

What's the first thing you think of when someone says...

Is it drumming Dane Lars Ulrich, hard case vocalist and guitarist James Hetfield or even the dandy highwayman of metal guitarists Kirk Hammett? Nah, go on, admit it, it's suing people, isn't it? Online retailer N2K, distributor Dutch East India Trading Co., British label Outlaw Records (over the sale of an unauthorised live album), Pierre Cardin, Victoria's Secret (who used the name 'Metallica' on lip pencils), French perfume maker Guerlain, the Neiman-Marcus and Bergdorf-Goodman department stores...and that's without mentioning the band's extremely high profile run-in with Napster, portrayed in some circles, rather unfairly as it happens, as suing their own fans. Drummer Lars Ulrich, in particular, found himself on the receiving end of a great deal of flak.

Ulrich: "We have always stood up for protecting what is ours, and I'm proud of the fact it became a very public debate. No matter which side of the issue you were on there was an awareness of it."

And the way it was perceived as punishing your own fans?

Ulrich: "In retrospect, should we have seen that coming? Yes. Did we? No."

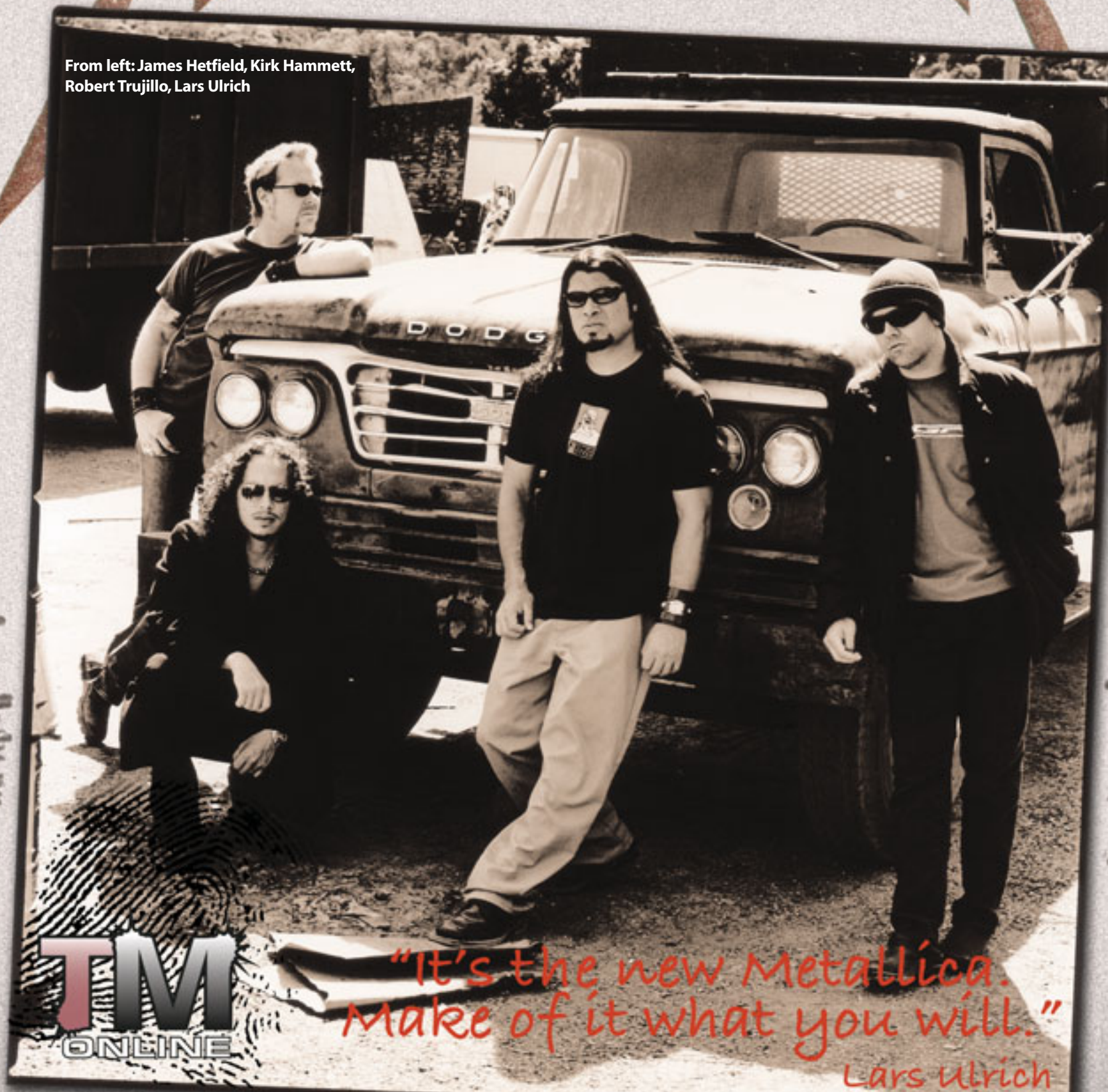
Hetfield: "Lars has always been a bit of a talking head for Metallica and I know it was difficult, 'cos he was taking all the shots."

Ulrich: "I still say that if we wanna give away our music for free, it should be our choice."

And the debate will doubtless continue to rage until someone gets to grips with the real possibilities offered by the internet. But regardless of their high profile battles, nothing should undermine the fact that Metallica – the seventh best-selling act in US history – more or less invented thrash metal, fusing the no-nonsense, heads down steam train pummelling of Deep Purple and Motörhead with the raw ferocity of punk. Hell, debut album *Kill 'Em All*, which made much of the overblown flaccid rock of the era sound positively pedestrian – along with the slightly less bug-eyed, but no less thunderous, sixth album *Metallica* (known amongst fans as the 'Black Album') – both still rank as some of the best rock albums ever made.

No strangers to tragedy – their initial bass player, Cliff Burton, was killed on a tour bus crash in Sweden in 1986 – the band (who also once featured Megadeth frontman Dave Mustaine), have also never shied away from a possible critical kicking, hence their numerous courtroom crusades or when they promptly followed their tour supporting 1996's *Load* (complete with an astonishing stage-set which actually appeared to collapse at one point in the show, throwing lighting engineers – actually stunt men – crashing to the floor amidst chaos, explosions and a fair few petrified punters) with an orchestral link up with the San Francisco Symphony and Michael Kamen ('classical rock' being right up there with 'deafening silence'

From left: James Hetfield, Kirk Hammett, Robert Trujillo, Lars Ulrich



and 'military intelligence' in the oxymoron premier league) and promptly pulled it off, as indicated by the live album *S&M*.

James Hetfield: "We need to invade places where we don't belong. It's like you have to leave to find out where home is. There might be a bit of 'let's do it just because we can', but we needed to explore some of those parts of us that hadn't been explored."

Having pushed Metallica in so many directions, it was perhaps not surprising when one of the wheels came off with the departure of Cliff Burton's replacement bass player Jason Newsted in 2001 (later replaced by ex-Suicidal Tendencies' bass monster Robert Trujillo), a departure which – initially at least – almost hailed the end of a 20-year relationship and prompted Hetfield to put some space between himself and the band.

Hetfield: "Jason needing to find happiness elsewhere made us question if the three [remaining members] were really happy. For me there was a realisation that my lifestyle wasn't working for me [and] I had no idea what was going to happen. I didn't care about Metallica."

Ulrich: "I began preparing myself for the possibility that the ride was over."

Fortunately for all concerned, the time out allowed Hetfield to rediscover his love of music. Kirk Hammett recalls:

"When he came back he definitely wanted to start making music, and Lars and I were so happy to have him back."

All of which brings us right up-to-date and the band's latest album *St Anger* (the title came from a conversation between Hammett and Hetfield based around Hammett's St Christopher medallion), an album recorded for the first time as a true democracy. Simply, the band sat around its new HQ and worked on the songwriting process together

Hammett: "This is probably the most stress-free album we've ever made, but it's also one of the most aggressive albums. Where [the anger and aggression] comes from, I don't know, but I'm not going to get in the way of the flow."

Hetfield: "To come in and not bring a riff, or a song, and then create them in the room with everyone there... For me, [being] the main songwriter was always a source of tension. Here was my baby and people listening to it would be like, 'let's take this arm off', so coming in and starting from scratch it was ours – we were all building this Frankenstein."

Ulrich: "It's the new Metallica. Make of it what you will."

Metallica's new single, 'Un Named Feeling', is released on January 12; *St. Anger* is out now. The band plays Earls Court on 19/20 December.