

Metallica? Therapy? – A movie review by Tom Strong March 12, 2005
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What can a movie about Metallica teach us about therapy? I'd wondered about this skeptically when favourable reviews of "Metallica: Some kind of monster" first came out in the fall of 2004. Being neither a fan of heavy metal, nor of most movie portrayals of therapists, new video titles were in low supply at the video store, so home I went with this chronicle of Metallica and their therapist/performance coach Paul Towles.

Many clients learn about what we do through the cultural stereotypes our media bombard them with. For the most part, these stereotypes are parodies though occasionally films come out that show us making valued differences in people lives, as in "Ordinary People" or the "Sixth Sense". In the world of rock and roll therapists are regarded similarly. The Beach Boys Bryan Wilson had his therapist take over creative control at one point in his career, and Beatle, John Lennon revitalized his career in the early 70's by seeing primal scream therapist, Arthur Janov. As a therapist and lover of rock and roll, I was at least intrigued by "Metallica: Some kind of monster".

Metallica, for the unfamiliar, have sold close to 100 million albums, and were one of the world's top-grossing concert acts in the 1990's. Starting in the early 80's, Metallica became the leaders in heavy metal rock – the kind of music band members describe in the movie as "angry and aggressively positive". Some other descriptors might better fit: testosterone-charged, swaggering, screechingly and thumpingly loud, and spleen-venting. Perhaps not your sort of thing either, but considered as a cultural phenomenon, Metallica had a following that, even after five tumultuous and unproductive years, can re-enter the top of the Billboard charts on the first week with their 2003 album, "St. Anger". It is the tumult and productivity that "Metallica: Some kind of monster" captures, and Paul Towles, the therapist/coach is right in the middle of it, as much a part of the new album it seems as veteran studio producer, Bob Rock. But, this is no Bryan Wilson story.

Directors, Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky, start the cameras running at exactly the point Towles enters Metallica's life. The band is in disarray, three years after its last album, just after the departure of their bass player, and twenty years into Metallica's life. The band members were road-weary guys who had done sex, drugs and rock and roll to mythic excesses then seemingly inseparable from the band's identity. But, they had also become middle-aged married men with young kids, substance abuse issues, and major problems in getting along. How would they find the creative and collectively required energies to sustain their remarkably lucrative careers? The answer, for their manager, was to hire Towles, a therapist and performance coach who had worked successfully with sports teams and another rock band. So, the movie opens with remaining band members, James Hetfield, Lars Ulrich and Kirk Hammett meeting with the directors and Towles, and agreeing to have their creative process not only filmed, but filmed with the involvement of a therapist they were asked by their management team to see.

As viewers quickly learn, and the directors are careful to show, Hetfield, Ulrich and Hammett have problems. They have reached a crossroads in their careers, and having already lost one member the prospect of the band self-destructing through interpersonal differences hovers

above them as they enter the studio to make their next album. That this album took nearly two years to make, before-through-after Hetfield's year in rehab, through many group and individual therapy sessions, and through tons of tension – this is front and centre in the movie. Towles begins with getting the band to do a mission statement – something that might seem hokey for a rock band to do, but these were guys who had lost their collective purpose. Much of the film takes place in the studio, and the studio producer (Bob Rock) is as involved in the therapy-propelled process as band members. We are shown their arguments over particular musical 'takes', how band members learn to communicate more effectively with each other, how they make some strong connections between them that had been missing, right through to discussions of 'firing' Towles near the end because his services are no longer needed. Towles also has band members meet with former band members (i.e., those let go), with family members, to grieve the death of the band's early bass player, and to greater democratize the band's creativity (Hammett becomes a more central figure) with all the attendant tensions that went with that. The band (a 'family') is even shown taking on a new member, Robert Trujillo, near the end, before they go out on tour with their new album. Towles is central in initiating and furthering these developments and the film succeeds in chronologically capturing these developments and some of the hard interpersonal work of therapy that was required in making them.

The band members come off as largely likeable. Hetfield and Ulrich have been Metallica's Jagger and Richards but are not prissy primadonnas or Neanderthals unwilling to discuss how they feel about things other than what angers them. Hetfield, early in the movie, comes off as tough-guy brittle, but willing to have Towles around. By the end of the movie, the dramatically changed Hetfield can still wail on guitar and musically rant, but he has cut back his working day to four hours to watch his kids grow, and he wonders about band life without Towles. Ulrich, a painter, has found ways to reconnect with Hetfield and to include Hammett in the band's creative process. Trujillo's arrival cements a we-ness the band has not felt in some time, and they collectively talk of playing with new inspiration. Lest any of this sound like a testimonial for therapy, performance coaching, or Towles, the movie does a good job in capturing the band members' ambivalence for Towles' interventions and presence. In this and many others respects (and omni-present cameras notwithstanding), "Metallica: Some kind of monster" does come off as a good portrayal of a creative and therapeutic process.

It may seem weird to watch someone else's therapy, especially one tied to public figures. Imagine being invited to view Bill, Hilary and Chelsea Clinton in family therapy. This was anything but a typical rock movie, and, for me, the musical passages were mercifully short. What was shown was an interesting glimmer on the creative process as facilitated by one of our colleagues. The methods used by Towles are mundanely familiar (good communication, relationship repair, goal-setting and attainment strategies, focusing strategies, and good supportive listening), and have become the stock and trade of a growing number of performance-oriented coaches. What the film did do a good job with was capturing the hard work of therapy, while showing some of its rewards. It did this without glorifying therapy or its participants (the band members still swear lots), and it did it in a way that may also help better show clients what can be involved in making changes, particularly changes in relationships. As a movie depiction of our work I thought it was one of the best.