

Zeren Wilson's journey into heavy metal wine

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&

MEGADETH

Illustration by Yoyo



“Can I offer you something while we talk? You wanna beer or something? Wine?” We’re backstage at the O2 Arena in south London, two hours before showtime. Dave Mustaine walks back from the fridge with a Heineken – I asked for a beer. Megadeth wasn’t a thing for me until recently, until last year, a bewildering and unexpected flashbang: I’ve become a fan, and dammit, I’m going to trawl through all the albums released over 35 years and get a real handle on the band, ranking the albums in order of favourites – a protean list that shifts with repeated listens. From the opening frantic jagged riffs of *Holy Wars... The Punishment Due (Rust In Peace, 1990, fourth album)*, I was hooked. Urgent, visceral, crowd-moshing thrash metal: a new obsession, a compulsion.

I begin reading everything I can on the band’s history; the story is a humdinger in the history of metal. Mustaine was the original lead guitarist in the nascent Metallica line-up of the early 1980s, unceremoniously booted out of the band in 1983 on the eve of recording their first album, and put on a Greyhound bus out of NYC back to Los Angeles. Megadeth was his snarling, furious, massive “fuck you” response to this parting of ways, a riposte that began with sketching lyrics to the song *Set The World Afire (So Far, So Good... So What!, third album, 1988)* on the back of a cupcake wrapper with a borrowed pencil on the bus back to California – he was

angry, with a point to prove, vengeance on his mind. So began one of the great metal rivalries of the 1980s and 90s.

My oldest and best mate Adam was way ahead of me on the metal scene, the memory of a scrawl on one of his school exercise books now making a lot more sense: “*Peace Sells... but Who’s Buying?*” (1986, the eponymous song from their second album). He was on it already, a nailed-on ripsnorter of a track regarded as one of their finest moments, brimming with politically charged lyrics. So, I’m playing catch-up... in fast-forward, devouring every bit of band info and all 15 albums since Mustaine founded Megadeth in 1983. Then I uncover an unexpected detail: Mustaine Vineyards is a thing. Wow. OK, I’m liking this guy even more. His journey into the world of wine began when he was a featured soloist with the San Diego Symphony in 2014, bringing thrash guitar-shredding into the world of classical music, the jagged sounds of his V-shaped guitar jiving against the melodies of Vivaldi, Bach and Wagner – not as whack as it sounds; the first Megadeth album (*Killing Is My Business...*) begins with Mustaine playing the piano, his take on Bach’s *Toccatà and Fugue in D Minor*, before unleashing into the hectic fast-paced thrash the band is famous for. To commemorate the unique evening, his debut wine, ‘Symphony Interrupted’, was served at the concert, a 2012

Cabernet Sauvignon made by Fallbrook Winery in San Diego County. He helped to pick the blend with his wife Pam, as well as helping during bottling – its production of 59 cases was offered for sale before the concert, selling out in 72 hours.

“My wife said, ‘You’re gonna have two different types of people there, your fans and the Symphony’s fans. You’ll need something for that mix.’ Wine was the perfect social lubricant,” he later tells me. Metal, classical music and wine, in the same room: who would have thought? The trail begins for me to track down a bottle from the winery – a long shot – and perhaps even get a comment from the man himself about how the world of wine became part of his life, a life that just happens also to have included creating one of the biggest metal bands on the planet – I buckle up for the journey and start making enquiries. At first glance, it looks like this will be easy. I track down the international booking agent for Megadeth, on London’s Kingsway, a short stroll from Holborn underground. Nope, barred from even passing the generic reception for the offices above: “Do you have an appointment? No? Please arrange an appointment.” OK. Denied. Several emails asking for a press contact are met with silence. Onwards.

Oh, what’s this, he recently launched a beer too? Let’s try this angle. A Twitter exchange with @megadethbeer – I’m stunned and impressed that Mustaine is responding

himself to all exchanges here – a hook-up with their European distributor, and a bottle is soon winging its way to me. It’s good, too, not just a sham vanity-project bottling for the sake of it; a poised and elegant Belgian-style *saison*, named ‘A Tout Le Monde’ after a Megadeth song, made by Unibroue, a lauded Canadian brewery that quickly picked up a gold medal for the beer at the World Beer Championships – seems Mustaine gives a shit about what he puts his name to. A good sign.

I discover that Megadeth are playing the O2 in a couple of months: a booking is made. I’m excited, buzzing. A few more flurries over Twitter, a hook-up with Mustaine’s webmaster Dave McRobb – who kindly opens the door to getting responses to a few questions about Mustaine Vineyards – and it feels like progress. I slip into a reverie where I imagine I’m drinking Meursault with Dave Mustaine of Megadeth... just imagine.

Uncovering more layers about him and the band, I realise I’m in danger of hurtling into full-blown fanboy territory, but I don’t care: the Instagram feed shows a love of food as well as booze, and the Gimme Radio metal show he hosts every Thursday is a blast, chatting to listeners on screen as he spins the tunes. The final clincher is when I’m told that he’s recently eaten with his family at Kiln, a Thai barbecue restaurant in London where I help with the wine list – it all feels like metal-and-wine serendipity,

it was surely meant to be.

Saturday 16 June 2018 – at the O2 with Adam (the early adopter), and we’re having a pre-gig beer. The chance of getting some answers to vinous questions have tipped from “should be fine” to “you can ask him in person, if you like, before the show”. Still not convinced this will happen. Another beer. A text. It’s McRobb: “Do you have a recording device for the interview?” I do. “OK. Can you come to backstage doors?” Oh boy, it’s happening. Whisked through a door, a glimpse of the stage as we walk, and within moments we’re talking wine. I ask about his thoughts on its link with music: “I think some bands think their audiences don’t like wine because it’s not metal, not this or that, but I think they’re missing the point. It’s about the experience. It can be your background music, or it can be your theme song,” muses Mustaine, while admitting he’s not a connoisseur, not a fully paid-up wine nerd. “I’m learning. When I drank wine for the first time for the taste, rather than the effect, it was for whatever tasted the least bad. I’m obsessive with learning stuff, and I wanted to learn everything there was about having a wine business.”

The wines are now made by South Coast Winery, in Temecula, southern California, various blends of Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, Tempranillo and Sangiovese, each one named after a Megadeth song: ‘Hook

In Mouth’; ‘Blood of Heroes’; ‘She-Wolf’; ‘Kingmaker’ – he planted vines to create the family’s private estate vineyard ‘Le Rêve’ in Fallbrook. “Le Rêve has just been bottled, and the house is for sale. We may work out something to keep the rights if we continue harvesting, or turn it over to the new owners. It has the same wonderful topography as Fallbrook Winery.” We didn’t share a bottle of Meursault – he prefers reds, Syrah to be precise – and no metal talk, not a jot. A new wine is planned: “We’ve tasted some new varietals and some new blends, and we’ll be releasing something next year; it’s gonna be really neat, something really different.”

The gig was great, the O2 throbbing to a selection of the band’s finest songs over the years. The wines? They’re on their way, in transit; I’ll taste them soon. The Meursault moment will have to wait: I’ll take a bottle to the next gig.

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