

For my own convenience I'll be writing this retrospective under the assumption that the reader has no knowledge concerning Metallica's history or familiarity with their discography. Of course my knowledge regarding the timeline only extends so far, so much of this will be written rather informally to take on more of a discussion-based format.

Kill 'Em All (1983)



With glaringly apparent influences from their early heavy metal and hardcore punk predecessors, Metallica's debut record, *Kill 'Em All*, would be attributed as the progenitor of the thrash metal genre as we now know it. Initially consisting of James Hetfield, Lars Ulrich, Dave Mustaine, and Ron McGovney – the band played for local clubs and recorded demos in 1981 before relocating to San Francisco and securing the talents of Cliff Burton. The *No Life 'til Leather* demo, recorded in 1982, features several songs that would make it on their eventual record and lay down the foundation for what would be the mainstay elements of the thrash genre. Some of these characteristics include high speed riffing, quick percussions, shredding, and a classic rebellious attitude that left heavy metal in the dust. The *Kill 'Em All* we know and love refined upon the ideas presented in the demo by bumping up the BPM higher than it already was and Hetfield shifting his vocals to the standard bark the first four records were intimate with. It's fast, it's heavy, it's technical, and set an impressive precedent for Metallica's following years to come.

Notable Tracks: *The Four Horsemen, (Anesthesia)--Pulling Teeth, Whiplash, Seek and Destroy*
Personal Rating: 4/5

Ride the Lightning (1984)



Perfecting the formula. Metallica's sophomore release marked a shift from their early heavy metal influences, demonstrated in the musical growth of their song structures and thematic concepts their records embarked on. In part thanks to Cliff Burton's grasp on music theory, the songwriting on this record deviated from the superficial lyrical compositions and unapologetic aggression that stereotypically characterized heavy metal at that point. The album was executed with a lot more thoughtful pacing in their songs, introducing a broader range of instrumentation and acoustic guitars to accompany the usual shreds and technical riffs. Funny

enough, the band had received some backlash and was criticized by die-hard fans for "selling out," due to the inclusion of the more ballad-focused track, *Fade to Black*. Nevertheless, these critiques were incredibly unfounded by reactionary fans that weren't accustomed to the direction Metallica was taking thrash as its own genre. *Ride the Lightning* showcases a wonderful incorporation of more complex-driven melodies and guitar harmonies found in much of their song compositions. The lyrics took on a more socially commentative approach, defining an enemy to focus their aggression on rather than the blind hostility and advocacy of an adrenaline-fueled lifestyle that *Kill 'Em All* was known for. Don't get me wrong though, the album was still incredibly heavy and if anything elevated the intensity twofold. I mean, look no further than the ingenious and iconic bass lick at the start of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the explosive shredding in *Fight Fire with Fire*, and the galloping riffs in *Creeping Death*. Honestly it wasn't for the kind of out of place and underwhelming track, *Escape*, this would easily be a perfect album for me. Oh also, Kirk Hammett from Exodus has permanently replaced Dave Mustaine as the lead guitarist.

Notable Tracks: Literally everything but *Escape*.

Personal Rating: 4.5/5

Master of Puppets (1986)



The magnum opus. In some ways, it's hard to say anything about this album because it speaks for itself more than anything, *anyone* can really say about it. It's a classic, it's Metallica at their peak, it transcends the heavy metal landscape itself, and is widely regarded as one of the greatest metal albums for a reason. In any case, *Master of Puppets*, Metallica's junior studio album had more or less stayed along the path that *Ride the Lightning* had initially carved – but now had really nailed down the soundscape thrash metal had to offer. The band had a unique writing process for the album that was more methodical than how they went about crafting their earlier works. James and Lars would begin by sketching out guitar riffs and went through a revision process to flesh out riffs to fit into the mold of a song. The band would then think of a song title and topic to thematically fit the album, already titled, *Master of Puppets*, before James would write the lyrics to the song itself. I always found this heavily edited songwriting style interesting because it's reflective in how tight the tracklist is – almost machine-like in how it was milled to artificial perfection, as opposed to a dirtier freeform songwriting process. You can see capsules of this process by looking into the early works in progress and demos of the songs in the deluxe edition of *Master of Puppets*, definitely worth checking out. Composition wise, the record doesn't deviate much from its predecessor album beyond a mastered level of musical dexterity and refinement on all fronts, lyrically and sonically. As the album name would suggest, Metallica is now delving into more socially conscious territory in exploring themes related to manipulation, control, and oppressive forces found in various settings. The band has taken their performance to the next level with tight, multilayered arrangements composed of (the now standard) technical percussion, riffs, and solos – everything is calculated to the tee. James too demonstrates a greater level of control in his vocal performance, now developing his signature growl compared to the shouts in the previous albums. Oh yes and the ballads are HERE TO STAY, with the heavy-hearted track *Welcome Home (Sanitarium)* that's more of a power ballad than *Fade to Black* was. There's so much to say about this album and at the same time nothing at all, but you likely already know this to be true!

Notable Tracks: All. Of. Them.

Personal Rating: 5/5

...And Justice for All (1988)



The golden era. But at the same time, this was a particularly rough period for Metallica to endure as during the European leg of the '86 *Master of Puppets* tour, Cliff died during a freak accident when their tour bus (supposedly) hit a patch of black ice and rolled off the road. Former bandmate, Dave Mustaine, took the news pretty harshly too as when word broke out to him he went on an emotionally charged bender before writing *In My Darkest Hour*. This was Metallica's first album to feature bassist Jason Newstead and last album to include some of Cliff's writing on the track, *To Live Is to Die*. Surprisingly enough, this period is also considered

to be some of the group's best live performances and breakout from the underground metal scene. Metallica had become a powerhouse of a name and was credited for putting metal on the radar of mainstream music, formally being recognized by the Grammys and nominated for their track off the Justice album, *One*. Digressions aside, the album cover depicting Lady Justice fractured and bound by ropes prefaces the sociopolitical aware themes the album dives into – referencing injustices and corruptions found within the legal, governmental, and other kinds of bureaucratic systems. At this stage in their career, the songwriting is typical Metallica with the distortion and layering over the guitar tracks taken up a notch. There are apparent progressive metal influences to be found on this album with distinctly chunky riffs, odd time signatures and noticeable or abrupt shifts in tempo. Much less melodies, nearly inaudible bass mixing, and even coarser vocals all mastered together to produce an album which music critics raved over at the time – but I think they were just caught up in the Metallica craze. Regardless, it is still a solid record I had even considered to be my favorite off the Metallica discography during my politically conscious late teens. This distinct deviation from their thrash roots would leave fans retrospectively wondering what Metallica would have been like if Cliff was still around. Regardless, the late 80s and early 90s held what I consider Metallica's stage presence to be at its prime, especially with fan favorite *Live Shit: Binge and Purge* performance in Seattle 1989.

Notable Tracks: *Blackened, ...And Justice for All, One, To Live Is to Die*

Personal Rating: 3.5/5

Metallica [also known as the Black album] (1991)



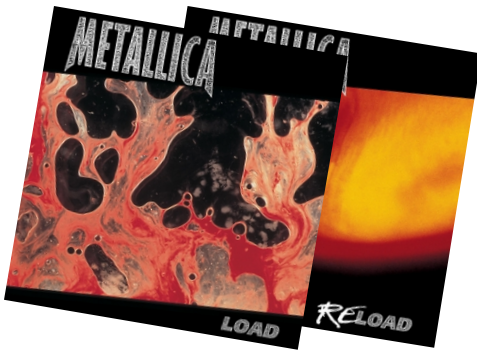
A new era. Kinda, not really but I figured I'd keep the trend of fragmented sentences as an introduction to the album going. This release is still categorized as heavy metal, but for the first time it is exclusively just that as opposed to the usual thrash they had been developing and had become known for. For those unfamiliar with the band's history, it might seem puzzling as to what inspired their sonic transition or what allowed them to be so comfortable with slowing down the BPM by a substantial margin to try something new. But the band just wanted a fresh start after four albums of their usual format that felt like it was getting stale or done to

death. Lars had elaborated on this by saying that they felt a sense of musical inadequacy that made them "go too far" around the *Master of Puppets* or *Justice* album for the sake of trying to prove their worth as metal artists. Whatever their exact reasons were, the result ended up catering towards commercial success with much shorter songs that got straight to the point and were thus perfect for radio airplay. Now working with producer Bob Rock, the band worked collaboratively to create a slower and refined sound that lyrically, provided an introspective and personal lens into James's mind. The story behind *Nothing Else Matters* gives some interesting perspective for the band's writing process in the making of this album as the song was originally dedicated to James's girlfriend at the time. The intro to which stemmed from the way James had been unconsciously plucking his guitar while talking over the phone with her one day. James himself felt it was too vulnerable for him to include it on the album and wouldn't have made it had it not been for Lars's insistence to include it as to provide another musical aspect Metallica had to offer. Jason originally intended to continue the trend of instrumental tracks when he introduced the main riff for *My Friend of Misery* until the band heard it and decided to swing it in another direction. This conflict of interest led to some arguments over aspects each bandmate wanted for the album and would create some unresolved tensions between one another for years to come. The fresh slate the band was writing off of ended up working in their favor in the end as it sold over 30 million copies worldwide and was certified 16x platinum by the RIAA.

Notable Tracks: *Holier Than Thou, The Unforgiven, My Friend of Misery, Of Wolf and Man*

Personal Rating: 4/5

Load/Reload (1996/1997)



The new, *new* era...? If anyone thought that Metallica came far out of left field with the black album, boy were they in for a surprise when their sixth and seventh studio releases came out. I'm grouping these together into one batch because these are the two albums I am the most unfamiliar with and because it was originally going to be a double album release before some logistics got in the way of the band making that happen. I would also rather highlight the positive aspects of both albums than burn my bandwidth on something I don't really care much about. It seemed as though Metallica was

regressing into the softer branch of hard rock in their musical experimentation phase, which alienated a good fraction of their fanbase. Honestly, I feel as though this was more of an indirect grieving phase for Metallica having never properly mourned Cliff's death all those years ago – manifesting some pretty ugly emotions and coping mechanisms that are somewhat reflective in the clear blues rock inspiration found on the albums. The lyricism sheds some light on this matter as several of the tracks from both records pertain to themes involving depression and substance abuse, especially on *Load*. I also think there's some outside influence that could be attributed to Metallica taking on a grungier, groovy, alternative rock approach. Heavy metal needed a new direction to go in from the ashes of what it used to be, especially with bands like Korn, Deftones, and System of a Down emerging from the advent of Nu-Metal just around the corner of the late 1990s. The Metallica brand had transcended to new heights of popularity that they could afford to take the risk with little repercussions, financially anyway. The world was their oyster, but I think they chose the wrong path to direct heavy metal into. Now with a new style, new haircuts, and primarily playing in E-flat (or sometimes drop D) tuning, Metallica for the first time was met with a mixed-bag of reviews from critics and fans alike. I don't think it was all bad and I myself was very open to this portion of their discography when I had discovered it due to my unwavering loyalty to Metallica during my adolescent years. If they had just taken the best cuts from both *Load* and *Reload* into one album, it actually could've been a pretty solid record. A little fun fact before I end off this section – the album artwork on *Load* was created by mingling bovine blood and semen between two sheets of plexiglas, do whatever you will with this information.

Notable Tracks:

Load - *Hero Of The Day, King Nothing, Bleeding Me, The Outlaw Torn*

Reload - *Fuel, The Unforgiven II, Low Man's Lyric*

Personal Rating:

Load - 2.5/5

Reload - 2/5

St. Anger (2003)



In the defense of *St. Anger*. I'm just gonna come out and say this now – I don't think *St. Anger* is as bad as everyone makes it out to be and was at the very least a much more interesting concept than their previous two studio albums. Okay yes, the lyrics had suffered a significant drop in quality, some of the songs overstay their welcome and are fairly repetitive, but if you really have that much of an issue with the production I GUESS YOU JUST CAN'T APPRECIATE LO-FI NOISE ROCK. I can't even begin to list the amount of times I've seen people harp on the point about how obnoxious Lars's snare drums are since I was a prepubescent teen debating people in the YouTube comment sections. I really don't think it's that bad, and maybe this is a hot take but it is pretty reminiscent of the same snares that go into well received j-rock albums so it's not like it fundamentally *can't* work. Maybe this impassioned response I hold to the backlash is a remnant of my angsty younger self but I can't help but feel somewhat enamored by the raw ferocity this album holds. If it was paced better, if there was some depth or intricacy to the riffs or added some mathcore elements to the noisy mix, and took more of a hardcore punk route in its edits I think it could've been a pretty damn good record. Anyway, unfortunately this project more than anything was a product of circumstance considering what Metallica was going through at the time. Jason left the band due to some disagreements he had with James regarding where to take the trajectory of the band and his personal career. Not too long after James entered rehab for alcoholism and after his return, the band was struggling through some relationship issues that almost led to their breakup. In many ways, the making of *St. Anger* was an extended therapy session for the whole band to air out their dirty laundry that had been piling for years on end. For your own curiosity on the matter, the *Some Kind of Monster* documentary delves further into the sensitive subjects the band members were dealing with at the time. Back to the matter at hand, *St. Anger* brought on bassist Robert Trujillo as a permanent replacement for Jason near the end of its completion and was recorded entirely in drop C tuning. I think people give this album too much shit than it deserves and the unpolished nature of its mixing, in my eyes, helps convey the intensity associated with the unfiltered feelings of anger.

Notable Tracks: *St. Anger*, *Some Kind of Monster*, *My World*, *All Within My Hands*

Personal Rating: 2.5+/5

Death Magnetic (2008)



The worst one. If there is a case to be made about how awful an album's mixing is from Metallica's discography, it's this one and I have no idea how people give it more of a pass than they did *St. Anger*. At least with *St. Anger*, it didn't sound like someone ripped the album from a shady .mp3 converter site and at least it was actually fitting with what the band was trying to go for. Everything is so compressed in an unintentional way that it's almost impossible to decipher which instrument the noise is coming from. This was Metallica attempting to go back to their early thrash roots but fell flat in so many ways. I am really trying not to let my

bias get to me but so many of the songs and so many of the riffs feel uninspired and unmemorable and so formulaic that I genuinely can't tell apart some of the songs from one another if you played them back to back for me. I feel so incredibly apathetic to the mediocrity this album presents that I have trouble mustering up any kind of analysis dissecting whatever good it does have. You know, what's REALLY funny is the fact that the poor sound quality comes from an excessively compressed dynamic range, stemming from what was known as the "loudness war," which was an ongoing industry effort to make recordings as loud as possible. And if you listen to the *Death Magnetic* tracks from the *Guitar Hero Metallica* game, these audio issues aren't as present anymore ([video](#) showing exactly what I mean) which is so embarrassing and so funny to me that I cannot even understand how the CD version ever got the green light. This album is one giant nothing burger where the band really had nothing going on for them at the time but still somehow managed to win three Grammy awards for. I liked it as a kid, definitely not now – listen to it if you want, I wouldn't recommend it.

Notable Tracks: they all suck tbh but you can try *Day that Never Comes* or *Unforgiven III*

Personal Rating: 1.5/5

Hardwired...to Self-Destruct (2016)



The redemption, kinda. Compared to *Death Magnetic* at least, I think this was a much more digestible record to listen to with ideas I can get behind even to this day. I actually remember how excited my sixteen-year old self was when this album was announced along with the teaser tracks they released with it. After eight long years, Metallica finally dispelled the silence with their tenth studio album released through Blackened recordings. In retrospect I definitely overhyped the album more than it was worth but considering what the previous studio releases held under Metallica's name, this was a breath of fresh air. I can actually distinguish the sound between each instrument, the drums are present in a somewhat meaningful way, and James is really utilizing his riffs in a simple but effective manner. This is Metallica at their best since the black album and it really warmed my heart to see them still be able to make some decent sounding stuff after the great schism and tired ideas metal had been through over the years. The album's not perfect by any means but the concept's cool and in some sense pays an homage to their early social conscious days – providing their own commentary and reaction to what was going with the world at the time, especially with the advent of technology and where we as a human race were leading ourselves into. It's not as insightful as I'm making it out to be compared to actual literature related to philosophical nihilism or pessimism, but the fact that it had some concept as the driving force behind the album gave it a nice reason to exist. The licks and guitar harmonies that we haven't heard since *Ride the Lightning* along with a batch of power ballads that harken back to the black album made me feel like I'm being really pandered to, but you know, I'm not against it at all. This album also had a whole series of music videos tied to the singles that were uploaded leading up to the album's release and from what I remember, they were pretty cool. Some of it was kind of corny but I think it added an extra poetic layer to the meanings behind some of the songs that I can appreciate from an artistic point of view.

Notable Tracks: *Hardwired, Moth into Flame, Am I Savage?, Spit Out the Bone*

Personal Rating: 3/5