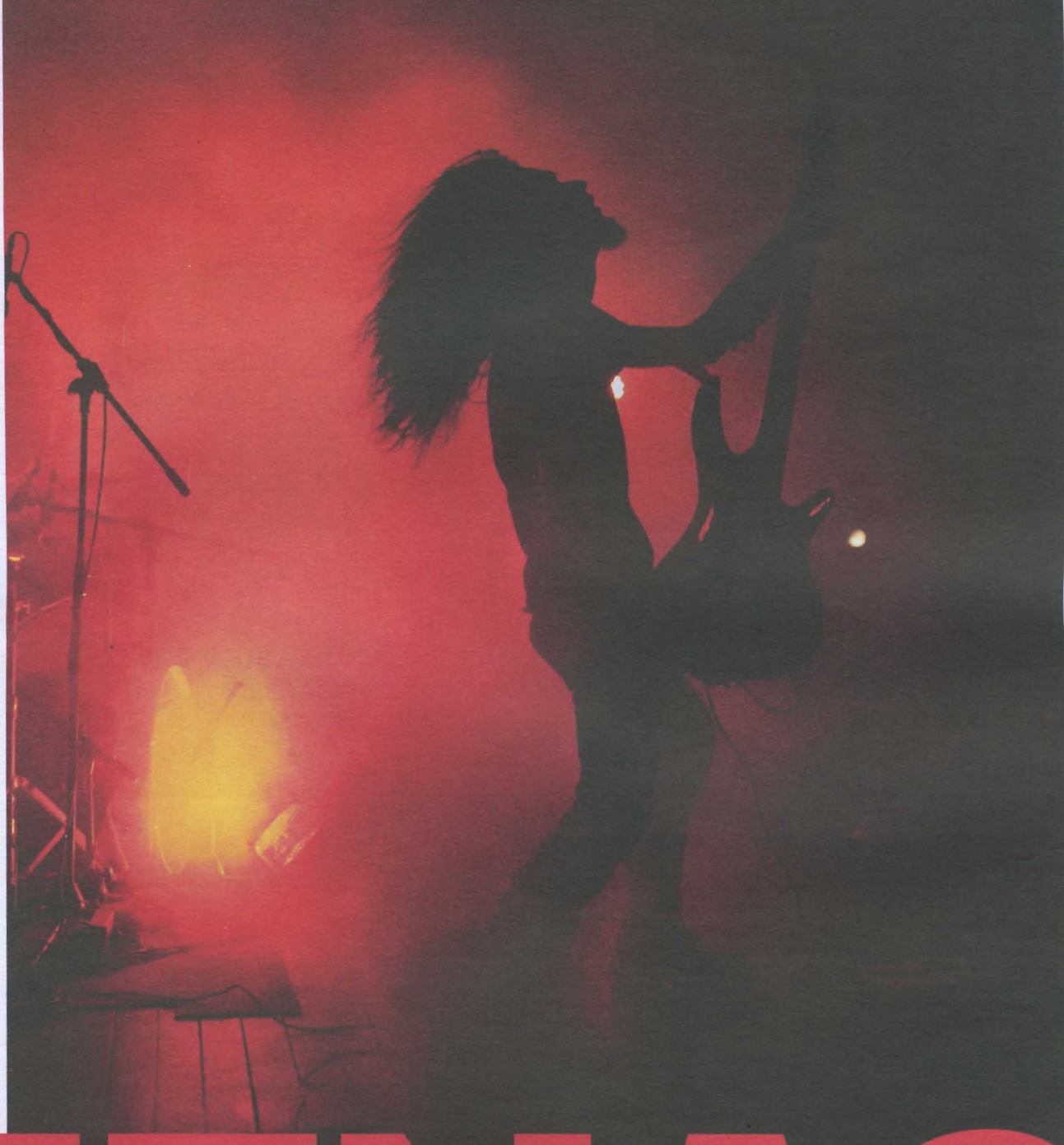



LOUDER THE BETTER

RED



THREAT



**BUENA VISTA
ANTISOCIAL CL
Joel Kaos of
Ancestor and 66
Fest co-organiz
(opposite page)
Amed "Helheim"
Olivares and Da
Vivás of Abaddo**

**As the world gets smaller
and more connected every day,
Cuba remains isolated and
repressed, mired in poverty
and outdated technology.**

**It's no wonder that the
country is responsible for some
of the angriest, most
extreme metal on Earth.**

By David Peisner

Photographs by Richmond Lam

The park at the corner of 23rd Avenue and G Street in the Vedado section of Havana isn't much to look at by the standards of fading, crumbling glory that prevail in Cuba's capital city. In fact, it's less a park than a median that bisects the wide expanse of G Street: some patches of green grass, a few paved walkways, and maybe a half-dozen benches, all within about 100 square feet.

At 1 a.m. on a warm, windy Friday night in mid-March, the park is a sea of long, dark hair and black concert T-shirts—Slayer, Bathory, Gorgoroth, Megadeth. I've been led here by Amed "Helheim" Olivares, frontman for Abaddon, a young band that, hours earlier, had played a relentless, assaultive 45-minute set at an Art Deco cinema a few blocks away during the first night of the third annual 666 Fest, a weekend-long celebration of Cuban black metal. After wiping the corpse paint from his face and the black, upside-down cross from his arm, and stowing the nail-studded armband he wore onstage, Olivares finds me outside after the show. He claps me on the shoulder and smiles widely.

"For metal in Cuba, you have to see G Street," he says.

Metalheads have been hanging out on this unremarkable corner most weekend nights since the mid-'90s. Nobody seems to know why they chose this location, but whiling away the nighttime hours outside, hanging with like-minded comrades, is common in Havana. It's too expensive to frequent bars or clubs, so on Friday and Saturday nights at spots like this, packs of the young and sometimes not-so-young can be seen sharing a few communal bottles of rum, doing not very much.

Almost all of the hundred or so gathered tonight came from the festival, and while they look somewhat intimidating from afar, it's just an illusion. People here are friendly, quick to pass the rum, and, with the exception of one heavily inebriated man who keeps dropping his shorts and exposing himself, well-behaved.

The 666 Fest isn't Cuba's biggest metal festival—tonight's show drew approximately 200 people; tomorrow night, there will be a few more than that—but its very existence is rather shocking. In a country ruled for more than 50 years by an authoritarian Communist regime known for its intolerance of free expression and resistance to anything that stinks of imperialist capitalist *yanquis*, heavy metal has taken hold over the past two decades in a major way. While its audience is dwarfed by that for salsa or reggaeton, its stylistic leanings and brash, antisocial attitude are eye-opening. Metal here is almost uniformly deafening, punishing, and brutally aggressive. As Michel Hernández, frontman for a popular thrash-metal outfit called Chlover, puts it, "We don't listen to Bon Jovi here."

Joel Kaos, one of the festival's organizers, is a surprisingly cheery guy who plays bass in Ancestor, an anarchic, thunderous black-metal band which is headlining Saturday's show. "You need extreme music to match your extreme life," he says, drawing a direct cause and effect. "You find harder metal in countries that are more oppressed. We have something to scream about."

That this scene is blossoming seems to indicate an opening up of what has long been the Western Hemisphere's most repressive society. But like everything in Cuba, the reality is more complicated: A combination of onerous travel restric-

tions and dire economic conditions means that for most Cubans—and most Cuban metal bands—it's extremely difficult, if not impossible, to ever leave the island.

And at a time when uprisings against autocratic regimes throughout the Middle East are being fueled by Facebook, Twitter, and other social media, most Cubans have never even *used* the Internet. Access is restricted to those authorized specifically by the regime, and even people who manage to get online, legally or illegally (often at great personal expense), must cope with governmental monitoring and slow dial-up connections (broadband and Wi-Fi are all but nonexistent). The more interconnected the world becomes, the more pronounced this island's isolation feels, and the further it's left behind. While the rest of the globe is undergoing once-in-a-generation political and social changes, Cuba is in many ways conforming to the cliché perpetuated by its beautifully collapsing old-world architecture and the 1950s-era automobiles that rule its streets: It's frozen in time.

On G Street, I fall into conversation with a group that includes Abaddon's hulking drummer, Damian Vivás. Vivás is at least 6'2", with a buzz cut, a passable command of English, and a bone-dry sense of humor. In five days, he'll begin two years of compulsory military service and he's not happy about it. His mother is Spanish, which means he qualifies for a coveted Spanish passport, but in an example of the sort of unexplainable illogic familiar to all Cubans, he must first complete his army stint. I ask what he plans to do when he finally gets his precious travel document.

"I'll go to Stockholm, then walk to Norway so I can be with black-metal people," he says, with the faintest hint of a wry smirk.

"Do you know how cold it is there?" I ask.

"It's okay," he replies. "I'll eat flesh and listen to black metal to keep warm." He pauses for a moment. "Cuba is a prison."

His friends laugh and his girlfriend shakes her head. "No, it's not," she says.

Vivás stares into the night, unsmiling. "Yes, it is."

Rock'n'roll in Cuba dates back to the 1950s, but after a scrappy band of guerillas led by Fidel Castro, his brother (and current president) Raúl, and Ernesto "Che" Guevara engineered an unlikely revolution against the U.S.-backed government of Fulgencio Batista in 1959, the U.S. imposed a trade embargo, the broad outlines of which remain in place today. In the subsequent backlash against all things American, rock was outlawed for much of the 1960s and '70s. Often, long hair was forcibly cut, and possession of a Beatles album was punishable with imprisonment. Just getting music was tricky: There were no stores that sold rock albums, so they had to be ferried in by tourists or those lucky enough to travel outside Cuba. Instruments and equipment were even more difficult to obtain. Laws and attitudes began softening in the '80s—though record stores and instrument shops never really took hold—and eventually Fidel himself came around: In 2000, he unveiled a statue of John Lennon in a Havana park and apologized for the earlier ban.

The first real metal band in Cuba was Venus. Formed in 1981, the band was inspired by Deep Purple, Black Sabbath, and Led Zeppelin. At their height, Venus could draw as many as 5,000 people to a show, but in 1986 the government forced them to split up, according to the band's singer, Dionicio Arce. "They said we were taking young people's minds out of the path," he tells me when we meet in his Havana apartment, a small second-story walk-up with a blue toilet sitting disassembled on the patio and a large, mirrored cross with spikes nailed to it hanging from a living-room wall. "We were told the group wasn't matching with the principles of the Revolution."

The spark was lit, though. In the mid-'80s, Metal Oscuro, a harder-edged, death-metal outfit, emerged and was soon followed by Zeus, whose furious riffs and brawny drumming were influenced heavily by Pantera. Zeus subsequently became the country's most popular metal band. They still are.

Venues were difficult to find in the '80s, with most clubs shunning rock and metal in favor of traditional Cuban music, which brought in tourists. But by the late '80s and early '90s, the extreme-metal scene, featuring acts like Combat Noise, Blinder, and Agonizer, began to coalesce around a community house in Vedado known as El Patio de María, in honor of its director, a middle-aged woman named Maria Gattorno. Today, metalheads talk of the late '90s and early 2000s at the Patio with mythical reverence.

On the second night of the 666 Fest, I sit in the theater lobby before the show with another festival organizer, Alexander Sánchez, a lanky, enthusiastic 35-year-old who has been publishing a Cuban rock zine called *Scriptorium* since 1999. When I ask about Maria's, he smiles and lets out a long sigh. "That was our time," he says. "You could go there from Thursday to Sunday, and you didn't need to ask who was playing—all those days there were good bands. It was just getting bigger and bigger."

In 2003, a huge concert at the Patio featuring 14 bands drew thousands. The venue was three blocks from Revolution Square, the seat of the government, and the enthusiastic young crowds apparently spooked the leadership. Fifteen days after the show, Maria's was closed forever, without explanation. The closure was a huge blow and kick-started what appeared to be an official crackdown.

"For two or three years after that, there were no places to play," says Sánchez. "The cops ordered the rock people from G Street park. Every day, two or three trucks full of police would move people away." It's not clear whether this crackdown was part of a broader 2003 campaign against dissidents and activists known as the "Black Spring" or just a concurrent development. "That's what happens here," says Sánchez. "Things happen and there's no explanation."

The scene experienced some attrition through the mid-2000s, but its core members kept the faith, and eventually,

their efforts bore fruit. In 2007, a diminutive French metal fanatic named David Chapet, who'd moved to Cuba 11 years earlier, started a record label called Brutal Beatdown, devoted specifically to exposing the island's extreme music. The following year, he released the 21-track compilation *Not Salsa, Just Brutal Music*, and organized Brutal Fest, a nine-band concert that drew 6,000 fans to an outdoor site in Havana. The same year, a new, modern venue opened here called Maxim Rock, which began booking metal nearly every weekend. The scene had survived its wilderness years.

"Maxim Rock is here because they shut down Maria's," says Alejandro de la Torre, bassist for Escape. "They owed it to us."

Central Havana is a strikingly handsome shambles of gorgeous 200- and 300-year-old buildings on the verge of collapse. Small, blackish clouds rise from the tailpipes of aging automobiles and fill the air with a sickly sweet sulfuric smell. Down one side street, Maxim Rock stands out from its dilapidated neighbors. Formerly an old theater, the venue was renovated and painted a deep, dark red before it opened in 2008. Inside, the main room has a four-story-high ceiling and space for nearly 1,000 concertgoers; the stage is framed by the kind of large, steel lighting rig designed for outdoor festivals. All this was the handiwork of the Cuban Rock Agency, which houses its offices inside Maxim Rock.

Although entrepreneurial opportunities have expanded in recent years—the state allows limited private ownership of real estate and automobiles, and grants licenses to operate small businesses—most everything is still government-run, including music. For musicians to get paid, they must be ▶

**"We don't listen to Bon Jovi here,"
says Chlover frontman Michel Hernández,
below, in Old Havana.**



"professional," a status bestowed on them by a government agency, through the Ministry of Culture.

For years, rock and metal acts were licensed through the same agencies as salsa and jazz bands. What that meant, in reality, was that they were mostly ignored and therefore couldn't earn money legally. In 2007, the Cuban Rock Agency was formed to represent them. Shortly after, the agency began auditioning bands to receive their professional credentials. At present, it has 16 acts on its roster, most of them metal, and, due to limited resources, nearly all from Havana. These bands either get paid a monthly salary or 60 percent of ticket sales whenever they play a show. What that amounts to is not much: Only one musician I spoke to, Arce, the ex-Venus singer who began fronting Zeus in 1996, makes enough from music to live on. He earns 3,000 national pesos a month, or about \$125, which is four to five times more than the average Cuban.



Even though the money most bands earn is negligible, the situation itself seems bizarre to an outsider: A gaggle of insanely angry metal bands—including Ancestor, Escape, Zeus, Hipnosis, and Chlover—who are partially subsidized by the same government that's frequently the source and target of their rage.

Yuri Ávila has run the Cuban Rock Agency since its inception, but doesn't look like your average government functionary. She's short and stocky, and when I meet her one afternoon at Maxim Rock, she's wearing a fading black Juicehead concert T-shirt and gray shorts. She's a longtime metal fan who used to work alongside Gattorno at the Patio. When Gattorno passed up the opportunity to head the agency—she was reportedly still disillusioned over the Patio's shuttering—she suggested Ávila. Ávila's is a complicated job because she's both the voice of the rock community and an employee of the regime who is occasionally charged with keeping that community in line. "We have bands in the agency with very strong politics, and it's okay," she says. "But there are rules we must not trespass. It's not my intention to break those rules and fuck up everything we've built. There are ways to say things, there are moments to say things. But I always want the musician that stands up on that stage to be aware of what will come from the things he says."

These are rules that apply to all bands here, not just those signed by the agency. Certain lines can't be crossed. Criticism of society's ills is usually okay; criticism of the government is usually not. Lázaro Hernández, drummer for the metalcore band Switch, told me that when they played a song called "Represión" on a popular TV show, their performance was cut from the final program. Others I spoke to offered similar tales; but several mentioned the particular case of Gorki Águila.

Águila is the outspoken frontman for the punk band Porno Para Ricardo. His incendiary tunes mocking Cuban bureaucrats, denouncing Communism, and in one case, taking Fidel to task personally ("El Comandante wants me to work for next to nothing / El Comandante wants me to applaud his bullshit

sermonizing") have gotten him banned from playing music in public and imprisoned several times, including a two-year stint in maximum security during the mid-2000s. A week before I arrived, Águila was arrested again (and released a day later) when he tried to play an unauthorized show at G Street park.

But the standards of what's deemed "over the line" by authorities are hazy. Chlover, for example, have gotten significant play on state-run radio and TV with songs like "Poder a la Gente" ("Power to the People"), which calls on Cubans to rise up, stop being silent, and fight for change.

"There are some lyrics on our CD that are risky," says Chlover drummer and lyricist Orlando Acosta. "We don't know how we've been able to get away with it, but we've never been criticized or censored."

A lot of bands sing in English, which offers a measure of protection. As Abaddon's Olivares points out, many of the lyrics are indecipherable anyway. "If you sing in English and your voice is all growls, they can't understand what you're saying," he says. "If they understood, it would be more problematic."

Sánchez, the 666 Fest organizer, says he had to offer assurances to government officials about the event. "Weeks ago, we had to say which bands were going to play and what kind of lyrics they'd sing," he says. "We were told there can't be anything against the government. We said, 'There won't be any trouble. All the bands are about Satan and 'Fuck God,' and all that.'"

Ultimately, for a festival of black metal—which celebrates individualism above all else—to be supported by a state founded on forced collectivism is somewhere between ironic and absurd. But all this uncertainty leads, inevitably, to the most insidious strain of censorship.

"You grow up censoring yourself," says Sánchez. "You know what you can say and what you can't. We have that incorporated since we were kids."

Santa Clara is 175 miles east of Havana, but it takes me nearly five hours by bus to make the trip. The city, built by the Spanish in the 17th and 18th centuries, was the site of the decisive battle of the Cuban Revolution, where battalions led by Camilo Cienfuegos and Che Guevara (whose remains are housed in a nearby mausoleum) overwhelmed government forces. President Batista fled the country 12 hours later.



There's not much to look at on the ride from Havana, except for the occasional billboard touting socialism's virtues or decrying U.S. injustices—"End the Blockade," "Free the Five" (a reference to five Cubans imprisoned in the U.S. on espionage charges—one has since been released). Like the infamous Japanese sergeant who was found hiding in a cave in Guam nearly 30 years after World War II ended, Cuba often feels like it's stuck fighting a Cold War that everyone else quit paying attention to decades ago.

Eric and Jorge Domenech live on a narrow street of dusty,

low-slung buildings in Santa Clara, not far from the picturesque city center. Eric, short and compact, with a shaved head and a thin goatee, is the frontman for Blinder, one of the country's best-known death-metal bands. His brother, Jorge, tall and slender, is Blinder's manager. They invite me into the tidy living room of their small home on a Sunday afternoon.



The two first discovered metal as teenagers in the 1980s. With an antenna fixed to the roof of the house, they could pick up FM stations from South Florida. "There were two or three stations in Miami you could listen to," Jorge says. "They'd play Quiet Riot, Twisted Sister, Ratt. One station, 101.5 FM, had a 30-minute program of hardcore, punk, and metal with bands like Napalm Death, Obituary, Sepultura, and Deicide."

Eric points past the small kitchen and out the back door of the house to show where the antenna was perched. "When I listened to the radio, it was always like this," he says. He mimes pressing his ear to a transistor and imitates the alternations between static and ferocious metal barking that used to waft from the speaker. "It was hard to find music. It took real sacrifice."

Jorge wrote letters to foreign bands, asking them for posters, T-shirts, and music. "The mail service is fucking shit," he says. "But from time to time, I'd receive things." He disappears for a moment into a bedroom and returns with a prized bounty: His extensive correspondence with Oystein "Euronymous" Aarseth, the guitarist of the Norwegian band Mayhem who was murdered by his bandmate in the most notorious incident in black-metal history. "He seemed like a nice guy," Jorge says.

As difficult as it was to be a metal fan, it was simple compared to starting a band. When Eric formed his first group, Cronos, in 1991, they had to manufacture most of their equipment from scratch. Eric, whose full-time job is teaching art, constructed the guitar bodies from wood, then fixed them with pickups that came from former Eastern Bloc nations such as Poland and Czechoslovakia. Friends helped him jury-rig together homemade amplifiers. These days, getting equipment is only marginally easier.

"My monthly salary is 480 pesos," says Eric. "That's about \$20. I'm not going to buy a microphone or I'll starve to death. By the way, there's no shop with instruments, anyway."

Most musicians get their instruments from friends traveling abroad and then hang on to them until they disintegrate. A few days later, I sit with the band Chlover, across the street from the Havana terminal where, in 2003, armed men hijacked a ferry and tried to sail it to Florida (they were caught and three ringleaders were quickly executed). The band members tell me about taping together broken drumsticks, making guitar picks from old phone cards, and only changing guitar strings every seven months. As one of Chlover's guitarists

Milton Núñez explains, "Normally, you buy equipment to get the sound you want to achieve. Here, you take anything that shows up and somehow get to the sound you want."

The phrase I heard most from musicians here is "*No es facile*," or "It's not easy," and they weren't just talking about playing in a band. Nothing is simple for Cubans, and almost everything requires standing in a long line. It took hours of explanation from my interpreter before I could decipher the processes behind procuring cellphones, buying groceries, using the two different currencies—don't ask—and finding a place to live here.

Traveling the country is arduous. Buying a car was illegal without specific government permission until last year, and still remains prohibitively expensive. Decent public transportation between provinces is also pricey—my bus trip to Santa Clara cost as much as the average monthly salary—and the cheaper options are unreliable. At the 666 Fest, one of the headlining bands, Unlight Domain, hitchhiked to the gig, which isn't uncommon; but two other bands tried to and didn't make it, which also isn't uncommon.

In a country without any Internet culture, promotion and distribution is mostly hand-to-hand and by word of mouth. Getting music from overseas is easier than it once was but still requires resourcefulness: When Chapet (of the Brutal Beatdown label) discovered I was coming to Cuba, he had me bring a flash drive with 50 or so albums on it.

Then there's the challenge of spreading the gospel worldwide. As the rest of the world's music industry moves online, uploading and downloading music here is nearly impossible. "There is no Internet here, so no one knows you," says Fanny Tachin, bassist for Hipnosis. "Nobody knows there are bands here."

One website, Cuba-Metal.com, run by a Cuban expat living in Spain, has become a good clearinghouse for music and information, but it's inaccessible to most Cubans themselves. Chapet has had some success drawing attention from abroad: Although Brutal Beatdown hasn't sold many copies of its two releases—the *Not Salsa* compilation, plus an album by veteran death-grindcore act Combat Noise—it has gotten some favorable notices on foreign blogs and in European metal magazines. Brutal Fest has grown into a ten-day tour around Cuba and now also features foreign artists. This year's festival, in mid-August, will include, for the first time, an American band, the New Orleans horrorcore group She's Still Dead.



But as Blinder's Eric Domenech points out, this is the exception, not the rule. "We don't get a lot of bands from other countries coming to Cuba." Mostly, he says, because it's a money-losing proposition. "They have to pay for everything. But that would be our opportunity to interchange with other bands. When they go home, they would talk about our Cuban scene."

Then there's the inability of Cuban bands to tour abroad. While it's theoretically possible to be granted permission—a formal invitation is required from a promoter or an institution,

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From left: Switch in Old Havana; metal-scene epicenter Maxim Rock; fans at 666 Fest; at home with Dionicio Arce of Zeus, Cuba's biggest metal band

crafting a scientific arsenal of speaker cabinets and modified power amps. (DeMaio's interview with SPIN was abruptly rescheduled after he blew up three amplifiers that morning.) All in the name of good old vindictiveness.

"I realized that the people who run nightclubs are only interested in getting people on the dance floor, getting them hot and sweaty, and selling drinks," he says. "When I realized that I was not going to become a human jukebox, I swore a vow of revenge against club owners that treat the bands like shit. Whenever somebody would tell us to turn down, I would turn up as loud as I could. I'm just gonna build the highest quality backline you can and blow these joints down, just pack the places so good that they'll shut the fuck up while we lift the roof off these shitholes."

A record producer as well as a musician, DeMaio wears earplugs, gets his hearing checked regularly, and encourages his audience to do the same. So, can we get a letter from your ear doctor? DeMaio laughs, then quips, "He died when we invited him to a show." ■

Killah Instinct

« Continued from page 61

"It just takes a lot for me to be excited," she explains. "Like, even if I get a massage, it's gotta be fucking *hard*. What's the point? I can rub lotion on myself, thanks." She pauses, laughs, and adds, "You gotta do something amazing, because there's too much of everything now, anyway. If you're going to fucking do it, go hard. That's kind of how I felt on the boat."

White has learned that which scares the crap out of you only makes you stronger, and she's been making herself uncomfortable in the name of art. She corresponded with Earl Sweatshirt via Twitter about a collaboration ("It's weird, I'm not that type of person"). She trades texts with Jay-Z ("I get embarrassed because he's really witty and I'm not. I miss every joke and then he just stops writing me back"). She introduces her dancers, Desiree and Monica, to zany moves ("It originally started where I was doing most of the choreography, because who dances like that?").

And for the *Master of My Make-Believe* album cover, she posed in front of the Wiley painting crammed into a gold Alexander Wang bodysuit and too-tight heels, then bound her breasts and dressed up like a man. Talk about a picture of discomfort—and power. It's an image of domination that she spliced together from source material as disparate as Stanley Kubrick and Wes Anderson (she digs his films' visual symmetry) and *Coming to America* (she just happens to have it on her laptop).

Albums may be audio business cards these days, as someone recently told White, but she still slaves over them. "I want to be the one in the history books," she says. "I want to be the one whose records are classics and you can always listen to them. I don't want to make trendy little songs that are here and gone."

Popularity can slip away as easily as a set of hubcaps on a Brooklyn street, but now that she's fashioned her own crown, Santi's not going to

abdicate any real or imaginary thrones anytime soon. "People want my power and they want my station," she yelped at the Music Hall, marching around the stage to the relentless racket of "Go!" "Storm my winter palace, but they couldn't take it."

Cue the big-ass smile. ■

Red Menace

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plus someone has to put up the money—the only band I spoke with who'd actually completed the process were Zeus, who have played in France and Spain. The rest had lots of stories of near misses: lost paperwork, passports that didn't come through in time, money that was never raised. Even if all the travel restrictions were lifted tomorrow, financial reality would keep most bands trapped on the island. Since Fidel Castro passed power to Raúl in 2008, there have been some economic reforms and a slight easing of regulations, but nothing that's made much difference in the lives of ordinary Cubans.

"There have been certain changes but not the necessary ones," says Eric Domenech. "It's a very slow process. The rest of the world is opening up right now, but there are very old ideas here. The people that run the country are old and orthodox."

Few I spoke with have much hope that even the demise of the Castros will make a difference. When I ask Domenech what changes he'd like to see, he laughs and shakes his head. "I'll go to jail if I say. It's too many. I think I'm not going to live to see the changes I want."

Besides hosting concerts, Maxim Rock serves as a rehearsal space for many bands. On my final afternoon in Cuba, I return to the venue, where Escape are beginning practice. One of the guitarists has his instrument upside down on his lap and is working on the back of it with a screwdriver. Alejandro Padron, the band's drummer, strips off his shirt and pounds out double-time rhythms on his small kit. Once everyone else joins in, the force of sound is overwhelming. The sextet's music might be defined broadly as thrash, but there are elements of hardcore and industrial at play too, and the songs are surprisingly dynamic, with a keyboard adding hints of melody. The aggressive and often baldly political language in songs like "Simbolo de Libertad" ("Symbol of Freedom"), "Ahora o Nunca" ("Now or Never"), and especially "Rebellion," which features lyrics that all but call for an uprising (one section translates roughly as "Rebellion / The only way / No more pain / No more fear / These changes are inevitable"), has helped make them one of Cuba's most beloved metal bands.

"We're just saying what we're seeing," says Padron. "This is our point of view. And they haven't stopped us yet."

This seems like progress, but many here are suspicious. There's a sense that the government tolerates some criticism from the metal scene because it's small and therefore not a threat. With the Cuban Rock Agency and Maxim Rock,

the state provides the community with just enough oxygen to survive, but not enough to thrive and grow.

"They created this place [Maxim Rock] and the agency as a way to get the metalheads all together in one place and only one place," says Escape's frontman Yando Coy.

As Dionicio Arce puts it, "Maxim Rock is a hell of a good place, but we are buried there. We can't work anywhere else."

In this way, the government's approach toward the scene feels devilishly clever: They're allowing a measure of freedom, while ensuring that the metalheads remain nothing more than a tiny, noisy, impotent rabble.

"It looks like we're in a dollhouse having fun," says Chlover's drummer Acosta of the shows at Maxim Rock. "We're not dangerous. At least that's what they think."

Chlover vocalist Michel Hernández goes further. "They look at us like we're dark people with tattoos," he says. "But we're a voice of a big part of the youth. We know what we're saying and we know what we're doing. We're not nobodies."

But as these artists struggle for more freedom and attention, both from Cuba and the world, the bitter ends faced by El Patio de Maria and Cuba's first metal band, Venus, as well as the ongoing struggles of Porno Para Ricardo's Gorki Águila, stand as cautionary tales for those who dream of turning this scene into a real movement. Still, hope endures.

"Things will get bigger," says Escape's guitarist Justo Valdes. "Society will get more open. Everything will be better."

He sounds more prayerful than confident, but even if he's right, when will it happen? In this place of supposed permanent *revolucion*, the gears of incremental change grind too slowly.

Back onstage at their Maxim Rock rehearsal, Escape are whipping through "Rebellion," which dates back almost a decade, but seems to grow more pointed as time crawls by. Yando Coy, his left foot balanced on a monitor, stares into the empty room at an imaginary audience, clutching the microphone to his mouth. "¿Cuántos años mas?" he hollers, veins bulging visibly from his neck. "How many more years?"

The band brings the song to a crashing climax. Then, for a moment, the room goes silent. Coy takes a deep breath, turns back to his bandmates, and practice continues. ■

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