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MUSIC: FEATURE

**Killswitch Engage,
Shadows Fall and Lamb of
God**



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Brutal youth: Lamb of God (Randy Blythe, second from left)

Black wind, fire and steel

By [Omar Perez](#)

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When MTV's "Headbangers Ball" went off the air in the early '90s, rock fans still holding on to the last scraps of metal the corporate giant threw their way were left in the cold. Sure, what started out as a somewhat interesting Saturday night of hard rock and metal videos presented by the genre's finest eventually turned into *ad nauseam* airings of Winger and Poison videos by moronic host Riki Rachtman. But added to the fact that their beloved thrash and ass-rock was being squeezed out of pop culture by the Eddie Vedder era, the show's disappearance was a final, disappointing blow.

Eight years later, MTV2 has brought back the show, introducing a more credible host, Hatebreed vocalist Jamey Jasta. In typical MTV fashion, the network has embraced the very genre it once dismissed, and is vigorously promoting the new "Headbangers Ball Tour," featuring Killswitch Engage, Shadows Fall and Lamb of God. While certainly appealing to the new generation of metal fans, the nostalgic pull of the show's name is surely meant to act as a homing beacon for the scattered metal masses of yore.

"I remember going out to parties and racing home on Saturday nights to make it back home to watch 'Headbangers Ball,'" says Mike D'Antonio, bassist of Killswitch Engage. "Now we're part of the tour. It's pretty cool."

The tour, which the bands put together themselves before MTV2 smelled potential profits and endorsed it, finds the three bands alternating the headlining spot each night. It's one of the first high-profile package tours in recent years that offers metal without a prefix, opting for acts that stick to the basics of the form: heavy crunch, jackhammer drums and adrenaline that's not FM-synthetic.

"There's so many genres of metal right now," says Lamb of God vocalist Randy Blythe. "You've got speed metal, black metal. I hesitate to use the word because it's not metal, but some people say nü-metal, which is audial pollution. If you listen to metal, and you know what real metal is, you recognize it when you hear it."

"If you wanted to have a good time back in the day, you'd see Slayer. Poison was the band you'd see with your girlfriend so you could get laid later."

For a while, metal seemed taboo in America, and its reach was confined to a voracious yet underestimated underground. Once upon a time, acts like Iron Maiden sold out venues like Madison Square Garden without the benefit of radio or television support. After Metallica and L.A. glam-rock briefly pushed various aspects of the genre into the mainstream, metal was quick to retreat back underground. Until recently, one might have thought authentic metal could only be unearthed in Europe's darkened corners.

"It went so far underground it was practically underwater for a while," says Shadows Fall vocalist Phil LeBonte. "Now the true metal is coming back."

"Supporting metal was not the cool thing to do for some time, so it's nice to see a lot of those bands get the recognition and respect they deserve."

D'Antonio says Jasta brings the MTV2 show more credibility, given that his band is among the few respected heavy acts signed to a major label today, and one whose fans don't knock the band for being there.

"Hatebreed signing to a major label opened a lot of doors for everybody," D'Antonio says. "I think people are taking this genre a little more seriously again. Hopefully, its future will be good."

D'Antonio comments on the rumor that Sully Erna from Godsmack will replace Jasta as the show's host, saying he hopes Erna doesn't turn into this year's Rachtman.

"That was one thing I couldn't stand about Headbangers Ball: Riki Rachtman," D'Antonio says. "[MTV management] probably told him, 'Here's a couple of bucks; go out and get yourself a new identity.' He cut his hair and got some tattoos.

"He was trying to be down, but we all knew what was going on behind the scenes."