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The Album That Started Heavy Metal Music:

A Review of Black Sabbath's *Black Sabbath* Album

Album: <i>Black Sabbath</i>	Genre: Heavy Metal
Band: Black Sabbath	Studio: Regent Sound, London
Length: 39 min., 23 seconds	Label: Vertigo
Released: February 13, 1970	Producer: Rodger Bain

Today's music is a declining culture. Kids have traded in rockers of old like Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, and Eddie Van Halen for the new pop artists and rappers who define the era of Generation Z. People like to hear songs made in a computer that talk about money and fame rather than listen to the raw emotions people poured into a guitar and thrashed out on a drum set. Sadly, I was born as a part of Generation Z, but my taste in music dates back to the eras of Grunge, Rock n' roll, and Heavy Metal. As a junior at East Tennessee State University, I hear what people are blasting out of their car stereos, and it feels like real music is dying out. Music has changed, and if you walk around campus talking about Heavy Metal or bands like Black Sabbath, Judas Priest, and Metallica, you will probably get a lot of wild stares and questions about if you worship the devil. However, to people like me, people who prefer to hear

the imperfections and rawness coming from actual instruments, those are the real rockstars and musicians.

Musical genres are no different than new fashion statements or new fads because someone or some group must do something that has never been done before. And that is what Black Sabbath did in 1970 with their first album, *Black Sabbath*. From the name of the band, to the image on the cover of the album, and down to the doomy, haunting melodies that blare through the speakers, Black Sabbath created the first ever “Heavy Metal” album. The entirety of Black Sabbath is what would eventually define “Heavy Metal” as a term. It is not just the backstory, the look, the sound, or the lyrics, but the perfect fusion of all those things that made them metal.

Earth: The Journey to Becoming Black Sabbath

Before they created the album that would eventually spark a completely new genre of music, the band known as Black Sabbath was four young factory workers who lived in Birmingham, England. Ozzy Osbourne, lead singer; Tony Iommi, lead guitarist; Geezer Butler, bassist; and Bill Ward, drummer, were the four members of a band called Earth in the 1960s. These young men worked in an industrial city in England, but they had dreams of making it out of that town through music. Ozzy Osbourne grew up in an abusive, poverty-stricken family, and he was often picked on because of his clothes or appearance. The man the world now knows as the “Prince of Darkness” used to be a shy, skinny troublemaker who often had to wear his sister’s hand-me-downs to school. However, guitarist Tony Iommi had a little money, and even picked on Ozzy during his high school years. He was known around town as an amazing guitarist, and he was good friends with the band’s drummer, Bill Ward. Ward was in a band called The Rest when Iommi and he met, but Ward left once he realized his chances of hitting

the big time were better if he was teamed up with the town's best guitarist. Soon after, Ozzy and Geezer Butler would link up after frequently running into each other on Sunday mornings at 6:00 a.m. following long, blurry nights spent in the town's nightclubs. Each pair was looking for the missing pieces to their puzzle as Iommi and Ward had a drummer and guitarist, and Butler and Osbourne were only a bassist and a singer. After reading an ad in the local paper, this group of rebellious misfits would unite in the dreary town of Birmingham, England to form Earth.



Figure 1. From Left to Right: Bill Ward, Ozzy Osbourne, Tony Iommi, Geezer Butler

The band's journey to stardom did not come easy. The poverty Ozzy lived in, along with the combination of his unwillingness to keep a steady job, quickly lured him towards other means of acquiring income. After thinking about his day spent at the slaughterhouse rummaging around in sheep guts, Ozzy figured robbery would be an easier means of obtaining fast cash to fuel his love for the night life. At seventeen, he slipped through the window of a local retail store where he grabbed numerous clothes off the rack, and he intended to resale them for quick profits. However, the rush of his successful robbery caused Ozzy to go back the next night. His eyes landed on a brand new twenty-four-inch television he knew his family could never afford. While escaping through the window of the shop, his skeletal like build could not bear the weight of the box TV causing him to fall to the ground. Both the TV and Ozzy fell to the earth, but he landed first as the colossal tube crashed down on his bony chest. This was too much effort, so he

decided to leave the busted set behind. His decision to leave the stolen merchandise was costly because he also left his fingerprints on that TV. The Prince of Darkness was sentenced to Winson Green prison in Birmingham, England. His time in prison made Ozzy realize that pursuing a career in music was his only way of making it out of Birmingham.

Right around the time Ozzy was serving mush and old food to prisoners, Iommi was becoming a known guitarist in the Rock n' Roll world. At just seventeen years old, the young axe slayer received his first shot playing professionally with a band that was going to tour across Europe; however, he still had one more day of work in the industrial city. Iommi completed the first part of his shift, and when he went home for lunch, he informed his mother that he was not going to back for the second part of the job. His mother, who did not share her son's vision as a musician, forced him back to that dreaded factory. As he stepped into the building one last time, Iommi was sent to work on a machine he had never operated before. He positioned himself in front of a towering, guillotine like metal presser for the waning hours of his final shift before pursuing his dream. It is as if the factory town of Birmingham could not let go of the young Rockstar, so when Iommi pushed in the sheet of metal, the guillotine banged down on his most important asset as a guitarist, his hand. With one swift jerk, the guitarist ripped off the tips of his fingers exposing the stubs of bone lying under what used to be his fingernails. The doctor gave Iommi the prognosis that he would never play the guitar again. However, Iommi did not let his dream die. He found a way to play by burning plastic bottle caps and molding them to fit the tops of his fingers. Then he changed his guitar strings to banjo strings, so they would bend easier when he pressed down on them. Being forced to discover a new style of playing caused Iommi to tune his guitar down to the D chord which became the staple sound of Heavy Metal music.

The odds were stacked against Earth, but their misfortunes are what created the legacy. Even after his injury, Iommi remained the shining light of the band. The sound of his instrument started to spread worldwide, and because the dreams of making Earth a famous band were slowly dwindling, the guitarist left to tour with Jethro Tull in 1968. It was a short stint because Iommi knew his purposed lied within making Earth a household name. He came back to his friends in Birmingham, England, but this time, it was going to be different.

Iommi introduced to Earth the new methods he learned from touring with Jethro Tull, and the madness transformed into a well-oiled machine. Just as Earth was making its name in the Rock n' World, a strange gig in England would bring about a new change. In 1969, the band was accidentally booked by a classical music venue because there were two bands named "Earth". The rebellious, long-haired members of Ozzy Osbourne's band quickly realized the suits and ties sitting in front of them did not want to hear what they were about to play. Earth played the guitar loud, beat the drums aggressively, used the bass to darken the mood, and howled and shouted through the microphone. The businessmen and women who expected a more classical sound were shocked when this group took the stage, and the embarrassment it caused the band would never happen again. It was time for the band to turn a new leaf and make a name for themselves that would match their Heavy Metal persona.

Amid searching for the band's new identity after the failed show in England, bassist Geezer Butler was dabbling in witchcraft or black magic. As legend goes, Butler was asleep in his one-bedroom apartment when he was awakened by a dark figure whose presence loomed over top of the petrified bassist. Seeing this apparition ended his involvement in satanic rituals, but this episode birthed the band, album, and song, Black Sabbath. Butler revealed his experience to his band members, and the rest is history. His story became the lyrics of the song

“Black Sabbath”, and the name became the band’s new identity as they moved on from Earth. As if “Black Sabbath” was not enough for the band and song title, they also chose to use it for their first ever album. The haunting tale surrounding the title of the album matches the hair-raising cover, sounds, and lyrics *Black Sabbath* is historically known for.

Judge This Album by Its Cover



Figure 2. The Cover of *Black Sabbath*

I am sure you have heard the saying, “Never judge a book by its cover,” but in the case of Heavy Metal’s seminal album, feel free to judge; the disturbing image painted on *Black Sabbath* tells all. Depicted on the front is a woman or witch cloaked in all black. If she were to stand alone, her presence might not be felt as strongly, but the scenery around her sets the stage. She stands in a wood of death. Each limb jutting out of the decaying trees, cannot hold even the smallest leaf or form of life. This mirrors the ghastly tri-tones¹ Iommi produces out of his amp

¹ A tritone is a three-chord riff or three adjacent whole tones that produces a hair-raising noise in between pitches. Iommi came up with this sound while writing “Wicked World”, and it became the sound of the entire album.

while Ozzy shouts his bouts of darkness. In the background of the ghostly woman stands alone a house which is void of all inhabitants. It is run down, bare of paint, and the contrast between the prominent black figure and the decaying white house foreshadow the gloom the music will drag you into. The artistry of *Black Sabbath's* front cover prepares its listeners for what will flow from the first song to the last.

Listen to the Music

When most imagine a Heavy Metal album, they think of distorted noises, dark undertones, and frightening lyrics that scare or enrage its audience. *Black Sabbath* does just that, and it begins with the self-titled masterpiece, “Black Sabbath”. As soon as the needle hits the vinyl, the sounds of rain and booming thunder infiltrate your ears. Images of gray skies, darkness, and even danger fill your brain right when Iommi strikes the first chord on his guitar. What comes out is a long, distinct pandemonium that clashes with the church bells ringing in the background. The sense of hope offered by the bells is blotted out by Iommi’s deafening tritone, and now you are enwrapped within the album of *Black Sabbath*. The tritone is feared by the Church, and its noise is associated with evil and wickedness. Pairing the tritones with the sound of church bells enhances its distinct, doomy sound. The eeriness continues in “The Wizard” as it begins with a repeating blow on the harmonica. It resembles the noise of an old train whistle as if it is issuing a warning for what is to come. What comes is the simultaneous crash of Ward, Butler, and Iommi striking their instruments in unison. It is loud, confusing, and even a bit psychedelic.

Track list

1. Black Sabbath
2. The Wizard
3. Behind the Wall of Sleep
4. N.I.B
5. Wicked World
6. Evil Woman
7. Warning

Paired with Iommi's guitar of doom² is Ozzy's haunting voice. The sounds they make together are thick, as if they still linger in the air after the note or lyric is finished. Their style of play is gloomy like that drab England town they grew up in. However, paired with the gloom and doom is energy and power no other rhythm section had played before the combination of Bill Ward and Geezer Butler. Each song tells a story of death, magic, or wickedness which molds perfectly to the sounds that flow out of each of their instruments. "Black Sabbath", "N.I.B.", and "Evil Woman" speak of the temptations of the wicked world. Lucifer, love, and bouts of temptations are embraced by the band, and then thrown to the side in the lyrics. On its surface, the album seems to promote the hopelessness and weariness their music makes its listeners feel, but their songs are warnings and lessons on how to beat the darkness.

The instruments obscure the sounds of hope and perseverance Ozzy shouts and cries for with his voice. We often find ourselves absorbed by the wickedness of the world, and the only way to get out is look for the light. During times of duress in the album's lyrics, Ozzy howls out to God for help to avoid what is coming with lines that read, "No, no, please God help me!" ("Black Sabbath"). A political voice can also be heard within this genre people pass off as ignorant or obnoxiously loud. "Wicked World" focuses on the Vietnam War, and criticizes the government with lyrics that read, "A politician's job, they say, is very high / For he has to choose who's got to go and die..." There is purpose behind the songs that were critiqued as sounding like a bunch of heavy metal crashing to the ground.

The men dressed in black and blaring gloomy and dismal sounds from the drums, bass, and guitar are telling a story. They write of hope, dread, politics, change, and even love. The concluding track "Warning" is a love song telling the events of a relationship where the

² Iommi, who is revered as one of history's greatest guitarists, lost the tops of most of his fingers because he got his hand stuck in a machine at his industrial job in Birmingham, England. It is a miracle he continued to play the guitar.

connection between two people grew until it broke apart. The guitar is softer, Ozzy talks about how iron grips his heart, and the band is vulnerable to its audience. The men who are falsely accused of playing the devil's music are torn apart by heartbreak.

Black Sabbath, the first Heavy Metal album, is not a small brained production about Satan and anger. It is 39 minutes and 23 seconds of raw emotion and power expressed through the instruments cupped in their hands. It is not computerized and fake like today's songs, but it is real, imperfect, and each imperfection is forged together to create Heavy Metal music.

Influence On Other Bands

The album *Black Sabbath* set off a bomb in the Rock n' Roll community. The long-haired rockers, bands of the 70s, and all the metal heads gaped and awed at the newfound gloom Iommi was spitting out of his guitar. Not only were the tips of his fingers making waves, but it was upheld by the soul-stirring vocals of front man Ozzy Osbourne. His indifferent cries to God for help following his high-pitched screams of warning matched perfectly to the eerie noise resounding out of Iommi's axe. Every rocker in the industry tried to follow in their footsteps with albums like Judas Priest's *Rocka Rolla* and Motörhead's self-titled album *Motörhead*. Its impact on music would be felt for generations as they inspired bands like Judas Priest, Motörhead, Metallica, and many more to come.

Conclusion

Black Sabbath by Black Sabbath is the foundation for the genre of guitar thrashers and mic swallows that have come since its debut in 1970. Everything from the name, the art, and the lyrics define Heavy Metal as we now know it. This is music. Bending the guitar strings, thrashing the drums, and shouting into the mic is more powerful and raw than any other genre. They hold nothing back and are completely exposed to the audience. So next time you are

wondering what to listen to, plug in your headphones, turn on your record player, or connect your Bluetooth, and let the darkness of *Black Sabbath* absorb you. And most importantly, play it loud.

About the Author:

My name is Brett Strother, and I grew up in a small town, Erwin, Tennessee, nestled in a valley in the Appalachian Mountains. My love for writing and the written word slowly developed over time. I never enjoyed reading and writing until one dark, snowy night when I was seventeen years old. Before that time, my only concern was making good grades in school, and after the bell, I spent my time playing basketball, baseball, or football. Reading and writing was only something I did as a necessity to pass my classes, but while sitting in my den one night during winter break, I became bored as I was locked inside for two or three days until the snowstorm passed. With nothing to do, my eyes veered over to the dusty pile of books that were gifted to me by my eighth-grade English teacher after many conversations about how I did not enjoy reading. As one last effort to entertain myself that night, I picked up the smallest book in the stack. The front cover read *Child of God* by Cormac McCarthy, and as soon as I read the first page, I did not put the book down until I finished it that night. I immediately fell in love with reading because I was astonished by McCarthy's ability to create the villain of the story, Lester Ballard. From that point forward, I continued reading and came across William Faulkner's *Light in August*. I did not think a fictional story could cause me to completely change the way I looked at society and life. Now, I am a twenty-year-old student at East Tennessee State University, and I am studying to earn a bachelor's degree in English with a minor in Legal Studies.

