

THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS BAND

Marilyn Manson, Alice Cooper, Ozzy Osbourne—those “wild children” of rock 'n' roll are downright tame compared to the craziest musical act we've ever heard of. Murder, suicide, and sheep heads are all part of the package with the Norwegian “black metal” band known as...Mayhem.

DISILLUSION

In the early 1980s, a radical underground music scene was forming in Europe. As far as these young musicians were concerned, rock was too tame, punk had gone mainstream, and the supposed “Satan-worshipping” heavy-metal acts like Black Sabbath, Dio, and KISS were all faking it. So, with no bands that were “heavy” enough for their taste, these young people made their own music that reflected their bitter attitude toward...well, everything. The two most prominent styles to emerge from the scene came to be known as “death metal” and “black metal.” To the untrained ear, both sound pretty much the same—blisteringly fast tempos; distorted guitars; screeching, unintelligible vocals; morbid lyrics (when you could hear them); and elaborate, gruesome stage acts. But of the two, black metal was the most melodic...and the most blasphemous.

THE GATHERING

One of the pioneering bands of black metal was an Oslo band called Mayhem. Formed in 1984, the original lineup consisted of guitarist/vocalist Øystein Aarseth (also known as “Euronymous”), bassist Jorn Stubberud (“Necrobutcher”), and drummer Kjetil Manheim. After going through a few singers (“Messiah” and “Maniac”), Mayhem was joined by Swedish vocalist Per Yngve Ohlin, who adopted the nickname “Dead.”

Dead was *the* quintessential black-metal singer: He buried his clothes for weeks underground to give them a “grave” scent; he slashed his own skin during performances; and, for inspiration, he inhaled rancid air from a plastic bag containing the decomposed remains of a crow. In 1990 Dead and the rest of Mayhem moved

into a house together to work on their first full-length album, *De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas*—a Latin phrase that loosely translates to “Lord Satan’s Secret Rites.” During those album sessions, a style emerged that would come to define black-metal music. According to *Dark Legions* magazine:

[The music] was metamorphosing into a sleeker, melodic variant with more dynamic change in the songs, producing different “settings” to tell a tale, somewhat like a micro-opera in harsh guitars and howling vocals. Similarly, the band’s appearance went from t-shirts and jeans to black clothing, black boots, and black-and-white facepaint, or “corpsepaint,” to make them all appear dead.

THE SPLINTERING

Life in the Mayhem house was as intense as the music: Dead, who continually battled depression, didn’t get along with Euronymous. And on April 8, 1991, Euronymous came home to find Dead dead—with slit wrists and a self-inflicted gunshot to the head. (Next to him was a suicide note that read, “Please excuse all the blood.”) Before calling the police, however, Euronymous ran to the store and bought an instant camera...and then photographed Dead’s body in a variety of positions. (One of the photos later found its way onto the cover of Mayhem’s bootleg live album, *Dawn of the Black Hearts*.) According to legend, Euronymous also kept chunks of Dead’s scattered brain and mixed them into a stew, and used bone fragments from his skull to make necklaces that he gave to musicians whom he “deemed worthy.”

The well-publicized tragedy gave a huge boost not only to Mayhem’s popularity but to all of black metal. “People became more aware of us after that,” said Necrobutcher, the bassist. “It really changed the scene.” But the “scene” became too much for Necrobutcher to handle, and he soon quit the band.

THE REFORMATION

But Mayhem lived on...for a while. Singer Attila Csihar took over for Dead, while Varg Vikernes (“Count Grishnackh,” named after a *Lord of the Rings* villain) stepped in on bass. But once again, there was trouble in the band—Count Grishnackh, who suffered from paranoid delusions, became convinced that Euronymous was secretly conspiring to torture and kill him. On August 10, 1993,

less than a year after joining the band, Grishnackh went to Eurononymous's apartment and stabbed him 23 times, killing him.

The ensuing murder trial put Mayhem in the news again. And the trial revealed that not only did the bassist kill the guitarist, but Grishnackh was also responsible for a spate of infamous church-burnings that had plagued Norway for the past few years. He was sentenced to 21 years in prison. (He was released on parole 15 years later, in 2009.)

THE SHEEP OFFENSIVE

It seemed that with two members dead and one in jail, Mayhem would never rock again. Not so—in 1995 Hellhammer got a lineup together to start anew, this time with guitarist Rune “Blasphemer” Eriksen and original member Sven Erik “Maniac” Kristiansen on vocals. He even lured Necrobutcher out of retirement to play bass. Soon after, Mayhem *finally* released *De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas*—an album that had been stalled amidst all of Mayhem's mayhem. That was followed by *Wolf's Lair Abyss* in 1997 and *Grand Declaration of War* in 2000. Mayhem were back in business—and were now a bona fide legend in the black-metal world. They managed to stay below the radar of the mainstream press... for a time.

But in 2003 the band made headlines again. During a show in Bergen, Norway, Maniac was cutting up a dead sheep on stage—a ritual that had become a regular part of their act—when its head somehow catapulted into the crowd, hitting 25-year-old Per Kristian Hagen. The sheep's head knocked the young man to the floor, and he ended up with a fractured skull. Hagen filed assault charges against Mayhem. “The whole thing was an accident,” claimed Blasphemer (although he added, “but maybe it *would* be an idea for another show”). In the end, Hagen dropped the charges and the band had weathered yet another storm.

LONG DIE ROCK

With the band members now in their 40s, Mayhem is still at it. They made the news again in 2009 when they were arrested for trashing a hotel room in the Netherlands. And though they don't expect everyone to like their music, they don't want to be thought of as just a gimmick. According to vocalist Attila Csihar, “It took us 20 years of doing this before people realized we weren't joking.”

...which now leads them through the hotel's lobby.