



SLAYER RIDE

Two years on from founding guitarist Jeff Hanneman's untimely passing, the band that defined thrash metal are back with a new album. Slayer singer and bassist Tom Araya tells Amit Sharma about his incredible four-string journey...

— Pics: Tina K —

There are metal legends and then there are metal gods: visionaries who drag their music into the deeper abyss, far beyond the point of no return. When the Los Angeles quartet Slayer formed in 1981, they did so with the purpose of pushing their New Wave Of British Heavy Metal influences to the very extremes. But it was their third album, *Reign In Blood*, released in '86, that saw them trap lightning in a bottle and present to the world a masterpiece that would stand tall for countless decades to come. In 10 tracks just short of 29 minutes, the Californians had distilled heavy metal to its purest essence: an uncontaminated, unadulterated sonic evil that would become the very hallmark of their sound.

Today they stand as the old gods of war, metal veterans with a near-religious cult of admirers the world over through their bludgeoning riffs, blastbeat rhythms and ominous tales of human cruelty. This year's eleventh album, *Repentless*, marks the end of a traumatic chapter in their career and looks to new beginnings with Exodus

guitarist Gary Holt making his official debut within their ranks. He replaces founding member and original axeman Jeff Hanneman, who tragically passed away after alcohol-related liver failure in 2013, having been absent from the band's live line-up for two years.

For singer/bassist Tom Araya, working for the first time without Hanneman, the writer behind Slayer's signature songs 'Angel Of Death' and 'South Of Heaven' (and more importantly, a lifelong friend) was never going to be easy.

"There was definitely a big presence missing," admits the 54-year-old, seated in an office chair at his label's London HQ on a warm summer's day. "That was inevitable. I'd known him since we were teenagers. Jeff had a quality for sound and a quality for songs. He was a rhythmic arranger, and his songs were pretty chaotic. To begin with, I was thinking, 'How are we gonna do this without him?' But the further we got with the album, the more sense I made out of the songs and by the time I got to the vocals, I thought, 'Wow, this is great, it sounds like Slayer!' I trusted [guitarist] Kerry King's judgement because I'm not much of a music writer, I'm more of a lyricist. Are people

gonna like it? It's Slayer. Yeah, there's one guy missing. But it's still Slayer."

While some fans may contend that the current line-up also lacks original sticksman Dave Lombardo, who quit in 2013 over financial issues, Araya speaks the truth – *Repentless* is very much Slayer, and the album does exactly what they've always promised to do. The poignancy of one track stands out in particular: 'Piano Wire' was the last song to be written by their fallen comrade, penned during the sessions for last album, 2012's *World Painted Blood*, and serves as his call from the grave.

"The final words of that song are 'Never surrender,'" reflects Araya. "I was thinking to myself while we recorded it 'Jeff, I hope you're liking this, because I sure as hell am!"

The majority of Araya's bass tone comes from a Precision-style bass made by ESP, who've been making a TA signature series since the late 90s, going into a Marshall Lemmy Kilmister Signature 1992 LEM Super Bass stack – the extremely limited edition 2008 replicas of the Motörhead man's favoured 1976 head, nicknamed Murder One.

"We were rehearsing for some live shows and I couldn't believe how good those amps sounded," says Araya from behind his impressively thick and white Santa-like beard. "Kerry told me they only made so many and then stopped making them. He even called up Marshall [to ask about them] for me – but there was no way, they were all gone. That amp is where most of my sound comes from, rather than the bass, though what you hear on the record might sometimes be a mixture of different amps dialled in together. It has that piano-like 'dong!' to it. That's the sound I like, clean and crisp with that low-end piano boom."

Araya was born in Viña del Mar, Chile in 1961, where he lived for five years before the family decided to relocate to the Californian suburbs in the mid-60s. His brother John introduced him to music and the pair began to jam together on a \$20 Roebuck electric and a detuned acoustic with four strings. It didn't take long for the young bass player to realise his true calling in life.

"My first proper bass was a Paul McCartney Hofner rip-off that I bought in a pawnshop," remembers Araya. "I did two summers in a row in the school wood-shop making stands for money. After that I got myself a Precision. McCartney was my first hero. The Beatles, the Rolling Stones and ZZ Top were also my favourite bands. My brother and I would buy Deep Purple music books and learn the songs together. I'd look at the scale, write the notes out and match it up on the neck. That's how I learned to play music."

The aspiring musician spent his school years as many do, simply enjoying the freedoms of young adulthood and contemplating the person he'd like to grow up to be. "I was a stoner that hung out with the same two guys on a bench, where we'd watch the world go by. I wasn't part of the cool clique. I always had long hair, which I only cut once to visit Chile in 1971 when Pinochet was dictator, because we were told long hair could mean problems."



In his late teens Araya met King, who replaced the guitarist in his top 40 list covers group. First impressions weren't particularly brilliant – Araya ended up getting kicked out of the band. But a year later, King was back in touch, needing a bassist for his new metal band, with a list of Black Sabbath, Judas Priest and Iron Maiden classics to learn. By the end of a sweaty, loud and beer-fuelled weekend, the bare bones of Slayer were in place: Araya, King, Hanneman and Lombardo. They debated the idea of recruiting a singer, but the bassist assured his new bandmates that he had it covered.

By 1983, they'd inked a deal with LA label Metal Blade. Slayer's debut album *Show No Mercy* was funded by Araya's earnings as a respiratory therapist and a loan from King's father. The follow-up, *Hell Awaits* (1985), saw them continue to spread the satanic gospel, tales of Lucifer's wrath reinforced by the brain-simmering heaviness of their frenetic discordance. By *Reign In Blood*, they were simply unstoppable. Furthermore, the albums that followed – 1988's *South Of Heaven* and in particular, 1990's career-peaking *Seasons In The Abyss* – cemented

"All I need is my volume knob – that's it," he grins. "I used my P-Bass for a long time, then BC Rich offered to make me an instrument, as Kerry was working with them. I asked for the Wave bass, which they didn't make any more, but it was the one I liked so they dug out the pattern and made me one, which I used for a really long time. Then the guy from Hill got in touch and they made me a great bass. But that was the extent of it: I didn't wanna endorse it, he just made it for me and I paid him. Later ESP approached me about a line of basses. I told them I wasn't an amazing player by any means. I'm average, I can play fast sometimes... if I don't get all stiff."

For one of the most lauded and recognised musicians in metal, you get the impression that Araya has done well not to let things go to his head. He's disarmingly grounded and appreciative of how his career has panned out. Most of all, he's warm and accommodating – the kind of person that instantly cracks jokes to put people at ease. When it comes to his own talents, the Slayer man is self-deprecating, in his own signature light-hearted way.

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Slayer's stature as heavyweight champions of their peer group. They may never have reached the dizzying heights that Metallica did, but that was never the plan. The name Slayer stood for something more extreme and uncompromising, something deadlier than any of their thrash counterparts. And that's precisely what they delivered. It's a time Araya remembers very fondly indeed...

"The first two albums had more of a Venom influence," he recalls. "But when we first heard *Reign In Blood*, we couldn't believe it. We had no idea how it'd sound on record. That's when I started playing with a pick, to get more clarity and attack. Actually, a lot of it came down to [producer] Rick Rubin, who cleaned up our sound and help us define ourselves. And that allowed us to do what we've been doing for the past 30 years. Funnily enough, it was Jeff that liked the bass solo parts on 'Psychopathy Red' or the original bass intro on 'Piece By Piece', which came out too jumbled and indistinguishable to use in the end. But even though *Reign In Blood* is considered our classic album and the one everyone goes to, the one I'm most proud of is *Seasons...*, because I had such a big hand in writing the songs and it's one that everyone seems to enjoy."

As Slayer's legions continued to spread across the globe, so did the world of equipment available to the band. Before settling on ESP, Araya worked his way through a number of brands, although one factor remained consistent: simplicity. Too many features meant too many distractions, too many ways for things to go wrong.

"I really don't think of myself as a bassist extraordinaire," he shrugs. "That's not me. I have to sing and play, so I have to cheat, because playing and singing at the same time is not easy. When we play 'Raining Blood' live, there are parts where I just play an open E instead of the riff you hear on the record. Another part that's not easy is the main 'Angel Of Death' riff while singing. I can't do that shit! I could do it in the studio, but live... let's just say no one asks for their money back. A lot of Slayer riffs aren't really for bass players – there's a lot of notes. I'll learn the riff and if I think it's too much for bass, I'll play what I think sounds better. It's about how it grooves with the drummer. That's the most important thing to me, carrying that groove."

Thrash metal ushered some truly incredible bass players, from Metallica's Cliff Burton – who tragically lost his life in a tourbus crash in 1986 – and Megadeth's David Ellefson to Testament's Greg Christian. But Araya felt no competition among his fellow four-stringers, at least from a technical standpoint.

"I'm more about the band than the players in the band, you know? Cliff Burton was a great bass player but Metallica, the band, were awesome, up to a certain point. I'm not a schooled player. I'm self-taught and I have bad practising habits, in that I don't bother. Kerry's always practising: he's the only one of us that was schooled musically. I don't warm up for vocals either: I don't even hope for the best – I just go out and do it, which is a horrible example of how you should be as a singer! Someone told us we played in the devil's

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scale, which is all sharps and flats. I don't know anything about scales, but we looked it up and it does exist! That's how we came up with the title for [Slayer's 1998 album] *Diabolus In Musica*."

It makes you wonder: for someone that has lived and breathed heavy metal thunder through the decades, keeping the idea of sonic terror well and truly alive – does Araya find much time for other forms of music? What are the chances of him getting the jazz charts out on a rainy weekday night? Or sneaking in some funk jams while the family are out on a Sunday afternoon?

"I don't know if I can play funk," he grins. "But sure, I'll listen to it. I love all kinds of music, to be honest. I'll slap a bass, but I don't really have the talent for it. I wish I did, because I think it's really cool when people use it well – Funkadelic, Tower Of Power, all that stuff. Just the other day I was listening to Paul Simon's *Graceland*, which is a great album. The song 'You Can Call Me Al' has some wicked bass playing – what a riff. I love Joe Jackson's *Jumpin' Jive*, that's one of my favourite records, as is *The Dream Of The Blue Turtles* by Sting. My wife got me into Elvis: I listen to a lot of old country stuff because she grew up on that and I think a lot of it is really good. One of our favourites is Randy Travis, who's got this amazing voice, along with guys like George Strait and Dwight Yoakam."

Our time with the Slayer legend draws to an end, but you get the feeling Araya could happily sit rejoicing in tales all day. There's time for one final question, though. He's a man who has devoted his life to defending the faith. He's played and sung on albums that have shaped heavy metal history. When he looks around at what the genre has become today, what does he see? When the metal gods of old finally hang their boots up, and the world no longer has Iron Maiden, Judas Priest and Slayer filling its arenas and festivals, who will be left to take charge?

"There are some good bands out there, but nothing that makes me go, 'What the fuck is this?'" he ponders. "The one band that did do that for me was System Of A Down. I remember being in the car and Rick Rubin handed me their three-track demo saying, 'You gotta check these guys out!' I put it in and thought, 'Wow! This is metal – but the message and lyrics are also very cultural!' It really struck me and, along with the rhythms, made me think, 'I've never heard anything quite like this!' But apart from that, there hasn't been much. I guess we're lucky in that sense. We've been around so long, we've established our sound. People instantly know when it's Slayer."

Ain't that the truth. In Slayer we trust. ■

Repentless is out now on Nuclear Blast Entertainment.
Slayer are touring the UK from 21 to 30 November.
Info: www.slayer.net.