

On enjoying the mystery of creation



Musician Max Cavalera (Sepultura, Soulfly) discusses overcoming obstacles, collaborating with family, and becoming a musical ambassador.

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As told to J. Bennett, 3201 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Beginnings](#), [Adversity](#), [Identity](#), [Collaboration](#).

Was there a specific moment when you went from just enjoying music to deciding you wanted to play?

I didn't even like music when I was a kid. Soccer was my only passion until we saw Queen. That Queen concert changed our lives. Me and my brother Iggor became rock and rollers the next day. It was crazy, the power that one show had. It's quite unbelievable.

A little bit later, we met some older guys that were wearing Black Sabbath and Deep Purple t-shirts. One of them took us to see the AC/DC movie, *Let There Be Rock*. We saw that in a movie theater, and it was awesome. Then I also went to see the Led Zeppelin movie, *The Song Remains The Same*, which was really cool.

It wasn't until we actually went to a concert of a Brazilian metal band called Dorsal Atlântica, about eight hours drive from our city. We went by bus, and that's when it really hit home. Seeing Brazilian guys doing that made me and Iggor realize, "If they can do it, we can do it." They sounded awesome, like Venom and Hellhammer, so we jumped on that. That's what we wanted to do.

How did you and Iggor start playing instruments?

Iggor was already good at drumming. He had been doing that since he was a kid. I started messing around with the guitar, just figuring out chords and stuff. I remember learning Black Sabbath's "Heaven and Hell"—that's probably the first riff I ever learned. It's a little tricky, but I got it. And it was really satisfying to me that I could play that riff good. I felt empowered.

So, I ended up trying other riffs. I remember getting Deep Purple's "Smoke on the Water," and then Zeppelin's "Whole Lotta Love." That kickstarted my passion for riffs that never went away. It's a lifelong addiction that's never going to go away, and it started back then.

What do you remember about writing your first song?

Roger Taylor from Queen had a solo record, *Fun In Space*. I loved that record, and still do. So, I went and wrote a rocking song similar to that. I was just pummeling the E string to death—a little bit of chugging. Then I realized if you put your palm close to the strings, you could get that muted sound. After I wrote that, I got together with Iggor and our old singer and we wrote some of the first Sepultura tracks. They were all in Portuguese, but the titles translated to "Antichrist" and "Friday the 13th."

What was the first Sepultura show like?

We played at this bar, all out of tune and crazy. We didn't care. There were two guys with Motörhead shirts in the bar—they were the only people that liked it. Everybody else was like, "Dude, this is garbage. This is fucking horrible." But those two guys told us to keep it up. We always had an attitude, like not knowing how to play well is not going to stop us from doing the thing we love. I think that's a punk attitude, actually. You don't need to be a virtuoso to make a good riff. It's like they say, you just need three chords and the truth. I think we had more attitude than musicianship—like 90 percent attitude, 10 percent musicianship.

What did you feel like during that first performance?

I felt such a rush. It was crazy. It was like I became possessed, like I went into a different dimension. It's hard to explain to people what it felt like, but it was this adrenaline rush and this crazy feeling. And even though it was a show where nobody even liked what we were doing, just being onstage with a couple of lights and the distorted guitar, out of tune ... just hearing the noise that we were making had such an adrenaline rush. When it was done, I wanted more.

Playing live is like a drug—you're chasing that feeling. You want to get that again. The more we played, the better we got and the more of that rush you needed. It's really, really similar to a drug, actually. And that was cool, man. That's why my nickname became Max Possessed. I loved the band Possessed, but it was also referring to the state I would get in when I played those shows. Even today, I am a totally different person onstage than I am offstage. Offstage, I'm very mellow, very easygoing. Get me on the stage, and it's like the flick of a switch. I become somebody else. It's pretty powerful stuff.

You've been in many bands and projects over the decades. Do you have a creative philosophy or an attitude that ties everything together?

The thing I love about music the most is the mystery. I don't want to find out why I sing a certain way, and why those riffs, put it in certain order, make a good song. Even the silence between notes is sometimes very important. All those little details that make music magic, I don't want to know what causes that. I'm not interested in finding out the scientific reasons for those things.

I am interested that it's there and exists, and I never went away from it. It's always there, no matter what projects I get in. No matter what stage, I get nervous before a show. Even today, after almost 40 years of doing it, still get the butterflies in the stomach right before I play. I still get nervous. But that's great. I love to feel all those things, man. Those are all part of being a musician. I'm very intrigued by the mystery of music, and it's fascinating what I get from other bands, from other people, from other music. And then people get it from my music, and it's fucking cool.

Your lyrics have a pretty consistent thread of social and political observation. When did that first become important to you?

I think the first time we actually tried something like that was on [Sepultura's 1989 album] *Beneath the Remains*. The first two records were very black metal, with all satanic lyrics. *Schizophrenia* was in between, but it was still stuff related to psychosis and losing-your-mind type stuff. *Beneath the Remains* is where finally we broke out of the idea that you need to copy somebody. It's better to do your own thing.

"Inner Self" is the song that made that possible. I never had a diary—I still don't—but if I had one back then, that song would be like a page ripped out of it: "Walking in these dirty streets with hate in my mind. Feeling the scorn of the world, I will not follow your rules." That was my reaction to the world around me. That was my life in Sao Paulo at that time. "The streets are dirty, I'm full of hate, but I will not do what society's telling me to do. Fuck you!" So, that's the first time we had something that's more ours.

"Beneath the Remains" is an anti-war song, very influenced by U2. I was listening a lot to their *War* album at

that time. And then "Stronger Than Hate," that's a hatred towards society song. "Mass Hypnosis" was about the media, because the Brazilian media hated Sepultura. They were like, "Do you want to see the worst band in the world? Go see these guys." That was a badge of honor to us. They're talking shit, but they're talking shit about us. It started with that record, and then I never stopped.

Beneath the Remains was your first album released outside of Brazil. As you became more internationally known, did you start to feel it was your duty to speak about things like that? You've been famous for a long time now, and you have a platform.

I think it was a combination of duty and also a chance to show people things about Brazil. We could show the world some stuff that they will never probably find out about Brazil if it wasn't through our songs. I met a lot of people that actually visited Brazil because of Sepultura, and that makes me very happy. Some people do pilgrimages to Brazil just to see some of the stuff that we did there, some of the locations from videos we shot there.

You do have a platform to say your opinion, but I was never into the whole idea that my point of view is the only good one. If you agree with me, cool. If you disagree with me, that's cool, too. We're still friends, man. In fact, you are welcome to disagree. It opens a line of communication. We can actually talk, and that's great. But in terms of the Brazilian stuff, without sounding pompous or big-headed, I feel like an ambassador of Brazil to the world. I think we did more for Brazil than most people from Brazil did. But I wanted people to see the other side of Brazil—not the touristic paradise and beautiful oceans and forests, but the dark side. We were showing the ugly side of Brazil, and for me that was important.

As far as I know, Sepultura were the first band to put the spotlight on—and actually collaborate with—the indigenous peoples of Brazil. What was the spark for that?

My mother had told me that we had indigenous roots ourselves. My great-grandmother was Indian, from the rainforest. I've seen pictures of her—she looked very exotic. That always stuck with me. And then, since I was very young, I was always into different places and exotic locations. And I was really intrigued by different cultures.

When we had the chance to do *Roots*, that was pretty much created out of a drunken haze of me watching a movie in my living room. I had an epiphany: "We should go record with a Brazilian tribe." The name of the movie was *At Play In The Fields of the Lord*, and it's about three hours and a half long.

I told [his wife and Sepultura's then-manager] Gloria, "We've got to go do that." Her first reaction was like, "We're not Michael Jackson. We can't afford that." But I was not going to let that go. I was going to find a way. So, I just started contacting people. She helped me a lot with it, and little by little we found the right people.

Your initial idea may have come from a drunken impulse, but it quickly came to mean so much more.

I think we were trying to show the world and the Brazilian people that indigenous music is the first music of Brazil. It was there before samba, before bossa nova. So, that became the heart of the record, the middle of *Roots*. That was the message of the album. I think that made the whole thing exotic and cool and exciting, the whole project. It took on a certain life force and became super intriguing for people. I'm sure it really fucked with some metalheads, like, "What the fuck? Why is there a Brazilian tribe on a metal album?" But I love that.

It took a lot of people by surprise, and it's still a very controversial record. There's people that straight-up hate *Roots*, and people that love *Roots*. Dave Grohl worships it, but I love that it divides people. It came from my own curiosity with other cultures, from when I was a kid, and I wanted to do more. So, I ended up doing more in Soulfly with Navajo culture. And I think it can be taken even further in the future. I think the idea is still good.

I can only imagine what it was like, flying into the rainforest to record with an indigenous tribe that's wary of

outsiders. What did you learn from that experience?

It was pretty mind blowing, man, because it became bigger than the record itself. It became bigger than ourselves, bigger than music. It was *National Geographic* type stuff. All of a sudden, we were in the middle of nowhere. We flew in on these prop planes and had a meeting with the chief of the tribe. In fact, we just had him at our show in Sao Paulo a couple weeks ago. We hadn't seen him in 25 years, but he came to the show, and he did a speech to the crowd. It was amazing.

But the feeling of being there was confusing. We were stressing about recording. We had a generator with only so much power to record. Once the battery was gone, that's it. If we got it, we got it. If we didn't, tough shit. So, we were a little bit stressed out with that, but it was great. Just being part of all the rituals that they did ... they painted all of us with spit. They had a coconut cut in half with some kind of earth paint, and with spit they painted all of us. When me and Gloria flew back, we didn't want to shower. We went with the painted faces in the airplane. I think people almost had a heart attack in the airplane. "What the fuck is going on here? Look at these two lunatics." But it was a great experience, man. It's hard to put into words. It was a life-changing experience.

You're playing with your brother Iggor in Cavalera Conspiracy. And of course, you played with him back in the day in Sepultura. You play with your son Zion in Soulfly and your other son Igor in Go Ahead and Die. What are the pros and cons of working with family in a creative setting?

Mostly it's positive. I love it. It was an old dream of mine, when my sons were born: I was like, "I hope they become metalheads first. And then I hope they become musicians. And then the third wish is, I hope they're good musicians so we can jam, and we can actually throw down and really write stuff together."

They were born into this life, man. They went on tour with us when they were really young. I have vivid memories of Zion and Igor sleeping in Black Sabbath guitar cases while Ozzy's singing in the background, and they're sleeping with blankets and headphones. And I'm sitting next to them watching Black Sabbath and going, "Holy shit, I made it. I really made it, man. Not in a million years did I think this is going to happen to me." So, they know about life on the road, the sacrifices, everything. The chances of them becoming doctors or lawyers were very minimal.

I tell them all the time that it's a rough life. It's hard, hard work. But the stuff you get from it is mind-blowing. You don't get it anywhere else. I think we created a kind of mini-empire, with Gloria at the helm as the queen of the tribe. We created a heavy metal family. We created our tribe, and it's one of the things I'm most proud of.

How do you compare working in Soulfly, where you're writing most of the material, to a more collaborative process like Killer Be Killed or Nailbomb, in which you're working with other people who are also songwriters?

I'd say there's a little bit more freedom in the other projects, as far as trying different stuff. I think Soulfly has a certain amount of expectation that has been determined by the years we've been together and the 12 records we have out. But when I do something like Killer Be Killed, I get to really mingle with the other musicians and pick their brains. I like to jam with everybody, you know? I think that you could me in a room with Willie Nelson, and in five minutes you're going to have a country-metal banger. It's just one of those things. I get so passionate about it, and I'm curious about how other musicians do things.

I got into this because there are no rules. That's why I quit school, man. And I didn't want to work for anybody because I hate fucking rules and I hate authority. In metal, you make your own rules. That's what I love about it. With that mentality, I can have as many projects as I want. I can do whatever the fuck I want. And I think a lot of fans enjoy it. They get more music out of me. When I'm dead, it's finished. I was put here to write music, to play music. So, I'm doing that.

You've overcome more obstacles than most to get where you are today: Military dictatorships in Brazil, the breakup of Sepultura in the '90s, being estranged from your brother for many years, your father passing when you

were young, and the problems you had with alcohol. Do you have any thoughts on how painful experiences affect the creative process?

I think adversity creates great art. I really believe that. I think when you have your back against the wall, good stuff's going to come out of it. Sometimes I don't love the situation—sometimes I even hate where I was when I was making some records. I can go back to making *Beneath the Remains* and remember being so stressed out that if nobody liked this record, we were done, our career is over. So even then, I had all that going on in my head. *We need to fucking succeed. This album needs to be amazing.*

When I made the first Soulfly record, there was a huge amount of pressure. It was the first album I made without Sepultura. I don't think people even understand the pressure I was under. It was really me against the world. I had to prove to the world that I was still the same guy, that I could still write those songs. And I didn't have any hope. I was a fully hopeless person. But that also meant I didn't have any fear. Today, that's some people's favorite record I've ever done. But I had to be in an uncomfortable state of mind to make it.

If you are comfortable and everything is great—life is beautiful, there's no drama, there's nothing wrong with your life—it's going to be very hard to make a really good record, I think. To me, there's always some kind of adversity connected to the best art. And I'm okay with that.

Max Cavalera recommends

Hotboxin with Mike Tyson (podcast) - "He does an episode with his therapist that has some of the craziest stories I ever heard."

Mandy (film) - "I just saw this for the first time last night, and it fucked me up."

Unto Others - *Strength* (album) "It's a combination of gothic and metal. Really well made."

Zeal & Ardor - *Zeal & Ardor* (album) "I like all their records, but this one is amazing."

Name

Max Cavalera

Vocation

musician

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