



William Irwin, "The Meaning of Metallica: Ride the Lyrics"

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William Irwin. *The Meaning of Metallica: Ride the Lyrics*. ECW Press year. 200 pp. \$22.95 CAD (Paperback ISBN 9781770416185).

William Irwin's *The Meaning of Metallica* introduces an audience beyond their base to the band by way of 'a close reading of lyrics dense with details and rich with allusions' (back-cover). Irwin, a philosophy professor at King's College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, achieves many of his goals. He demonstrates that James Hetfield, the band's singer and primary lyricist, has some thoughtful things to say about the existential issues that confront his listeners.

The Meaning of Metallica is comprised of an introduction, ten chapters, a conclusion, and a brief acknowledgements section at the end. Each of the chapters is focused on a theme that is tied to specific song lyrics that range across Metallica's career. The subtitles of said chapters are nods to the song titles themselves, a wink to those already versed in the verses of the band.

The introduction, 'The Ecstasy of Gold,' starts with a bold provocation: 'Hetfield's lyrics are worthy of the same attention that Bob Dylan's receives' (vii). In service to that agenda, Irwin decides to focus on Metallica's lyrics as central, not supplemental, to the songs; they are poems that can be considered for their composition as well as their content. He hopes this project will bring 'more serious attention to Metallica' (x).

Chapter One, 'Religion,' is contextualized as at least a partial examination of Hetfield's complicated personal relationship with religion; specifically, the issues surrounding his upbringing in a Christian Science family. The compositional clues are drawn primarily from the song 'Creeping Death,' off Metallica's *Ride the Lightning* (1984), and 'Leper Messiah,' off the album *Master of Puppets* (1986). Irwin suggests that the lyrical content 'raises questions about God's justice and about the rationality of believing in such a God' (3). He also notes that, as Hetfield has aged, so too have his views on religion, implying 'that he has accepted some form of Christianity' (32-33).

'Addiction,' the second chapter, points to one reason Hetfield's view on religion might have shifted: his ongoing struggles with alcohol. Here Irwin spans Metallica's career, moving chronologically from 'Master of Puppets' (the title song from the previously mentioned album), to 'The House that Jack Built' off of *Load* (1996), to the more recent releases *St. Anger* (2003) and *Hardwired . . . to Self-Destruct* (2016). Throughout, Irwin argues that the lyrical content belies a writer familiar of a common truth: addicts are aware of their struggles, though they struggle nonetheless (58).

Chapter Three, 'Insanity and Confusion,' is primarily focused on 'Welcome Home (Sanitarium)' from *Master*. Here, Irwin engages in an interesting strategy-by-comparison: though not everyone has dealt with mental illness, most are familiar with the feelings of being bullied, put down, and made to feel 'unfit' (73).

'Death,' the fourth chapter, reads like a continuation of the previous two discussions, even if the focus is on the issue of suicides and overdoses. Here 'Fade to Black' off *Ride* serves as the focal point. Irwin changes up the previous strategy by offering compositional complications in 'Moth into Flame' and 'Now That We're Dead' from *Hardwired*. While the former is inspired by the



death of Amy Winehouse (98) and the latter is a take on the story of Romeo and Juliet (100), the through-line is apparent: the tension between the permanence of death and the yearning to believe there is something that comes after it.

Chapter Five, 'War,' reads like a non-chronological discussion of 'anti-war' themes (113): trauma and injury in 'One' from . . . *And Justice for All* (1988); the bravery and futility of military service in 'For Whom the Bell Tolls' from *Ride*; soldiers as interchangeable means to ends in 'Disposable Heroes' from *Master*; and the more general critiques of war in songs like 'Fight Fire with Fire,' also from *Ride*, and 'Blackened,' off . . . *And Justice*.

'Justice,' the sixth chapter, is as much about framing . . . *And Justice* and *Metallica* (1991) as a complicated conceptual whole as it is about individual songs and their lyrics. Irwin's overall suggestion is that, together, they represent a clear theme: 'don't limit my freedom of speech and don't corrupt my justice system' (120).

Chapter Seven, 'Freedom,' continues this theme by returning to more of a focus on individual songs. Here, though, Hetfield's lyrics celebrate how even an imperfect America provides the groundwork for individuals to flourish. To Irwin, 'Wherever I May Roam,' off *Metallica*, is 'a declaration of individual independence' (126) and a 'journey of self-discovery' (131). But neither is guaranteed. In 'The Unforgiven,' off the same album, Hetfield's lyrics suggest a character lamenting 'that he did not become the person he wanted to be' (136).

'Emotional Isolation,' the eighth chapter, finds Irwin juxtaposing songs so as to demonstrate a theme. Though Irwin references 'The Unforgiven' (*Metallica*), this chapter is really about the impact of love as found in a trilogy of songs: 'Nothing Else Matters' (*Metallica*), and 'The Unforgiven,' parts II-III (*Reload*, 1997; *Death Magnetic*, 2008). In the first, there is a naïve faith in 'us against the world' even if we know most relationships end (149). The second song is a jaundiced rejoinder from a narrator who sought 'refuge in romantic love' and failed (152). The final song suggests that the result of avoiding love and connection with others, even as we reflect on the failures in our past, is a life of 'extreme isolation' (161).

Chapter Nine, 'Control,' is about a paradox at the heart of the above theme(s): the quest 'to be noble' as found in 'The Struggle Within' (*Metallica*; 163), can just as easily warp into a pitiful need to play 'the martyr and the savior' ('Atlas Arise,' *Hardwired*, 178). Thus, one has to resist two equally problematic strategies: isolation, which severs us from others ('King Nothing,' *Load*, 165), and micro-managing people to the point that you lose them in the process ('All Within My Hands,' *St. Anger*, 167).

In 'Resilience,' the tenth chapter, Irwin focuses on two songs from one album: 'The Judas Kiss' and 'Broken, Beat & Scarred' from *Death Magnetic*. But he examines three lyrical targets: the band, its fans, and people in general. In the first song, Irwin suggests that Metallica felt as betrayed by their fans as their fans did by their musical experimentation in the 1990s (176). Hetfield proposes a solution that extends beyond the band and those who follow Metallica: turn adversities into life lessons to 'become better and stronger' (179).

The conclusion, 'The Search Goes On,' is a brief note to fans, suggesting they contact him directly with their own impressions of the band and its songs, complete with Irwin's email address

and Twitter handle.

Irwin demonstrates an intimate knowledge of the songs he analyzes. He also shines when demonstrating how Hetfield's lyrics have touchstones in other creative areas. The book is rich in cultural, literary, and philosophical references. In the discussion of religion, there are allusions to mobster Tony Soprano from the ground-breaking HBO show that bore the title character's name (11) and Pascal's wager (17). The analysis of mental illness nods to the Hippocratic Oath (72), Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* (74), and Homer's *Odyssey* (79). The discussion of freedom draws in references to John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (128) and Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (132). Irwin's discussion of inner strength draws in insight on Nietzsche from essayist Nassim Taleb (179).

On occasion, however, Irwin's reach exceeds his grasp. Though maintaining a largely observational and objective tone, at times the author extends courtesies to Hetfield (and Metallica) that he would not offer to other bands. In suggesting Hetfield's place amongst lyricists like Dylan, he unnecessarily stereotypes most other metal bands as 'trite' (vii). He also applauds Metallica for avoiding 'faux-Satanism' and other clichés (1). At the same time, however, he gives them a pass for being 'affectionately known as "Alcoholica"' (17), an impression which they readily embraced, in the very same chapter where Irwin recounts Hetfield's struggles with sobriety. There are also a couple of places where, in attempting to establish the heft of Hetfield's lyrics, the author relies a bit too heavily on other bands and their songs. One of the more prominent cases of this occurs in the same chapter on addiction, where, multiple times, Irwin refers to Black Sabbath's 'N.I.B.' (off their eponymous 1970 album) while discussing 'Master of Puppets.' While Metallica fans mostly like both bands, the discussion runs perilously close to becoming a discussion of lyrics in general, rather than Metallica's lyrics. In a few instances, particularly in the move from the third to the fourth and then the sixth to seventh chapters, it feels as if the latter chapters are merely extensions of the former. Edited differently, they might have made for two more detailed and focused chapters. The conclusion also includes a passing dismissal of the song 'Fuel' off *Load* (183), even if the song functions in a similar way—an ode to adrenalin-inducing, non-addictive, 'highs'—to Motley Crue's 'Kickstart My Heart' from *Dr. Feelgood* (1989). The book would also have greatly benefited from a bibliography and/or index, given that Irwin often toggles between songs from different eras of the band, while also referencing the numerous non-musical examples, no less songs from other bands.

To be clear, *The Meaning of Metallica* will not likely move the band into the realms of Samuel Coleridge or Maya Angelou. No one will even mistake Hetfield's lyrics for the didactic prose of Arthur Schopenhauer or the precise exposition of John Dewey. But, as Irwin points out, for his fans, Hetfield's musings on the complexities of the human condition were (and are) equally powerful. To an interested outsider looking in, the appeal of Metallica might still seem difficult to fathom. Irwin, however, makes a good case that, amidst the joyous cacophony that is their music, there is a love of hard-earned wisdom that a man, his band, and their fans share.

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