

# CHAPTER 1 PITCH 'EM ALL

**Like many great stories of rock-and-roll excess, this one begins in a hotel's pent-house suite.** Not that you'd guess that anyone here was contemplating anything excessive. No lamps were being hurled onto Fifty-seventh Street, fifty-two stories below. No mattresses were slashed. No room-service trays were overturned. There was nothing to suggest that these guys were thinking about doing something crazier than any stunt any drug-addled rock star had ever pulled in a hotel room (nobody was doing anything strange with shark meat). No hint that their decision to do it would wreak havoc with their lives and risk their livelihoods. And cost them millions of their own dollars.

They were agreeing to let Bruce Sinofsky and me hang out with them.

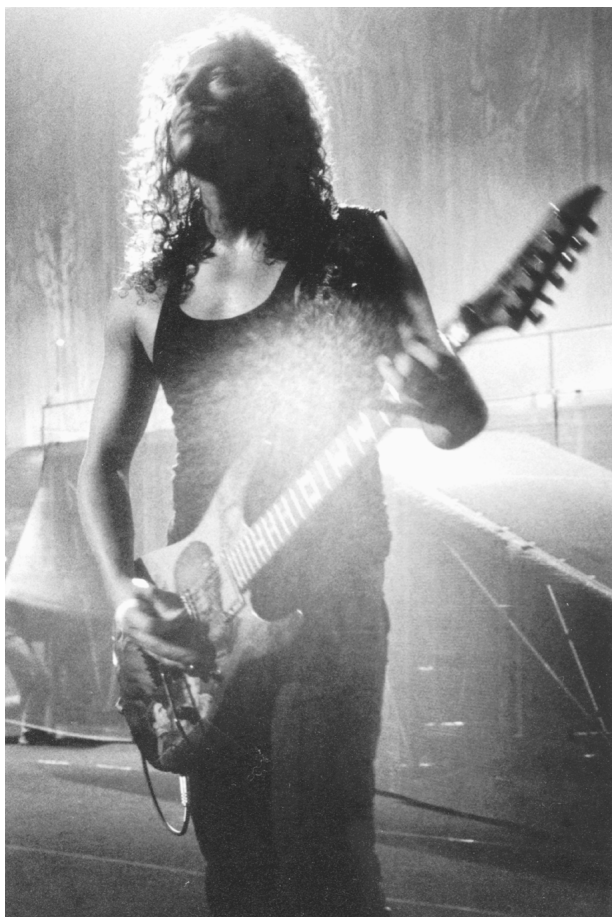
Or so I hoped. An awkward silence had descended on the opulent suite. Bruce and I weren't exactly getting along very well these days, but we knew each other intimately enough to know that neither of us thought this meeting was off to a very auspicious start. I didn't even know whose suite it was—I guessed the drummer's, since he'd just recently emerged from the bathroom, freshly showered and wearing only silk running shorts.

Bruce and I had just spent an eternity in the Four Seasons lobby, waiting to be summoned to this royal court. I was seething. Bruce, always the calmer half of our duo, was doing his best to keep it light, but it wasn't working. I have

a “fifteen-minute” rule in life: It’s the longest I will wait in line for a movie or a restaurant table—or, I decided then and there, rock stars. Peter Mensch, shaved-headed, no-nonsense, and one of Metallica’s two managers, kept coming down to tell us our audience with the kings was imminent. By the time we finally made our way upstairs, I had broken my own rule a record sixteen times over.

I knew the ostensible reason why we were there. Cliff Burnstein, Metallica’s other manager, wanted to hire us. Bruce and I had been making documentary films together for almost ten years. We now wanted to make a documentary about Metallica. Cliff also wanted us to do a documentary about Metallica, but not one that we particularly wanted to make.

It was the summer of 1999. Metallica had decided to lay low in 2000 (a little file-sharing program called Napster would put a dent in that plan). To keep them in the public eye, Cliff thought it was a good time to make a Metallica movie. What he wanted was really closer to an infomercial: a clips-driven film about Metallica’s storied history. The idea was to buy airtime on late-night television, show the film, and flog the band’s albums through a toll-free number. It




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**Kirk Hammett onstage in Oslo, Norway, in December 2003 (Courtesy of Joe Berlinger)**

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**The Berlinger-Sinofsky team in happier days, on our first film, *Brother’s Keeper*, in 1991. From left to right: Bruce, Delbert Ward, cinematographer Doug Cooper, and me. (Courtesy of Derek Berg)**

seemed like a good idea. Metallica's back catalog is one of the most lucrative assets in the music business. Even in an off year, when Metallica doesn't tour or release a record, two million Metallica albums find new homes.

Although Bruce and I had several times turned down offers to make historical films for basic cable channels, we were willing to consider this one. We both have healthy second careers making commercials and corporate films to pay the bills, and we figured this would fall in that category. But we were also intrigued at the prospect of making a more personal film about Metallica, who we'd come to know by using the band's music in our film *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills* and its sequel, *Paradise Lost 2: Revelations*, which we were in the process of finishing. I didn't know the band members well, but I knew enough to think it would be interesting to make a film about what these guys were like as people, and how they dealt with the baggage that came with being the kings of metal. We had pitched the idea a few times over the previous two years and gotten some tentative interest, mainly from drummer Lars Ulrich. Now Bruce and I had a vague idea that we could take the job they were offering and somehow nudge it in a more personal direction. I threw some numbers together for Cliff and didn't hear back from him. A few months later, Cliff called us to say that the band would be staying in New York en route to Woodstock '99. They wanted us to stop by their hotel. Although I was a little disappointed that they were participating in such a lame event, I was happy for the opportunity to meet with them again.

And so, here we were, on top of the world. Lars, guitarist Kirk Hammett, and bassist Jason Newsted were milling around the suite, as were Cliff and Peter—the co-owners of Q Prime Management—and Marc Reiter, a senior employee of Q Prime who is primarily responsible for the day-to-day marketing of Metallica. We made small talk for a while. We thanked them for letting us use their music in *Paradise Lost 2*. We talked a little about the wrongfully convicted kids in the film, who had now been imprisoned for six years. The topic of how great the view was from up here, introduced by Bruce, came and went. We were running out of things to say to each other. I was playing with my sneakers, mentally preparing my speech about why Metallica should let us stick a camera in its collective face for a year. I wanted them to broach the subject of the film first, and for some reason, they weren't. Cliff thoughtfully stroked his gray beard. As the silence began to get uncomfortable, it hit me that we were waiting for singer and guitarist James Hetfield to show up. I was about to learn a cardinal rule of Metallica, one I would come to know well in the coming years:

Nothing Happens Without James. If James isn't around, no action shall be taken, no business discussed. Lars is in many ways Metallica's mouthpiece, but James is the capo.

After a few more minutes of shoe picking, view gazing, and small-talk making, James mercifully showed up, accompanied by his full-time body-guard, the kind of beefy guy employed to snap the neck of anyone who gets near his charge. I instantly noticed that James has an incredible presence. When he walks into a room, the light seems to pool around him. He truly is a rock star, without really trying. I remember thinking, even then, that he carried that powerful aura like a burden. There was something intimidating about him that made me tongue-tied, careful to measure every word. Bruce has an ease with all types—be they mall rats, trailer-park kids, or James Hetfield—that I greatly admire. He speaks spontaneously, which sometimes gets him in trouble but more often works to his advantage by disarming people. I tend to measure my words more carefully. Someone like James makes me unbearably self-conscious.

Cliff called the meeting to order. He reminded everyone that a historical documentary about Metallica would be a wise business move. The idea would be for us to delve deep into Lars's huge video archive, which spanned the band's history. What we'd come out with would be the definitive filmic history of Metallica. We'd throw in a little concert footage that we'd shoot. The whole thing would be finished in time for Metallica's upcoming sabbatical.

Cliff paused. Everyone nodded—not, apparently, in agreement, but more like to show they were sentient. Just another day at the office.

What the hell, I figured. Time to jump into the void. Now or never.

"You know . . ." I had completely forgotten my speech. "We don't really do just historical stuff. It's kind of boring. Anyone can do it." *Hey—why hire us? Any monkey with an Avid could do it!*

Bruce pushed it further. "What Joe and I are really good at is getting involved in our subjects' lives." (Bruce has an amazing knack for taking an idea that would make any sane person recoil—a total stranger invading your life—and somehow making it sound okay—fun, even!)

"Do something more personal," I urged, really exhorting the troops. "Combine the historical stuff with a portrait of who you guys really are. We can do the history, but let's try to make this more than an infomercial." Going in for the kill . . . "Let's make it rewarding for people!"

Somewhere in the room an air conditioner whirred. If there were tumble-

weeds in hotel penthouses, one would have blown through the room. If there were crickets, they would've chirped.

Lars pulled at his wet hair. "Personal?" he said, treating the word like a dirty sock. "Like what kind of things? Me taking a leak?" Snickers from the others.

"I don't know, man," Kirk said. "When I'm at home, I really like my privacy."

Let the record show that the member of Metallica most enamored of the idea was Jason Newsted. He would let us film him backstage and hanging out with fans after shows. Maybe he'd even let us into his house—he'd have to think about it.<sup>1</sup>

As for James, well, he didn't say a word. He didn't have to; the look on his face spoke volumes. This is what it told me: "If, for business reasons, we need to make an infomercial to sell a few albums, that's fine. But let there be no confusion: I am James Fucking Hetfield, and you are not shoving a camera in my face—unless it's onstage, in which case, stay the fuck out of my way."

Cliff also chose nonverbal communication. His look said: "Nice one, guys. You certainly blew that opportunity." Also: "Don't let the door hit your personal-film-loving asses on the way out."

We all shook hands, never imagining that there would come a day, a few years hence, when a therapist would instruct us all to hug one another when saying hello and good-bye. I wasn't even sure we'd ever say hello to Metallica again.

Bruce and I got in the elevator and began the slow descent from the rarified air of the penthouse suite to the sweltering heat below, from rock royalty to the hoi polloi. I turned to Bruce and said, "This ain't gonna happen."

Was he rolling his eyes or just following the numbered floors as they counted down? "No shit," he replied.

Like I said, we weren't getting along.