



The Art of Annihilation

How Thrash Metal turned atomic fallout into its most enduring symbol - and why it's still relevant

The sky is ablaze. A green hue bathes the surrounding landscape, as lightning bolts playfully dart overhead and continuous sonic booms roll across the horizon. Thick, almost slime-like mushroom clouds billow upward, forming an ungodly sign that the end has arrived.

This is our inevitable punishment for splitting the atom - no time to pause and ponder that notion, due to the acid rain descending upon us in torrents, causing the flesh to melt from bone, with the whites of our eyes disappearing as capillaries burst.

The crowd appears possessed by some kind of mania. They uncontrollably push and shove each other with such violence that you are forced to endure the horrific sounds of their bones cracking and breaking - walls of death all around, preventing any kind of escape.

It's at this point that you notice the airwaves pulsing with galloping, skull-crushing riffs, while beneath them surge thumping bass lines and relentless double-kick drums. All eyes are on the performers on stage, abusively playing instruments that their creators never imagined they would be destined for.

What seemed at first like the aftermath of planet Earth's final war is something else entirely..

This is a mosh pit - and you're all caught up.

Those who are familiar with the fringes of the Thrash scene will be familiar with this type of immersive imagery - as it's existed in its art since practically its beginning in the early 80's.

From irradiated mascots and atomic battlefields, to visions of civilizations reduced to ash - No genre embraces nuclear annihilation with such feverish devotion as this heart attack-inducing, high-beats-per-minute form of metal.

Beneath the lurid colours of the apocalyptic spectacle, however, lies something deeper. These images held a mirror up to the world these shredders found themselves living in, giving the art far more weight than simple shock value.

They're images that emerged from a generation that was forced to grow up under the shadow of mutually assured destruction. The hands on the clock were always edging closer and closer to midnight. The end of the world feeling was less like a potential science fiction hook and more like a weather forecast.

But where did the art begin, and why has it managed to endure?

Thrash metal surprisingly didn't invent nuclear imagery - in fact, it was an earlier genre that it appears to have inherited the atomic spirit from. Punk. Anarcho Punk to be precise. A style birthed directly from Cold War paranoia and the collective nightmares that dominated public consciousness throughout the 1970s and bled into the 1980s.

The clearest link between Thrash and its infamous imagery is the UK Hardcore Punk and Anarcho band Discharge. With their 1982 debut 'Hear Nothing, See Nothing, Say Nothing', it was clear their aesthetic and music obsessed over nuclear war, militarism, the apocalypse and societal collapse. Their raucous and gloriously ear-blistering tracks covered topics of atomic destruction and war - echoing the angst of a whole generation who were kicking back.

Discharge's influence was enormous and it's been proven by members of both Metallica and Anthrax, who often have cited them as a major influence on the creation of what was originally known as Speed Metal.

Considering that these bands make up two of the 'Big 4' Thrash Metal bands (Metallica, Megadeth, Anthrax and Slayer) - it's hard to argue with.

In the early eighties, these bands burst onto the scene with their debuts and most agreed that the first ever official Thrash release was Metallica's 'Kill 'em All' in 1983 - yet the name thrash was most likely coined in 1984 when Anthrax released 'Metal Thrashing Mad'.

Followed shortly by Megadeth and Nuclear Assault - whose records were the first to show imagery of the threat of nuclear war.

Before long, the mushroom cloud ceased being just a symbol of the Cold War, and instead became the symbol of a new musical movement emerging from the San Francisco Bay Area.

A new counterculture.

Most art, it has been said, parodies life - nuclear Armageddon in this case being no exception. Humanity's ugliness captured on record sleeves in technicolour.

What's even more intriguing is that the genre emerged almost exactly when nuclear fear peaked in the public imagination. Historians are in agreement that the early 80's were one of the most dangerous periods of the Cold War - Nuclear war ranked among the globe's most commonly cited fears.

The artists and shredders pioneering thrash weren't just imagining a distant apocalypse, they genuinely thought they might live through one.

Yet while most processed this fear through sadness and melancholy, they chose another path...

Process the fear through acceleration, brutality and moshing - with crowds eager to follow.

The bombs are coming.

Play faster!

Communism is on the move.

Play faster!

The news has announced the hands just moved closer to midnight.

PLAY FUCKING FASTER!

The pit became a ritualised embodiment of chaos and destruction, yet somehow also a mark of celebration in the wake of potential obliteration. A threat of Cold War terror remixed into an atomic and radioactive horror-comedy. Fear evaporating, as if to neutralise the potentially looming mushroom clouds of anxiety.

This is why the style not only struck the right nerve with fans back then, but why it continues to hold up and endure in modern society.

Because the hands haven't ceased moving towards midnight - right now the Doomsday Clock run by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, sits at 85 seconds to midnight.

Another plea echoed from the organisation's security board to global leaders to take urgent action to limit nuclear arsenals, create international guidelines for the use of AI, and form unilateral agreements to address global biological threats.

With that in mind, thrashers today don't just see one threat, they see an entire new umbrella blocking out the sun - and beneath it, there is no better choice than to throw on your tattered battle vest emblazoned with radioactive symbols and crowd surf your way through this.

In their minds, there are two choices in life. Move fast, or move slow - and their art tells us they've made their choice.

Play fucking fast, like the bombs are about to drop at any minute.

Carpe Diem, before you face the Megadeth...

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