

Q&A



Brann Dailor, Brent Hinds, Troy Sanders, Bill Kelliher

# MASTODON

## Their toughest task yet: reinventing heavy metal on deadline

LONGTIME FANS MAY BE SURPRISED by some new twists on heavy-metal giant Mastodon's latest, *The Hunter*. There's the absence of the group's usual concept-album narrative, and the presence of producer Mike Elizondo—who has worked with artists ranging from Dr. Dre to Carrie Underwood, but has very little hard rock on his résumé. Then again, fans might also be surprised to find Mastodon's fearsomely tattooed guitar slayer Bill Kelliher relaxing at an Atlanta park with his youngest son, which is just where we caught up with him. "I'm the rock 'n' roll dad," he says with a chuckle. "Onstage kicking butt, then at home with the kids."

### How did *The Hunter* begin?

We were told [in January] that if we wanted to get a record out this year we'd better get it recorded by June 1. We already had a lot of ideas stored up from the Alice in Chains tour we did a year ago. I always bring my Pro Tools on my laptop. Everybody's got their cellphones out, recording riffs they think sound interesting. And I commissioned a recording studio to be built in our practice space—just a room for demos. That way when the urge comes, when the feeling is

there, we'll hit record. In early spring we dumped out a lot of the riffs we had and started thinking about a record.

### What led you to Mike Elizondo?

Mike had come to visit us in Atlanta, and he was so exciting and excitable. We invited him to our little mock studio to talk about ideas, and he was genuinely interested in the band. He listened to what we had to say and connected with us on a personal level. He seemed like the guy to do it. Finding a good producer is like finding a good friend.

### Even one not known for metal?

If you're a good producer, you're a good producer. You're going to make a band sound like it wants to sound. Why would Mike Elizondo want to make us sound like a hip-hop band?

### How did you divvy up writing?

This record was like, "Everybody throw what you've got in the pile right now. We've got to get it down so it can get out this year." We went back to basics. When we first got together as a band it was [drummer] Brann [Dailor] and myself—we'd been

playing together since the early '90s and had written some of the very first Mastodon songs before we met [guitarist] Brent [Hinds] and [bassist] Troy [Sanders]. They were in the same situation, so Brann and I were like, "Hey, we've all got these songs, let's put them together and make a record." The end result is what defines Mastodon. Everybody writes and we let the songs speak for themselves.

### Why no concept?

The pressure was on for us to do that: "Oh, they're Mastodon, they do concepts, they have to live up to that." We were like, "You know what? Let's just write a record. We don't need a concept. Let's let it be fun again and be free to write what we want to write, for the sake of being a band. Let's be spontaneous." Songs were coming together left and right. Toward the end Brann said, "I've got a concept for the record." It was intricate and really amazing—but suddenly we were finishing up the record and it was sounding great, so we scrapped the idea. But maybe we'll save that crazy concept for the next record.

—Chris Neal

**'Everybody writes and we let the songs speak for themselves. That's what defines Mastodon.'**

