



## CHAPTER 14

# WELCOME HOME

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On Bob Richman's first day, as we drove our production van across the Golden Gate Bridge, we discussed the strategy for this very unusual shoot. We had already updated him on the state of Metallica. We told him that today we were going to show Metallica some footage and that James was really on the fence regarding our continued presence. We decided that Bob would hang back at first with the camera off, holding it by his side rather than on his shoulder in a shooting pose. As James (hopefully) relaxed, Bob would gradually insinuate himself into the scene with his camera.

We were the first to arrive at HQ that morning. As we sat in the lounge waiting for the others, I heard James's voice coming from the tech room in back. He had entered HQ through the rear entrance, which struck me as interesting. I had a sudden twinge of filmmaker's intuition. I decided we should walk back there and approach him with the camera. James had agreed in our phone conversation to let us film the band meeting on his first day back, so I

was bending the rules a bit by filming him before the meeting, but something told me it was worth the risk.

Bruce stayed behind to capture the other guys as they came in, while I motioned for Bob to follow me.

"Hey, Bob, start the camera."

"What?"

"Start rolling now."

"But you said to ease into it."

"Yeah, I changed my mind."

As we entered the tech room, we saw Bob Rock giving James a welcome-back hug. As you can see in *Monster*, James was not thrilled when he saw our camera. "Why are we filming this?" he asked with a tight smile on his face.

A lot of things went through my mind at this moment. About a month had gone by since we'd shown our twenty-six-minute trailer to Q Prime. We had scored some points with Metallica's managers by turning over our footage so that Elektra could recut the trailer, which, as we had expected, was mediocre without the therapy. *The Osbournes* had just debuted and become an overnight sensation. We were already hearing murmurs from Elektra that we might have the next *Osbournes* on our hands. I doubted this would happen—

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Courtesy of Bob Richman



that therapyless trailer was unlikely to generate much buzz—but it was still one more potential obstacle that stood in the way of us making a great film. Cliff's feedback on our trailer hadn't diminished my belief that a great film was possible, but it made me realize that we really had our work cut out for us. On top of all that, James might kill the project on the spot. Despite all these hurdles, we had just turned down USA's Robert Blake film, which would have been a nice paycheck when I really needed one. So my reflexive response to James's query, which I thought but thankfully didn't say, was: "Yeah, why *are* we fucking filming this?"

What I did say was, "Hey, James, welcome back!" His smile got tighter. Bob instinctively put down his camera, recognizing a hostile subject when he saw one. As if we didn't have enough working against us on this project, I had now conceivably shot myself in the foot by shooting James too soon.

After Bob Richman cut the camera, I tried to reestablish a level of civility. I pointedly avoided talking about the film, and James seemed to relax a bit. Meanwhile, Phil and the rest of Metallica trickled into HQ. As Bob Richman and I walked back down the hall, I was a wreck, convinced that I'd ruined any possibility of continuing. I also felt guilty about putting Bob in such an awkward position on his first day at work. The camera operator on a verité film has an often thankless job. He or she points the camera at the behest of the director, and if it turns out that camera is aimed at someone who doesn't appreciate the intrusion, the cameraperson bears much of the brunt of the director's miscalculations. Besides being a master with the camera, Bob Richman has exactly the sort of comportment you want in a documentary DP: he listens really closely, attunes himself to the mood of any given scene, and has a knack for making himself invisible. I assumed Bob was annoyed right now, but he just chuckled and said, "Well, that certainly worked out great. Good job, Joe." Bob Rock had told the others about our failed attempt to film James, and they laughed nervously when they saw us. I was positive Bruce was glowering at me, furious that I'd destroyed our project. (Bruce insists to this day that he wasn't mad at me, so maybe I was just projecting my own guilt onto him.)

We all made small talk for an hour or so, waiting for James to emerge from the back, signaling that the meeting could begin. Bruce and I had a quick huddle before we started. We agreed on two major points we wanted to communicate to the band: we would only continue filming if we still had the same complete access, and we wanted to make it clear—especially to James—that we didn't want to do anything that would interfere with Metallica making their

record, even if that meant we had to shut down the film. We basically told the guys that the ball was in their court. It was difficult to stand in front of them and float the possibility of packing it in. When people think of the laborious process of making a documentary, they tend to focus on the Sisyphean task of starting the process. But just as any serious climber will tell you that getting down the mountain is always more difficult than getting up, a big challenge of documentaries is knowing when to quit reaching for a higher filmmaking summit, because there's always the possibility of something amazing happening. When Mark Byers, the stepfather of one of the murdered children, handed us a bloody knife during the filming of *Paradise Lost*, we decided we had a moral obligation to inform HBO of this apparent smoking gun, even though we knew the network might tell us this was a natural point to stop filming and we weren't sure we wanted to shut down. After a few months of filming *Brother's Keeper*, it looked like Delbert Ward was about to plead guilty in exchange for no jail time, and we had to make a decision whether to keep spending time and money making what would have been a much less compelling film. We took the risk, and it paid off.

Our state-of-the-film address to Metallica also paid off, of course. We filmed the entire proceedings—including Metallica watching our trailer—but we ultimately decided that most of the scene was just too self-referential to include in the finished film. We did, however, feel it was important to include the two of us speaking very frankly about the possibility of shutting down filming if that was in the best interest of the band. But that was only a small part of an incredible exchange that stopped being just about the film itself and became a sort of metadiscussion about the state of Metallica.

Since it was clear that James was the one who would need the most convincing, Lars, the film's biggest advocate in the band, anticipated James's concerns while appealing to everyone's sense of band solidarity. "I'm not particularly thrilled by the cameras," he said. "My take on this film is that if [anyone] wanted to make a film about a band that's different from other [rock] films, it should be us. Are the cameras in the way? A little bit. But we can make a better film than anyone else if we want to. If Metallica collectively decides to do this, we can make that happen."

"I understand that having a camera shoved in your face isn't the easiest thing," I said. "On *Paradise Lost* and *Brother's Keeper*, Bruce and I were always amazed that people let us into their lives. God forbid, if a tragedy happened to us, I'd never let a crew into my life. But I think we have an important film here."

James took a deep breath. "A lot of this stems from me not being honest




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**Courtesy of Bob Richman**

with myself for a long time and not wanting to stand up and express what I'm feeling or rock the boat and look like an asshole. I definitely want to do this. I think this film is important. There are messages in it that are helpful to people. But when Lars talks about Metallica as a different person, that scares me. Metallica is three individuals and three individuals have to decide what to do. I'm pretty tired of putting the band first instead of our personal feelings. That's where I disagree with you, Lars."

Lars didn't meet James's eyes. He just looked straight ahead and nodded.

Bob Rock said he didn't think that's what Lars was saying, and asked James to clarify.

"I guess it just doesn't feel right anymore to sacrifice my time and my sanity for Metallica. I've done it for a long time. It scares me that this beast . . ." He struggled for the words. "You might look at it as a friend—to me, it's a beast. I'd like to be James Hetfield instead of 'James Hetfield of Metallica.' I'd like us to be three individuals instead of us all feeding the beast for the benefit of Metallica."

"In other words, finding a balance," Kirk the peacemaker said.

"Maybe the fifth member of Metallica used to be the beast," Bob said. "But I don't think it's like that now. The three of you can control the beast. Lars's point is that you have to recognize that the beast is there."

"As I look at the great achievements of society," Phil said, "they come out

of people trusting tension. If there is tension in the moviemaking process, it's because we don't know how to harness it yet. If someone sticks a camera in my face and makes me self-conscious, like someone is doing now—" Phil swerved to look directly into Bob Richman's camera "—why don't I look at and see what this self-consciousness is all about, rather than saying, 'Get out of my face?'"

"An important question for all of you is, why do you want to film?" I said. "What do you expect? Remember, Cliff Burnstein's original idea was that this was supposed to be a corporate infomercial."

"The bigness of Metallica is there," Bob Rock said, turning to James. "The question is do you accept it? Or do you accept it on different terms? You have so much to say, more than you ever have. You guys aren't Pink Floyd; you're a new generation, and you're not gonna accept that bullshit where the machine is bigger than your personal lives." Maybe for James, Bob suggested delicately, Lars represents the beast.

Phil said, "The beast is the mythical projection of the unresolved issues in the group."

Lars, who'd been uncharacteristically silent for a while now, let out a quick snort of laughter. Phil looked taken aback. "What . . . ?" As Phil struggled to form a question, Kirk broke in: "The beast has trampled over all of us and brought us places we don't want to go, but we've never talked about how we felt about that. What you said is great, Bob, it puts things in perspective. The beast has been a savior and a guide, a giver as well as a taker. But there have been some casualties of the beast, and some damage done."

Lars, perched on the couch, was looking agitated. He shook his head. Bob asked him, "What's wrong?"

"This is what we do for a living, so of course there are moments when it's not fun," Lars said. "The thing I'm missing here is there seems to be a complete disregard for the word 'team' or the collective. This has been a career. We've made the most of it, better than most people ever have."

"This is what we latched onto as youths," James said. "I didn't say to my career counselor, 'I want to be a rock star.' This is the thing I've chosen, and we've made it strong. This is what we were meant to do."

There was a silence in the room for a few seconds. Kirk was the first to speak. "I can't do anything else." Everyone collapsed into laughter.

The tension seemed to break, so we suggested that we all watch the trailer. "We usually don't like to show footage to people in our films," Bruce said. "But this time we thought we should."

We put the tape in the VCR and hit Play. Without trying to be too obvious about it, I kept sneaking glimpses at how everyone was reacting. James started looking completely impassive, almost rigid, but he broke into a big smile when Kirk appeared on the screen, doing his nails with a buffer Bob Rock had given him for impromptu guitar effects. When Lars saw himself talking about band relationships, the thing that got Cliff Burnstein worked up, he hung his head and nervously played with his hair. He laughed at the scene where James ad-libs goofy lyrics about Frankenstein during a writing session for "Some Kind of Monster." He *really* laughed when Jason appeared onscreen to say that he was the exception to Lars's "everyone in Metallica has had crabs and 'drip-dick'" rule. (Jason's comment did not make it into *Monster*.) The part where Lars calls James a dick, which the Q Prime managers found very amusing, made everyone in Metallica stop laughing.

When it was over, Lars said, "It's hard to watch some of that. Which is good. It should be hard to watch."

James looked a little shell-shocked. "I saw myself being pretty real," he said. "And it was good to see that." He paused, looking relieved. "I've spent the last year thinking this would be a lot worse." He looked at Bruce and me. "You should go even deeper." My jaw hit the floor. That was what Cliff had told us, but I never expected to hear it from James. "Be truthful," he added. "Just get the camera out of my face."

And that was all the encouragement we needed. There was never any explicit permission for us to keep going, but we understood that we were still wanted. Driving back to the city late that afternoon, I remember thinking that I'd really dodged a bullet. Ambushing James with our camera had been a calculated risk; it could have been the last time our cameras were ever trained on Metallica. But James wound up telling us to make our material go deeper emotionally, as long as we didn't intrude too much physically. Maybe one positive effect of that ambush was that it got everything out in the open. Phil was always big on the idea that if you encounter something that scares you, you should "move forward" into it and see what happens. If you're afraid of monsters, then stare into the eyes of a monster. The "beast" that James feared would prevent him from remaining healthy and sane wasn't ambiguous or esoteric, some vague manifestation of the pressures of fame. The beast was real. It had just taken the form of a camera and attacked him when he walked in the door on his first day back. This monster was living. And from what he told us, it sounded like James was willing to live with it.