

music

this week's essential reading

{ 'I just now realise how stupid we are' by Morgan Houzel, *The Motley Fool*

'I've learnt that people are terrible at predicting their own emotions. You will be more fearful when the market is crashing and more greedy when it is surging than you think'



The Body, electrifying

Heavy metal isn't just about big riffs and big hair – it's a state of mind, which few bands exemplify as much as American duo The Body, writes **Andy Battaglia**

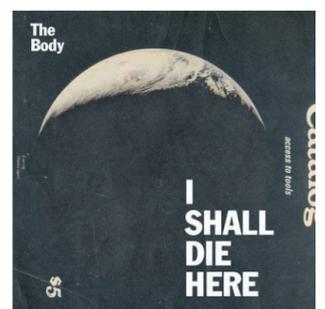
Music by the mysterious and curiously compelling band The Body is brutal in every sense of the word: savage, cruel, inhuman, crude, coarse, harsh, ferocious, taxing, demanding, exhausting, irrational, unreasoning. All those terms of deranged endearment come from a standard dictionary definition of "brutal" as it has been handed down since the 15th century, from origins in Middle English that imply a sort of worldly likeness to a primitive animal state.

There's no mistaking any element of such a list for anything other than intensely unpleasant and disarmingly dark. So what makes brutal music, at least on those most rare and intriguing of occasions, somehow beautiful too? The answer would seem to lurk somewhere in the suggestive notion of the sublime, or a sense of beauty at its most base level – something more like awe. To be awestruck is not necessarily to be charmed or pleased. But it's clear that they're related, like distant cousins if not exactly siblings per se.

The Body make music that is beautiful and sublime and a good deal more. It generally gets classified as heavy metal, but it's the kind of heavy metal that invites a rethink of what heavy metal means. For starters, it's so murky and methodical that it comes across less as a detonation and more like a dirge. It's patient and, unlike most metal, which moves at breakneck speed, ever so subtly slow.

It's also a kind of metal that finds no fateful contradiction in a band that makes an absolutely brutal album titled *I Shall Die Here* and also, in attempts to describe its own sound, boasts a member who utters statements like the following: "I love The Beach Boys – they're probably my favourite band. I'm obsessed with layers and layers of sound." That came from the mouth of the

drummer Lee Buford in an interview with the website Tiny Mix Tapes last year, when The Body began to break out of a fertile realm of the underground where metal and other modes of music-making have come to merge. Sometimes it's the simple intensity of metal more than the conventions of metal that matters most. With The Body, however, it's somehow majestically both. *I Shall Die Here* marks the latest in a series of exhilarating experimental moves for The Body, who got their start in 1999 and, from their current base in the woody American city of Portland, Oregon, have issued more than their fair share of spirit-shaking yowls ever since. The core of the band is a duo: Buford, who plays the drums as well as digital triggers for samples and electronic overlays, and Chip King, who plays guitar and sings. To say that either merely *plays* his instrument, though, is an understatement. Both, rather more accurately, bash, rip, pull, tear, and otherwise manhandle their tools of art, with results that make for a clamour much bigger than would seem possible for two lone beings of any kind. Then there's the matter of King's singing, which is more like a ritual



The Body *I Shall Die Here* RVNG Intl Dh22

scream from an exorcism than a tone of voice invested in things like melody or key. It's impossible to make out any actual words in what he's singing; they get subsumed and spewed out instead in a sort of inhuman shriek. There's no loss, though: what goes missing in the particulars is more than amply communicated in a visceral purging of primeval sounds that don't require the least bit of translation to understand.

And then, in the curious case of *I Shall Die Here*, comes the presence of an unusual collaborator from a genre with seemingly nothing in common with metal in any way. He is an Englishman who goes by the name The Haxan Cloak, and his main habit is electronic music with a lineage at least a little bit related to the club. His style is undeniably sparse and sepulchral by nature, but still, most of its moodiness communes with the more desiccated extremes of dubstep. He has much more in common with Burial or Holy Other than, say, Slayer.

The collaboration happened by way of the US record label RVNG Intl, which as part of a separate project titled FRKWYS has paired acts from disparate spheres to make new sounds together. Neither act knew anything beyond the other's formidable underground reputation. (Of the first album by The Body that he heard, back in 2011, The Haxan Cloak recently told *Fact* magazine: "I thought it was f***** amazing, so brutal.") So the process remained remote, negotiated by email with sounds laid down individually and then sent back and forth.

The result is a metal album that doesn't sound much like a metal album, necessarily. The introductory track *To Carry the Seeds of Death Within Me* opens with an atmospheric mix of slow, plodding drums and an eerie electronic tone like something out of a horror movie, and then the charge comes into full effect with an ushering in of murky guitar that sounds about as heavy as a guitar can sound. It's thickly layered, and gets layered

Buford, left, and Chip King are The Body. Courtesy Adam Heathcott & Sara Padgett Heathcott

all the more until King's voice enters to float in all its anguish over big bass drops and subtly strange electronic textures. It's easy to be oblivious of the meeting of the two worlds, which is another way of saying it's seamless.

The rest of the album circles around the same premise with a wide variety of outcomes. *Alone All the Way* takes a long pause for an extended rumble of metal drums with distended siren sounds in the background. *The Night Knows No Dawn* is about 90 per cent just heavy, thick, thundering chords on a menacing electric guitar. *Hail to Thee, Everlasting Pain* makes the clearest use of The Haxan Cloak's spectral presence with shape-shifting synthetic rhythms.

It's true: parts of it don't sound like conventional heavy metal at all. But in even further truth, neither does most

heavy metal. Over time, few other genres have weathered more reductive and incorrect accusations along the lines of "it all sounds the same"; and especially now, metal is going through a thrilling number of metamorphoses. The Body are an anomaly, to be sure, but anomalies are increasingly the norm.

Another recent metal standout is a collaborative record summoned into existence by Sunn O))) and Ulver, two bands with deep metal pedigrees and equal reputations for heretical behaviour. Sunn O))), from the United States, are masters of monolithic sounds, but many of those sounds are as ambient as they are assaulting. Ulver, for their part, started out making scuzzy, exorciating Norwegian black-metal in the early 1990s before moving, with increasing insistence, to a much more plangent sound marked by keyboards and almost operatic singing.

Terrestrials, the result of the collaboration, starts out with a mournful drone streaked by trumpet off in

the distance, blowing slowly. It could almost be a jazz song. *Western Horn* follows in somewhat more formidable fashion, but it's still a show of subtlety and finesse, with guitar ringing in a sort of nervous quiver over ominous bass notes with lots of space in between. Strings figure in *Eternal Return*, alongside richly emotive singing that sounds somehow elegant and eerie at once.

Maybe that's how metal actually approaches beauty, not only by way of brutal bashing but also by a sense of expectance instilled into the notes that make up metal itself. More than a sound, it's an actual kind of music, with its own patterns and inclinations that invoke telling melodies and moods that incite a sense of fear. We like to be scared. It makes us pay attention. A good shiver can go a long way.

Evidence of the same spirit at work abounds in yet another excellent recent metal aberration, this one featuring Stephen O'Malley from the same band Sunn O))) but this time in collaboration with the polymathic experimenter Oren Ambarchi and Randall Dunn. Originally made to soundtrack a post-apocalyptic science fiction film set in an imagining of the Australian outback, *Shade Themes from Kairos* finds the three sorcerers of sound in full-on jam mode, with a looseness that seems to mix preset structures against flights of wild improvisation. Over five lengthy tracks (one more than 20 minutes), you can hear the music come together and fall apart, sometimes melding into metal and sometimes not. It makes for a scintillating listen full of suspense and release – and a working lesson in the thrills to be divined from sounds sometimes hiding just around the corner.

Andy Battaglia is a regular contributor to *The National*.

playlist

Three more innovative two-piece rock outfits that punch above their weight



Lightning Bolt
Hailing from Rhode Island, this outfit are known for their guerrilla-style performances, playing their loud, aggressive experimental noise-rock on the ground with the crowd gathered around them rather than on a stage. The band, who have released five full-length albums since they formed in 1994, are strongly influenced by Japanese noise rock, Philip Glass and Sun Ra.



Drengé
This English grunge/post-grunge outfit take their name from the Danish word for boys. They rose to prominence after the resignation of Labour MP Tom Watson in 2013 – he wrote in his resignation letter on his blog "be that great Labour leader that you can be, but try to have a real life too. And if you want to see an awesome band, I recommend Drengé."



Death from Above 1979
This sporadically performing, Toronto-based dance-punk/noise-rock outfit formed after meeting at a Sonic Youth concert, although they are also fond of telling people they met in prison or on a pirate ship. The 1979 at the end of their name was chosen in part because they believe it was the last year of the last cool decade.