

HELSTAR – Interview with Larry Barragan by José Ant. Marroqui “Brujo” – www.tntradiorock.com

Hi Larry, before we begin, thank you for your time. With “The Devil’s Masquerade” out for a few weeks now, I'd like to know your thoughts on this new Helstar album.

LB: Well, I’m very proud of the álbum. I think it’s a very good heavy metal álbum and that is always the goal. I think the collection of songs are strong throughout.

It took you about nine years to craft “The Devil’s Masquerade,” or at least that's how long it took you to write the new songs, and what's changed in this process compared to previous albums?

LB: I don’t really look at it as a nine year hiatus. We did do the EP Clad in Black but it has been a while. The other thing that was going on was the label was in a transition that took quite a while to complete. The actual writing of the álbum was very methodical. I like to write and record as I go along. I don’t think we’ve changed how we go about writing. It’s almost comical because always at the end no matter how much time we’ve had it always seems like we are right up against the deadline.

Many agree that this is one of the “darkest” and “heaviest” albums in your discography. Was it a premeditated decision to take the sound to darker territory, or did the lyrical concept simply end up weighing down the musical tone?

LB: We always write the music first and then add the lyrics on top of that. I think it’s dark and heavy because it’s dark and heavy. I don’t really channel the music in a certain direction. I want it to be heavy first and foremost no matter what but the songs flow and gather momentum as we go along.

On this album, you leave behind some of the thrasher edge of Helstar and delve into a more classic heavy/power style, almost theatrical at times. Did you feel this was the best way to bring the album's dark themes to life?

LB: I try not to think about it too much to be honest. I start playing riffs and if something catches me ear then I’ll try to build on that. It’s like that old saying, just keep throwing shit on the wall until something sticks. I love playing the thrashier type songs but at the same time I make it a point to try not to repeat myself. For me that is very important because I don’t want to write the same álbum over and over. I want each álbum to be different from the others. I want it to have its own soul.

Lyricaly, there's a clear return to horror, but with more contemporary references and especially focused on vampirism, for example in songs like "Stygian Miracles" and "Carcass for a King." What were you trying to convey with this blend of modern horror and classical symbolism?

LB: James and I love to watch horror movies, especially the old ones. I think that for this álbum with all the shit happening in the world and all the división in our country, we wanted to do something lyricaly that takes the listener from the reality of the real horror going on in the world. There are real monsters in the world and they wear suits. That shit is in your face all day long. You don’t need us to reinforce that and cram it down your throats with our lyrics. This álbum for me is an escape.

“Suerte de Muleta” is an unexpected title on an album full of vampires and darkness. What? What does this instrumental piece represent within the album's concept? Is it a kind of ritual interlude, a moment of respite, or something more symbolic?

LB: That song is, in my mind, a soundtrack for the painting by Pablo Picasso by the same title. I began writing that song while looking at the painting and that's what came out. I think the drumming on that song is outstanding. Mikey fucking killed it! I'm very happy how that came out overall.

Albums like A Distant Thunder and Nosferatu are considered classics precisely because of their cohesive identity. Personally, I feel that The Devil's Masquerade recaptures that same sense of unity. Did you have that same feeling in the studio, or was it something you noticed once the album was finished?

LB: You know, being the producer engineer makes it difficult to step back and take it all in right at the moment it's all happening. James was very excited throughout the recording. I had to take several days off and not listen to it to finally go back and see what we had accomplished. I felt the album was very good. I think it's a strong effort and I'm proud of the performances on it. That's actually a very hard question to answer.

After more than 40 years, you're not only still active, but you're also delivering albums that sound fresh and with their own identity. How do you manage to avoid the temptation to repeat yourself? What continues to drive you creatively?

LB: I have always said it's not a matter of topping what you have already done, it's a matter of doing something different than what you have already done. I'm very proud of the fact that every Helstar album sounds different from the others before it. They all stand alone. There is a style but they are all very individual to themselves. I love looking at a blank canvas. It's beautiful and horrifying at the same time. There is much self doubt. Can I do this? Can I write something that's worth a fuck or not? So far, so good I guess.

I imagine the challenge isn't just to sound good, but to sound current without betraying your essence. How do you manage this tension between evolution and fidelity to the classic Helstar sound?

LB: You know, I can only be me. I'm blessed to have a vocalist that identifies this band no matter where I go musically. I don't worry about sounding modern or dated. I worry about sounding good. I worry about the songs being good. That's all I can control.

Madrid, Valencia, Barcelona, and Portugalete are the cities chosen to present The Devil's Masquerade in Spain in November. With such a powerful album like this, fresh off the press, how are you balancing the setlist between new songs and the classics that fans always look forward to? Are there going to be any songs you haven't played before in Spain?

LB: We will have a fairly long set. We have a core of songs that we always have to do. King is Dead, Evil Reign, Run With the Pack, Baptized in Blood, we have to do those songs or fans will walk away very unhappy. We'll be doing 4 songs of the new album and at least one from every other album. Obviously, there will be fans that will ask for deeper cuts but I think most will be happy with the set we will be doing.

Spain has always had a special relationship with classic metal. After so many years of touring, is there anything about the Spanish audience that continues to surprise or engage you?

Spain has always been good to us. We did Leyendas De Rock a few years ago and it was definitely the highlight of the tour for us. Spain is very passionate about metal and it shows.

After four decades, how has the way Helstar experiences a tour like this changed? Do you still enjoy the road, or is it more of a vampiric act of sacrifice to feed hungry fans?

LB: I love the road. I wish we could do more. Touring is hard at any level. It's many hours of nothing and then 2 hours of ecstasy. But I love meeting fans and hanging out. I think the friends I have made over the years in Spain can attest to that. When I was younger I didn't know how to react to fans. I was a bit shy and I didn't really trust people very much. As an old man I've come to enjoy and appreciate the people that come to see us and want a hand shake or an autograph or a photo. Not every band gets to do what we do or have fans like we have. That doesn't go unappreciated. We are so very lucky.

And lastly. If you were only allowed to play one song from the new album live, which would you choose and why?

LB: That's a hard one. Damn, I think Seek Out Your Sins. I just like how it flows and gets heavier as it goes along.

Congratulations on this excellent album, and thank you very much for your answers and time.

LB: Thank you Jose! It was my pleasure.