faster, thrashier material. It's a release that, in many ways, mirrors what Slayer achieved on ***World Painted Blood***, a contemporary-sounding album that still acknowledges past achievements. It's one obvious reason why the pairing of the two bands in 2010 makes sense.

And not surprisingly, Mustaine has his own unique take on why it works so well. "It's like two mighty stags on opposite sides of a huge valley, and we know that we're wired to fight each other, but—you know what—we're coexisting. We're looking down there and seeing everything that's beneath us and in front of us and saying, 'This is great; there's enough for both of us. There's plenty to go around.' If we really celebrate, not only can we partake of all of this majesty down there; we can also exponentially continue to make it travel around the world."

We're not entirely sure what the "huge valley" and "majesty down there" is all about, but Mustaine is definitely feeling on top of the world, as it were ("My career right now is just exploding," he tells us), and maybe that's just what things look like from his perspective. Part of that elevated status, so to speak, is a feeling that he's ready for the responsibility of showing the next generation of bands how it's done. Maybe take them under his wing and share his wisdom. "I think the thing that's most rewarding right now is being put in that position," he says. "Being able to actually represent. I feel that I have the tools right now to assume that position and be a proud elder statesman. I've been around the block."

And perhaps his first lesson will include tips on how to avoid having a Wikipedia page dedicated to your feuds and rivalries. Or maybe he can just offer his rather lengthy experience creating feuds and rivalries as a cautionary tale. What ***not*** to do. Because, as we have established, somewhere down the line, there's always a price to be paid. [dB]

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