

# ALBUMS FROM HELL

From endless recording sessions to lost millions, some of rock's most notable albums were devilishly difficult to create

By Chris Neal

**"Si** guarda al fine," counseled Niccolo Machiavelli in his 1532 book *The Prince*. "One judges by the result" is the literal translation, although the questionable (and arguably satirical) wisdom has come down to us through the ages as "the end justifies the means."

It's a rule that has come into play often throughout the history of popular music. Artists have labored away at albums and even individual tracks for months and years at a time, often alienating collaborators, friends and lovers, not to mention record labels and managers. Some get fixated on the idea that one more take, one more tweak, one more overdub or even starting all over again will make for a perfect result. Some feel the pressure of previous success weighing down every move they make. Some find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time, trying to make the best of a bad situation.

Many of the best albums ever made have been the blessed results of such cursed circumstances, but just as many have been made harmoniously and inexpensively. So why sacrifice personal happiness for a few good tunes? Because setting loose



those new sounds into the world, no matter how long it takes or how many bridges get burned, is an end that for many artists always justifies the means. Here are just a few good musical arguments for Machiavelli's dictum.

**FLEETWOOD MAC**  
*RUMOURS*, 1977

When work began on the follow-up to Fleetwood Mac's multimillion-selling self-titled 1975 album, there were two romantic couples among the group's ranks: guitarist Lindsey Buckingham and singer Stevie Nicks; and keyboardist Christine McVie and her husband, bass player John McVie. By the time the album was complete, both relationships had shattered, along with

the marriage of drummer Mick Fleetwood. The band members sniped at one another in song. Buckingham aimed "Go Your Own Way" in the direction of Nicks, who responded with "Dreams"; McVie's "You Make Loving Fun" pointedly saluted her new boyfriend.



Work on the album was slow and painful. Nine weeks of initial recording at the Record Plant studio in Sausalito, Calif., were maddening—at one point four days were spent attempting to tune a piano. All but the drum tracks were discarded, and during subsequent recording the master tapes began to thin out dangerously from constant playback. The finished product received many playbacks of its own—*Rumours* has sold more than 19 million copies in the U.S. alone. "What was going on between us was sad," Nicks acknowledged last year. "We were couples who couldn't make it through. But as musicians we still respected each other—and we got some brilliant songs out of it."

**METALLICA**  
*ST. ANGER*, 2003

When veteran heavy-metal band Metallica set to work on its eighth studio album at



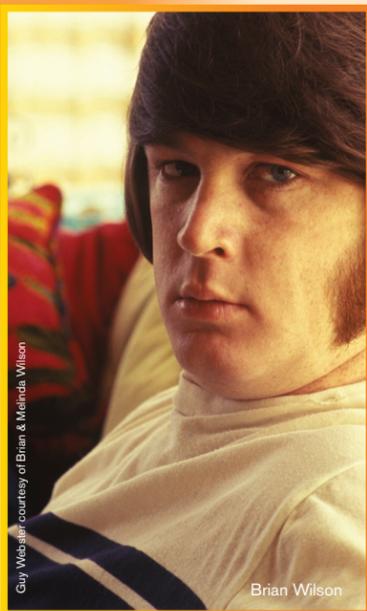
the dawn of 2001, its members could hardly have imagined the long road ahead of them. First came the defection of bass player Jason Newsted, exhausted from touring and artistically stymied. Frontman James Hetfield, lead guitarist Kirk Hammett and drummer Lars Ulrich tapped longtime producer Bob Rock as a substitute. Recording proceeded painstakingly until July, when Hetfield entered rehab to deal with his alcoholism. Upon his return in December, a therapist was brought in at a cost of thousands of dollars per month to help the band members work out issues that had been festering among them for many years.

The group added to its troubles by erecting artistic hurdles for itself. Hammett's trademark guitar solos were eliminated, Ulrich adopted a clanging snare-drum tone and all the band members were encouraged to contribute lyrics (previously Hetfield's domain). *St. Anger* proved divisive among fans when the album was finally released in June 2003, and the members now look back with a mixture of pride and regret. "We went from tearing each other's throats out with sarcasm, anger and not speaking to the polar opposite where we'd embrace every stupid idea so as to not hurt anyone's feelings," Hetfield said in 2007. "And that didn't work either."



**BRIAN WILSON**  
*SMILE*, 2004

Fired by his successful experimentation on 1965's *Pet Sounds*, Beach Boys visionary Brian Wilson resolved to compose and record his magnum opus the following year. He and lyricist Van Dyke Parks set to work on

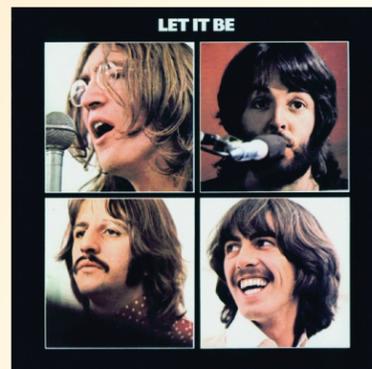


Guy Webster courtesy of Brian & Melinda Wilson

Brian Wilson

a cycle of thematically and musically linked songs that would be uniquely American in its scope and flavor. A groundbreaking single, "Good Vibrations," served as a perfect warmup. But the ensuing sessions were bedeviled by Wilson's own paranoia and increasing resistance to his musical vision from both his bandmates and the Beach Boys' record label. The sessions, Beach Boy Al Jardine remembered later, were like "being trapped in an insane asylum." Beset from without and within, Wilson abandoned *Smile* in May 1967. Over the decades its reputation as a lost masterpiece only grew. By 2004, the always psychologically

fragile Wilson was finally mentally prepared to re-approach *Smile*. With the aid of sympathetic collaborators including old friends like Parks and new ones like Wondermint leader Darian Sahanaja, he finally completed *Smile* to his satisfaction and released it in September 2004 to critical swoons. "It made me feel like a million bucks, like I was in Hawaii on vacation," Wilson said at the time about his experience finishing the album at last. "It made me feel pleasure, a lot of pleasure, tons of pleasure."



**THE BEATLES**  
*LET IT BE, 1970*

The recording of 1968's *The Beatles* (known as "The White Album") had been fraught with tension, and relations had not improved by the time the world's most popular act reconvened on a soundstage at London's Twickenham Studios in January 1969 to begin work on new songs. The project was to be an ambitious one, a back-to-basics album whose making would be captured in a documentary movie.

As the band got down to work, tempers began to flare. They found the documentary crew intrusive, and the presence of singer and guitarist John Lennon's wife, Yoko Ono, was a thorn in the side of his bandmates.

Guitarist George Harrison became frustrated with singer and bass player Paul McCartney's perfectionism, and a further argument with Lennon over the latter's disengagement from the group convinced him to quit for a week. "It was the most miserable session on earth," Lennon recalled the following year. When recording was complete, no one in the band could face the task of compiling the mess of tracks into an album—so *Let It Be* was at last handed over to producer Phil Spector to complete. By the time it was released in May 1970, the Beatles had broken up for good.

**R.E.M.**  
*FABLES OF THE RECONSTRUCTION, 1985*

The members of R.E.M. departed from their native Athens, Ga., in May 1985 to record with veteran producer Joe Boyd at Livingstone Studios in North London. Once there, the unfamiliar surroundings exacerbated the bad mood of a group already exhausted by more than eight months of touring and



short on new material. The English weather was typically downcast, and the daily hour-long commute to the studio from the band's rented flat in Mayfair was punishing. Getting a full set of new songs into shape for their third album was frustrating for all involved.

"I had a miserable time making that album," guitarist Peter Buck said in 1987. "We were all miserable and mean to each other." Boyd became more and more uncertain about the quality of the album as overdubbing and mixing proceeded. Lead singer Michael Stipe later claimed to have suffered a nervous breakdown during the recording. Yet *Fables of the Reconstruction* is so beloved today that it's the subject of an elaborate new two-disc reissue. In the liner notes, Buck writes that he now wonders what the group was so worried about at the time: "On the evidence of this recording, we must have known what we were doing."



Chapman Baehler

Def Leppard



**DEF LEPPARD**  
*HYSTERIA, 1987*

The making of the much-anticipated follow-up to Def Leppard's 1983 smash *Pyromania* got off to a difficult start. Trusted producer Robert John "Mutt" Lange dropped out of the project, the band's idea to replace him with Meat Loaf impresario Jim Steinman proved a non-starter, and the band's subsequent attempts to produce itself were also unsuccessful. Then disaster truly struck: On Dec. 31, 1984, drummer Rick Allen lost his left arm in a car crash. With his bandmates' support, the indomitable Allen developed an electronic kit that would allow him to continue in his role—but the process took months.

Lange eventually returned in 1985, but both band and producer were driven to distraction by the pressure of topping



*Pyromania*. Lange in particular was determined that the album would generate as many hit singles as Michael Jackson's juggernaut *Thriller*. "How do you follow six million albums sold?" lead singer Joe Elliott said in 1986, still in the thick of the seemingly endless *Hysteria* recording sessions. Lange's own less serious car crash and Elliott's bout with mumps further delayed progress. After three years of work and \$5 million spent, *Hysteria* was finally released in

August 1987. It sold 12 million copies in the U.S. and matched *Thriller's* seven hits—just as Lange had intended.

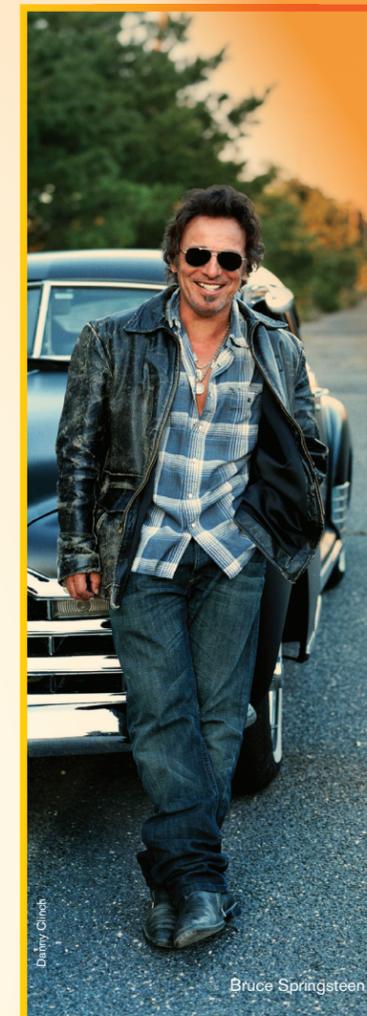
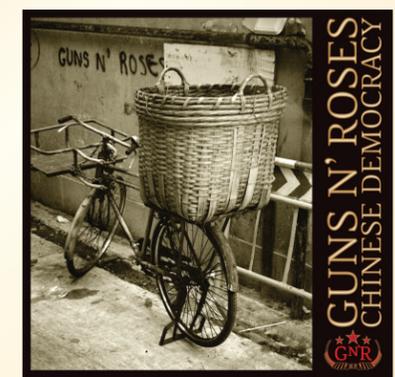
**EAGLES**  
*THE LONG RUN, 1979*

By the end of the long and punishing tour following the release of 1976's megahit *Hotel California*, the Eagles were exhausted. Bass player Randy Meisner left the group, and his former bandmates took some much-needed time to recharge their batteries. When they reconvened in early 1978 to start writing a new album, principal songwriters Glenn Frey and Don Henley found it difficult to deal with the high expectations of their record label and fans while juggling the increasing demands from their fellow Eagles for more artistic input.

Three months in a Miami studio proved unproductive, and the band spent the rest of 1978 on the concert trail. Recording finally resumed during the summer of 1979, with the group's perfectionism in full flower. "On some tracks we had as many as 50 takes that were tested in lots of mixes with different sets of lyrics before we settled on a final version of the song," producer Bill Szymczyk noted shortly after the album's eventual release in September 1979. *The Long Run* sold more than seven million copies—but years later still left a bad taste in Henley's mouth. "We had seen our finest hour," he said. "We were spiritually exhausted and really had nothing more to say." The group didn't record together again for 15 years.

**GUNS N' ROSES**  
*CHINESE DEMOCRACY, 2008*

The members of hard-rock powerhouse Guns N' Roses gathered in 1994 to begin work on the much-anticipated follow-up to its twin 1991 releases *Use Your Illusion I* and *II*. But nothing came of the sessions, and as time wore on the group started drifting apart. Lead guitarist Slash quit in 1996,

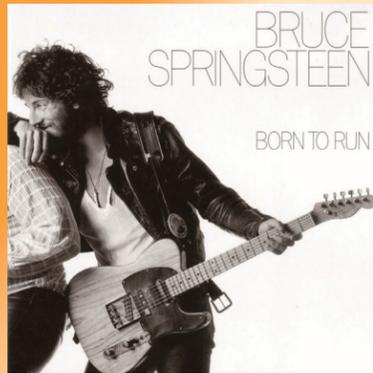


Danny Clinch

Bruce Springsteen

followed by bass player Duff McKagan and drummer Matt Sorum the following year. Lead singer Axl Rose took full control of the band, announcing that his new lineup's first effort was to be a new studio album called *Chinese Democracy*.

Band members and co-producers came and went over the following decade, with Rose seemingly never satisfied with the results of his labors. His record label offered \$1 million to complete the album by March 1, 1999—a date that came and went like many other publicly floated deadlines for the project. "The true, ongoing, behind-the-scenes triumphs and casualties are much more complicated than any negative speculation that the media or otherwise has managed to hit upon," Rose counseled in a December 2006 open letter. After 15 years and more than \$13 million spent, *Chinese Democracy* was finally released on Nov. 23, 2008, to generally positive reviews and middling sales.



**BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN**  
BORN TO RUN, 1975

When he hit the studio in June 1974 to begin making his third album, Bruce Springsteen was determined to make a major musical statement combining Dylanesque lyrics, a Roy Orbison-like vocal approach and producer Phil Spector's glorious sonic vistas. In fact, Springsteen set his sights on achieving that goal with just one song: "Born to Run." He, his E Street Band and producer Mike Appel spent months adding layers of guitar, piano, organ, horns, strings and many other instruments in an attempt to bring to life the magnificent sound Springsteen heard in his head. Once "Born to Run" was completed, Springsteen was felled by writer's block. Sessions were hindered further when drummer Ernest "Boom" Carter and keyboardist David Sancious quit the group (to be replaced, respectively, by current E Streeters Max Weinberg and Roy Bittan).

"The tension making that record I could never describe," Springsteen said after the album was released. "It was the worst, hardest, lousiest thing I ever had to do." Recording finally ended only because

# NO SWEAT

Some of music's most famous albums were the result of months or even years' worth of obsessive perfectionism and expensive studio time—but not these.

**MILES DAVIS, *KIND OF BLUE* (1959)**

The best-selling album in jazz history was recorded at Columbia Records' New York City studios on March 2 and April 22, 1959—with almost no rehearsal.

**THE BEATLES, *PLEASE PLEASE ME* (1963)**

Ten of the 14 tracks on the Fab Four's debut were laid down in one day at EMI Studios on Abbey Road in London, beginning at 10 a.m. and winding up at 10:45 p.m.

**BOB DYLAN, *ANOTHER SIDE OF BOB DYLAN* (1964)**

The album that gave us "It Ain't Me Babe" and "Chimes of Freedom" was recorded entirely in one productive session on June 9, 1964.

**LED ZEPPELIN, *LED ZEPPELIN* (1969)**

The band tracked its debut at London's Olympic Studios in a total of 30 hours, at a total cost of £1,782. "I know because I paid the bill," guitarist Jimmy Page later joked.

**BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN, *NEBRASKA* (1982)**

The Boss recorded all but one of the 10 songs on Jan. 3, 1982, alone at home in Colts Neck, N.J., with a four-track cassette recorder.

**FOO FIGHTERS, *FOO FIGHTERS* (1995)**

Former Nirvana drummer Dave Grohl recorded his new act's first album in a week at a Seattle studio in October 1994, overdubbing almost all the instruments himself.

**THE WHITE STRIPES, *WHITE BLOOD CELLS* (2001)**

The duo has never taken more than three weeks to make an album, but its breakthrough third effort was completed in five days.

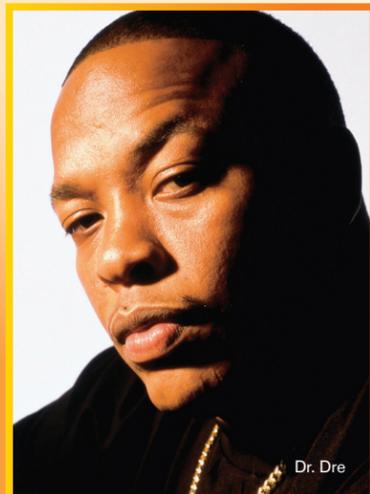
a tour was due to begin, and during the mastering process Springsteen considered scrapping everything that had been done. Despite its creator's doubts, *Born to Run* hit stores in September 1975 to a rapturous response, and is today considered an undisputed classic.

**DR. DRE**  
*DETOX*, NO RELEASE DATE

Word first came in 2002 that hip-hop giant Dr. Dre had begun creating his third and (he claimed) final solo album, already dubbed *Detox*—and reports of fitful progress have continued for a full eight years and counting. Co-producer Scott Storch said in January 2004 that work had been going on for a year, but over the ensuing months Dre decided to hand over the completed instrumental tracks to other artists he was working with rather than keep them to himself. By late

2004 he refocused on *Detox*, aiming for a fall 2005 release.

Friends and colleagues said that Dre was determined that his new album had to be an industry game-changer the way that his 1992 solo debut, *The Chronic*, had been. "He's such a perfectionist," collaborator 50 Cent said in 2007, as work on the album continued. "But sometimes that can be a bad thing. You create new pressure when you wait that long." The wait seemed to be almost over in June 2010, following the leak of an unfinished track featuring Jay-Z called "Under Pressure." Dre now says he hopes to release *Detox* in late fall. "I just make the music feel the way I want it to feel, and I don't put it out until I'm totally happy with it," Dre explained in 2008. When and if *Detox* finally does see the light of day, listeners can only put the long and complex backstory aside and—like the man said—*si guarda al fine*. **M**



Dr. Dre

MICHAEL FRANTI | SQUEEZE | AEROSMITH | TEGAN AND SARA



THE BLACK CROWES  
Fight or flight

INDIGO GIRLS  
Keep it live

TOM JONES  
Strips down

**SHERYL CROW**  
Finding fresh new sizzle in classic sounds



ALBUMS FROM HELL  
DIGITAL DILEMMAS  
ACES OF BASS

JULY/AUGUST 2010  
VOLUME 01, ISSUE 05  
PERIODICAL \$6.99 U.S. / \$7.99 CANADIAN

