

METAL MECCA

STORY BY Justin M. Norton PHOTOS BY Raymond Ahner

An exhaustive
Decibel tour of the East Bay's
historic extreme landscape



D.R.I. bassist Harald Oimoen bounds into the lobby of an elementary school administrative office. Petite backpacks and sneakers line the hallway. It's September 27, the 26th anniversary of Metallica bassist Cliff Burton's death, and Oimoen is leading a group of us on an unofficial tour of East Bay metal landmarks. Our first stop is a school where a Burton memorial is tucked in a hidden thicket near a soccer field, the same school where his mother once taught. ¶ In retrospect, it's probably not best to have a tall, graying metalhead saunter into an elementary school, especially wearing a huge backpatch featuring the conjoined demon twins from *Bonded by Blood*. I'm surprised they don't send Oimoen to detention or ask for a hall pass. ¶ The receptionist, who has likely seen similar bedraggled visitors, says: "Normally we don't let you see Cliff Burton during school hours," like Burton is in the back lot jamming. Since it's a school day and children abound, we politely exit. We agree on our way out that dB (jeans and T-shirt) should have asked for permission to roam the grounds. Our intrepid photographer returns later in the day to get the photo. ¶ The Burton memorial is the first stop on a daylong journey into the heart of East Bay metal country with Oimoen and Brian Lew, who photographed the earliest days of the thrash scene, later collected in *Murder in the Front Row: Shots From the Bay Area Thrash Metal Epicenter* (Bazillion Points). Along the way, we met or talked to people have been making the East Bay special for decades, and charmed our way into Metallica's old house. Join us and discover why the region produced (and is still home to) some of the most inimitable metal ever recorded—and find out where to go if you decide to visit.

THE METAL MECCA

A compelling argument could be made that American heavy metal began in the East Bay. For those unfamiliar with the region, it's the cluster of cities and towns in Northern California across the bay from San Francisco, including Oakland, Berkeley, part of Contra Costa County and the surrounding areas. It's where Metallica moved when Los Angeles just wasn't heavy enough to accommodate their uncompromising music. From their base in the El Cerrito, just a block from a Burger King and a gas station, they conquered the music world.

"For me, the East Bay thrash scene was family," says Metallica guitarist/vocalist James Hetfield, who lived for years in El Cerrito as the band grew from club mainstay to arena fixture. "We had our own way of doing things. Our own way of music, our own way of talking, our own way of thinking and, of course, our own way of partying. Aggressive music bonded us no matter how tough times were. It was truly us against the world."

While Metallica is the region's best-known export, they are only part of the story. The East Bay is also where the short-lived makeup-wearing Slayer lineup played in the early '80s.

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JAMES HETFIELD

It's where Paul Baloff, Gary Holt and Exodus stoked the earliest pits. The photos on the back of the Possessed album *Seven Churches* were shot in a backyard in Pinole (by Oimoen). The three founding members of Neurosis met in a warehouse in Emeryville—an area now crowded with high-priced condominiums, cookware shops and maternity boutiques. Neurosis returned home last fall for a rare one-night Oakland appearance at the Fox Theater for the *Honor Found in Decay* release party. The East Bay is also home to Autopsy, Testament, Death Angel and about a fourth of the bands in your record collection. Creativity and risk-taking flourish here.

HEADING OUT TO THE HIGHWAY

It's an early fall morning. Decibel picks up Oimoen in front of his apartment, located about five minutes from downtown Oakland. "Harald O" is the perfect guide; he loves to talk and has memories older than most of dB's readers. It seems like he was cryogenically frozen in 1984, and has just emerged from ice like Captain America to discover that we listen to music on computers, and that bands like Black Veil Brides are inconceivably popular.

In 20 years, when he's a septuagenarian, Oimoen will be taking tourists on bus tours [▶]



The bell still tolls
Burton's schoolyard memorial (l)
and childhood home (r)

↓ Let the righteous ones in

Lew (l) and Oimoen infiltrate the "Metallica mansion" as it stands today



of metal landmarks. We share laughs that Decibel drives a Subaru hatchback with a Leviathan CD in the front seat, and talk about Oimoen's infamous Maryland Deathfest appearance (he drunkenly danced on stage during a Watain set and received a beatdown). "I had a pentagram-shaped wound from that," he says.

We get coffee and meet Lew (a.k.a. Umlaut) and photographer Raymond Ahner in Castro Valley, a suburb about 15 minutes past Oakland. Our first stop is the Cliff Burton memorial (address withheld at family request to maintain privacy).

As mentioned, things didn't go so well, so our next stop is Burton's childhood home, 20444 Stanton Ave. in Castro Valley. Burton grew up in Apartment 1 on the first floor of this modest property. His parents managed the building.

Castro Valley—a suburb on the outskirts of the East Bay—looks like it hasn't changed much in a quarter-century, despite the presence of Chipotle and Starbucks. It's daunting to think about the riffs that might have been conceived in a place you'd normally pass by without a second thought.

INSIDE METALLICA'S BIRTHPLACE

We head back east. Metallica's formative years were spent at the "Metallica Mansion" at 3132 Carlson Ave., in El Cerrito, a working class town that's gentrified in recent years. While Oimoen isn't the best person to send first into a school, he's somehow befriended the homeowner, who inconceivably lets us inside and lights a hookah.

Lew hasn't been inside in 30 years, when he spent quality time taking pictures of Lars Ulrich, Hetfield, Burton, Kirk Hammett and (for real) Dave Mustaine. Burton's first rehearsal with

Metal up your ass

[l] Oimoen christens Hetfield's latrine; [r] Ruthie's Inn, all "lit" up



Lew says. "When Metallica left on tour, people just partied here. They used it as a party house."

It's an exciting moment, but also bittersweet. Years have passed, lives have changed, relationships faded. Homes hold stories that are often forgotten for later generations of residents. This one has many. "There's so much history in these walls. Now, it's just a house," Lew says. "It's been remodeled. They once had abandoned, trashed cars parked right on the lawn."

Metallica was in this living room. "Do you know the history of the house?" he asks the owner. Lew is amazed at the facelift—and the cleanliness. "It looks nice now," he says.

During Metallica's residence, the mansion—actually just two rooms and a bathroom—was a sty. Now, you'd let your younger sister stay overnight. The floors are the same, but it's 21st century chic, spartan and modern. A garage

once used for practice has been razed; condominiums have taken the spot. A band photo from the *Master of Puppets* era was shot on a couch in the living room. There's a new couch that looks straight out of the IKEA showroom.

The bathroom here housed more partying casualties than Lew can remember. It needs to be asked: How many people puked in this bathroom in the 1980s? "Oh, hundreds, if not thousands,"

ELSEWHERE IN BERKELEY

It's time to move on. We follow San Pablo Avenue from El Cerrito toward Berkeley, turn right and arrive at 924 Gilman St. It's a nonprofit, volunteer club to this day, and hosts events like the Speed Trials, where grind bands play as fast they can for 15 minutes and get offstage. In metal history, it's perhaps best known as the place [▶]

CAUGHT IN THE WEB

STEVE VON TILL of NEUROSIS on the interconnected world of East Bay extreme music

Neurosis was hatched in a live-work warehouse in Emeryville near Oakland, and came of age in the East Bay, playing some of their earliest shows at the all-ages 924 Gilman collective. Vocalist/guitarist Steve Von Till shared a few memories of the East Bay. —JUSTIN NORTON

What was it like growing up in the East Bay music scene?

We were all inspired by what was happening. Some of us came from a punk background, and some of us came from the metal world. There was so much cross-pollination going on that people take for granted now. Back then, it was different to combine the nihilism of punk and the guitar sounds of metal.

Did you ever feel overshadowed, at least early on, by the enormous presence of thrash?

It would be hard for us to say, because we were in our own little world. There's a tradition in the Bay Area of having a deeper psychedelic underbelly happening. That was the case with metal or punk, just like it was back in the acid test days. There's something in the water there; part of it is just environmental.

What role did Gilman Street play in the band's development?

The Bay Area has always had a strong underground punk scene. There were legit clubs like Ruthie's and the Mabuhay Gardens in San Francisco. But the warehouses and smaller spaces, the free-for-alls, is where things took hold. Gilman made this phenomenon legitimate. Back then, the scene was less together than it is today. There wasn't a place where you could see such a variety of shows until Gilman. It was a crazy mix. You would never know what was happening; you could have Neurosis playing with Green Day.

Why did you move away from the Bay Area?

I can't live in a city environment anymore. I want to worry more about the four-legged than the two-legged.

Yet all of the special Neurosis shows are held in the East Bay or San Francisco.

You can't shake where you come from. It's an exciting place and it made us what we are today. Despite the extreme amounts of humanity, there's still a cultural core that's inspiring. I'd just prefer to visit.





Neurosis came of age, beginning with *Pain of Mind*, and promptly lost most of their early fan base when they debuted the *Souls at Zero* material. Other history: Jello Biafra once got his ass kicked at the club by attackers calling him a "sellout," and a little band called Green Day played here before becoming *Rolling Stone's* house band.

Historic venues are scattered throughout the city; all of them are now closed. Ruthie's Inn, at 2618 San Pablo Ave., in Berkeley, is now the site of a Black Oak Books. It was home to the earliest East Bay thrash shows. The Keystone at 2119 University Ave., in Berkeley, the site of Slayer's first Bay Area show with makeup, is an apartment building. The Devil has had to make space for yuppies in the Bay Area before; in San Francisco, Church of Satan Founder Anton LaVey's famous "Black House" was razed to build pricey condos.

SHOVEL-HEADED BURGER MACHINES

We reconvene on Telegraph Avenue near the University of California. We are close to the former site of the Barrington Hall, 2315 Dwight Way in Berkeley, a former student co-op at the University of California that hosted Black Flag, the Dead Kennedys and others, as well as "wine dinners" where guests were served punched spiked with hallucinogens. Primus, featuring onetime Possessed guitarist Larry LaLonde, wrote the song "Fizzle Fry" about the experience.

We meet up at Rasputin, 2403 Telegraph Ave., in Berkeley, one of the remaining physical record stores in the East Bay, along with Amoeba (down the street at 2455 Telegraph). In the past, locals convened at Tower Records, but that's long gone. We scour the extensive metal section, and dB scores a limited edition red vinyl copy of

➤ Bonded by buds

Gary Holt and wife Lisa join the fabulous disaster

Autopsy's Mental Funeral. Decibel tries to convince Harald O. that there are records worth hearing released after Iron Maiden's *Killers*. Oimoen flips through old records, repeatedly finding photos that he shot on the back or in the gatefold. I ask him if he's ever been paid. "No, but it's still really cool to see them," he says.

We finish and run into our special lunch guests: Gary Holt of Exodus and his wife, Lisa. We're hungry, but, unlike many college towns, Telegraph lacks options. We end up at Pappy's, one of the few places serving beer with lunch. Everyone scores a burger and grabs a beer, and we sit out back. It's an unusually warm fall afternoon. For Oimoen and Lew, it's like catching up with old friends.

The conversation quickly enters interesting turf. There's a consensus that Varg Vikernes wouldn't have fared well in the Texas justice system. Holt and his wife talk about hilarious YouTube videos they've seen recently. Lew says later how interesting it is to see Holt and his wife together; he knew Lisa years earlier in the metal scene, and thanked her in his zine *Whiplash*.

Holt, who was preparing to leave for a tour with Slayer filling in for the still-recovering Jeff Hanneman, has lots of memories of Berkeley and the neighborhood. Holt would wander with Kirk Hammett to the People's Park, 2556 Haste St., in Berkeley—a hub of the free speech movement—before they would start partying. "We used to get a six-pack and walk over there and get a hit of acid, and it was on," Holt says, laughing.

METAL MILITIA

The group finishes and convenes on Telegraph Avenue. Harald O. heads to work at a nearby comic book and graphic arts store. It's an interesting moment. I didn't grow up anywhere near the East Bay; I was in a somewhat rural town more than 3,000 miles away, imagining what it was like to live in California. And yet here I am, talking to someone who helped create part of the music I grew up with. On the surface, there appears to be little in common; a few kids probably wonder what Holt is doing talking to the pair of us. Lew and I look like we could be teaching undergraduates down the block. There's a palpable connection nonetheless; this crazy, fucked up music binds us together.

Later, I ask Lew if that connection is what made the Bay Area scene so special. He agrees—with a caveat. "The East Bay has always been more blue-collar than other parts of the Bay Area, which has given it a rougher edge and reputation," he says. "At the same time, I think that blue-collar ethic also fueled a stronger sense of local pride and bond. The East Bay shows were always more dangerous than shows in San Francisco because the clubs were in bad neighborhoods.

"However, even if you weren't from the East Bay, you were accepted as one by the locals because you were in places like Ruthie's Inn raging with them. Some of my oldest friends now were those East Bay locals who I met back then. It was like being accepted into a tribe of kindred spirits." [dB]