

# At the Gates

*of Immortality:*

the making of *Slaughter of the Soul*

by J. Bennett

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NOTE:

THIS IS THE SECOND INSTALLMENT IN A SERIES CALLED THE **Decibel Hall of Fame**,  
EXPLORING LANDMARK ALBUMS IN THE PANTHEON OF EXTREME METAL.

HALL OF FAME INDUCTEE Q00



ALBUM	Slaughter of the Soul
RELEASE DATE	1995
LABEL	Earache
SUMMARY	The most influential death metal album of the past decade

*We are blind  
to the worlds  
within us,  
waiting to  
be born.*

—TOMAS LINDBERG,  
“Blinded by Fear”

**I**N MAY OF 1995, AT THE GATES entered Studio Fredman in Gothenburg, Sweden, to record what would be their fourth and final full-length, *Slaughter of the Soul*. Unbeknownst to the band’s members—not to mention heshers, headbangers and mustache warriors worldwide—it would become the most influential death metal album of the next decade. In the States, the now-legendary “Blinded by Fear” video hit *Headbangers Ball* face-first, and Riki Rachtman’s red-eyed disciples were stupefied. Milk shot from a veritable legion of hairy nipples on the way to the record store, but the fallout wasn’t fully ascertainable until many years later, when Shadows Fall, Killswitch Engage, and countless other metal/hardcore crossover bands began incorporating what became known as the “Gothenburg Sound” into their sonic templates. Vocalist Tomas Lindberg’s immortal command—“Go!”—in the opening seconds of *Slaughter’s* title track had become the war cry for a generation of future hardcore heroes and metal mercenaries. Unfortunately, during the seven consecutive months of touring that followed *Slaughter of the Soul’s* release, At the Gates went tits up in a blaze of alcohol and bad blood. While Lindberg went on to front half the metal bands in Sweden [The Great Deceiver, Hide, Nightrage, the Crown, Lock Up, Disfear], brothers Anders [guitar] and Jonas Björler [bass] formed The Haunted with drummer Adrian Erlandsson [currently of Cradle of Filth]; guitarist Martin Larsson faded into the private sector [he still plays music, but not professionally]. For the first time since the band’s demise, *Decibel* tracked down all five members of At the Gates to find out why *Slaughter of the Soul* is so fucking good.

## SLAUGHTER OF THE SOUL LINEUP

**ADRIAN ERLANDSSON:** drums  
(Now drums for Cradle of Filth)

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**MARTIN LARSSON:** guitar

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**ANDERS BJÖRLER:** guitar  
(Now plays guitar for the Haunted)

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**JONAS BJÖRLER:** bass  
(Now plays bass for the Haunted)

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**TOMAS LINDBERG:** vocals  
(Now sings for the Great Deceiver, Disfear, Nightrage)

### Was *Slaughter of the Soul* a revenge album?

**ADRIAN ERLANDSSON:** Totally—it was written in pure desperation. Before we recorded it, this promoter tricked us into going on a tour that had no real financial backing, and we got stuck for four days without any food or drink or anything in this parking lot outside a gig in Norwich [England]. We didn't even have a record deal at the time. Peaceville Records, who released *Terminal Spirit Disease*, wouldn't help us because we obviously didn't have a deal with them. [Patrick] Jensen's band, Séance, managed to talk their record company [Black Mark] into doing a deal over the phone with us in order to lend us money. They faxed all the record contracts to a truck stop, and we had to sign the deal there and then, and fax it back, to be able to get the money to get back home. It was absolutely horrible. We had to pay them back in 45 days or they would have the rights to the next album.

**ANDERS BJÖRLER:** It was a really fucked up situation. We only played two gigs on that tour with Séance; it was supposed to be 40 dates. Two days in, the promoter just left with the money.

Had that not happened, *Slaughter of the Soul* would've ended up on Black Mark. I'm sure there wouldn't have been the inspiration for the band to continue.

**TOMAS LINDBERG:** So many things had gone wrong for us, organization-wise. We pushed ourselves more than we would have if it hadn't been bad times. We felt it was now or never.

### What's the story behind "Blinded by Fear"?

**A. BJÖRLER:** It was the last track we wrote for the album. [Laughs] I actually think it's the worst track on the album. Everybody thinks it's fantastic, I think it's boring. But we wrote it as an opening song—we had the whole album, but not a real opener. I wrote it in maybe two or three hours, literally—a complete stroke of luck. Sometimes you get the whole song in your head and just show the other guys, sometimes it takes months.

**LINDBERG:** People always mention "Blinded by Fear," but it's just the opener for us. It was written that way, and it fills its purpose as the opener when it's followed by the title track. But alone, it's not as strong as the others. As a single, it's always seemed out of context to me. I mean, when you hear a song from *Reign in Blood* taken out of the context of the album, when it stops, you know what song is supposed to come next. And when something else follows it on the radio, you're disappointed. It's like, "Hey, where's 'Postmortem'?" I like that vibe, one natural flow, and [*Slaughter*] is one of those albums for me.

### What was the atmosphere like in the studio?

**LINDBERG:** It was the most creative atmosphere I've ever felt. That album was everything we lived and breathed for. You probably couldn't talk to us about anything else in those months. Adrian was so serious about getting his parts right from the very start. You have to consider that the album was recorded before digital. Nowadays, you can move around drum beats, you can reproduce parts of songs. All the songs [on *Slaughter*] were recorded start to finish on every take. You also have to remember that Jonas and Anders are twins—they fight like brothers, but even more so. There were a lot of compromises, a lot of disputes over riffs, but everybody was focused on the final effort. We were all young—between 21 and 23, and maybe not the best diplomats ever. [Laughs] Nowadays, it'd probably go a bit smoother. I felt like I had the worst part in one way, because everyone else had pushed themselves so hard and done such great work—but the singers are always [recorded] last. It was like, "Okay, I'm gonna go in there and ruin this now." I hate that feeling. The expectations were already up there.

**MARTIN LARSSON:** We were all pulling in the same direction. I wasn't really much part of the writing process, because I wasn't living in Gothenburg. I lived four hours away, near Stockholm. I had my whole life [there]—family,



▲ At the gates circa 1994  
PHOTO BY LISA OF PEACEVILLE

When we got in touch with Earache, we were really sparked by that because back then it was a really good label. Of course, we had all the old albums—Morbid Angel, Carcass, Bolt Thrower. It was a legendary label, and we were really surprised that they were interested in At the Gates.

### Was the band close to breaking up at that point?

**ERLANDSSON:** Oh yeah, totally. We were really insecure with what was going to happen with the band. When we came back from that tour, it could've gone either way. It didn't have to do with any friction in the band at that point—it was just the frustration with the business. But then we got the Earache deal—and some royalties from *Terminal Spirit Disease*—so we managed to buy our way out of the deal with Black Mark.

girlfriend, all that—except for the band. I think I was in the studio for maybe a week or a little bit more, but not the whole time.

**ERLANDSSON:** I went in on a Monday, and the following Monday, I was starting a new job. So I had to finish all the drum tracks in one week. On that Sunday night, I finished the title track, and I still had to do “Blinded by Fear.” It was really fucking late, but I managed, somehow, to get it done. I didn’t have any energy left. A few days later, when I got back to the studio and heard the guitars on it, it was like, “Yeah, cool.”

#### **What did Fredrik Nordstrom bring to the table for the recording sessions?**

**ERLANDSSON:** We did some demo tracks with him prior to *With Fear I Kiss the Burning Darkness*. He’d just moved into new facilities, and was really keen to make an impact. He had tons of ideas of how he wanted stuff to go. I had this really, really crap drum kit that I recorded the album with, but he’s really good at tuning—which at the time I had no clue about—and he mixed it with the top end of the kick drum from [Pantera’s] *Far Beyond Driven*. It was just a tiny bit, you can’t even tell. It’s quite a common trick these days, but I think *Slaughter* was one of the first albums he attempted something like that on.

**LINDBERG:** It’s about 80 percent live drums, and then about 20 percent of the bass drum is from *Far Beyond Driven*; 20 percent of the snare drum is from *Reign in Blood*. So most of it’s live, but we spiced it up a bit to get that extra “click.”

**A. BJÖRLER:** *Slaughter of the Soul* was an experiment on the guitar sound. I think we tried different things for like two or three days before we were satisfied. We went through a lot of pedals and tried all the amps we could get our hands on. I think we mixed two distortion pedals, and I played [through] a home-built cabinet that me and my dad built. I was maybe 21 or 22 at the time, and we didn’t have any money, so we couldn’t afford to buy much equipment. The funny thing is that Jesper [Strömblad] from In Flames wanted to borrow my stack on their next record—he was impressed with the sound on *Slaughter*. [Laughs] I had a cheap-ass guitar, too—it cost like 200 dollars or something. But we had a sponsorship to study music from the government, and we used that to buy some equipment—but in general, we didn’t have money. You’d have to report when you had your meetings and what you were studying, but it’s basically a scam. You’d just rehearse and write music. The economy is worse now, so it’s not as easy to get government funds as it was in the middle ‘90s.

#### **Were all the lyrics written in advance?**

**LINDBERG:** I usually have most of the lyrics ready [beforehand]. Parts of the first two At the Gates albums were written lyrics-first. I’d give them to Anders, and he’d actually write songs around the lyrics. So we’d worked both ways before. I

## Anatomy of a Masterpiece



Fredrik Nordstrom has produced albums for some of Scandinavia’s biggest metal bands, including Arch Enemy, In Flames, Opeth, Dimmu Borgir, Zyklon, and the Haunted. He’s also the guitarist for power-metal jokers Dream Evil. But *Slaughter of the Soul* made him famous.

#### ***Slaughter of the Soul* was a breakthrough for both you and the band.**

Yeah, it was one of my first big productions. We spent six weeks in the studio, and I had just bought a new 24-track two-inch machine for recording that album. I only had 16 tracks before—this is in the good old days, when we only had analog tape machines. [Laughs] I’m actually still using that 24-track, because it’s a brilliant machine.

#### **What was the atmosphere during the sessions?**

The atmosphere in the studio was very good. I remember Tomas [Lindberg] had this fake hair. He had met a girl who was making this kind of hair—a very beautiful girl, but not his type. He had stolen her from another singer of a band in Gothenburg [laughs]. She had made this long plastic hair with little plastic balls in it. Every time he’d turn around, someone was screaming, “Ow!” These little plastic balls would always hit you right in the eye, and then they’d break off and be all over the studio floor.

#### **You used a sample from *Far Beyond Driven* in Adrian’s kick drum?**

There’s a very good click on that [*Far Beyond Driven*] bass drum, so I’ve used it on many productions. For *Slaughter*, I recorded the trigger signal and then converted to MIDI, and then synchronized it by computer. But I think about 70 percent of the snare and the bass drum on that album is acoustic. So [the sample] is really just a back-up—if you don’t play hard enough, or if you don’t have enough bass in the snare drum, I’d use a trigger to make it sound deeper.

#### **Did Anders and Jonas argue a lot?**

The brothers were very picky with Adrian on the drumming. And then Jonas was very picky with Anders’ guitar-playing—always complaining. But when we went do bass, he was lazy. If you listen to the album, there is very little bass. There’s really only one place on the album where you can hear the bass, and that’s when it’s playing alone [on “Cold”]. It was Jonas’ idea—he wanted to take out the mid-range and the treble, and only use the sub-frequencies on the bass.

#### **The production sound on *Slaughter* became the melodic death metal standard for years afterwards.**

Many people come back to me and want that kind of sound. But the band put so much hard work into the playing, you know? It’s easy to get good sound on an album if everybody plays well and the arrangements are good.

#### **How long was it before you saw the impact it had?**

I remember like a year after, I heard Colin Richardson was using *Slaughter of the Soul* as a reference CD when he was mixing albums. I got calls from all around the world from bands who wanted to book the studio. It was a big step for me.

#### **Ten years later, is there anything you’d do differently?**

I don’t know. [Laughs] It’s hard to say—it was such a long time ago. I’d maybe record the bass better. On the latest Haunted album, I remember saying, “Okay, this time we have to do good bass playing.” —J. BENNETT



► At the Gates destroy Frankfurt  
PHOTO BY MARTIN WICKLER

think about 90 percent of the lyrics were written [in advance], but you always have one lyric here and there that ends up being a last-minute thing. There's actually a line in "Suicide Nation" that's stolen from the first Meathook Seed album. We had one line that wasn't really working rhythmically, and I always stress out about that—the vocal rhythms have to be perfect. We needed to get the song done that day, and the Meathook Seed album was lying around. I happened to flip through it, and found the line "brainwashed into submission." So Mitch Harris should probably have some copyright money from me.

**Whose idea was it to bring in Andy LaRocque to play the solo on "Cold"?**

**A. BJÖRLER:** I think it was my idea, actually. Fredrik knew Andy very well, so we asked if he'd be interested in playing a solo. We're all King Diamond fans—and Mercyful Fate, of course. The funny thing was that we had given him a tape of that track, and when he came to the studio, he had it transcribed all wrong. So he had to re-arrange all the notes, and he still did the whole thing in one hour or something. It was impressive. He's a very good musician.

**ERLANDSSON:** There's this music shop in Gothenburg where Andy used to work—just to be able to play guitar, I guess—and we all picked our gear up from there. We actually tried to get him play on *Terminal Spirit Disease* and *With Fear I Kiss the Burning Darkness*, but he listened to those albums when they were in their final stages, and said he had no idea what to do. So then we played him all the tracks from *Slaughter*, and he said he'd do one for "Cold." He came in the next day, sat down—he was really humble about it—and just played us his idea for the solo. Luckily,

Fredrik hit record. He played it back for Andy, who wanted to try it again. So he rolled again, and Andy put this harmony on top of it, so it's actually doubled. It was pretty fucking cool. We were all like, "Wow—Andy LaRocque's playing on our album."

**LINDBERG:** This was before we knew him, so we were not allowed in the same room when he was actually laying down the solo. [Laughs] We had to hang out in the recreation area of the studio. He said goodbye, and then we went in and listened to it.

**At what point did you realize the impact *Slaughter* had?**

**ERLANDSSON:** That's just been the last few years, to be honest, that new bands will come out and cite us as an influence. It's kind of difficult to say. At the time the band broke up, I was bitter—I thought we did way better with the *Haunted*.

**A. BJÖRLER:** It's really hard to say, because bands like In Flames were influenced by us, but we were influenced by them as well. Same with Dissection and the whole Gothenburg scene—we kind of inspired each other. But the outside influence? Maybe one or two years afterwards. We noticed that hardcore bands in the US would mix the Gothenburg style with New York hardcore. That was around '97 or something. I can't remember all the bands, but we toured with Hatebreed in '96. It's pretty weird, because when Fredrik and I mixed it, I was pretty disappointed. I thought we'd made a very bad record [laughs].

**JONAS BJÖRLER:** It was after the break-up—maybe late '96 or early '97 when we began to realize the impact. When the album came out,

we didn't really get many good reviews. I remember we got some really bad reviews from the German magazines. They said it was too generic or something, but people are always suspicious of new stuff.

**LARSSON:** It was a gradual process—it wasn't a particular point in time. Old albums seem to fade into oblivion and become cult favorites for a limited few, but people still talk about this album—even more so than when we were still around. I didn't think it would last this long, but I'm happy about it. Every once in a while, someone will mention it to me, but not many people recognize me. Not like Tomas—everybody recognizes Tomas. But there are a few guys at my job who didn't realize I was in At the Gates—when they did, it was awkward, you know?

**LINDBERG:** I can't remember a particular day where it crossed my mind or where people were getting into it on a wider scale. But the statements from Earache probably helped to make it clear for us. [Laughs] It's funny when sales actually increase eight years after an album has been out. It allows you to concentrate on what you're doing today, because at least you're getting paid.

***Slaughter* is as influential in hardcore and emo circles as it is with the metal crowd. Even musicians who don't necessarily play heavy music are into it. Why do you think that is?**

**ERLANDSSON:** On this Cradle [of Filth] tour I'm on right now, we're with Bleeding Through and Himsa, and they all swear by that album for some reason. They've been telling me stories about how they came to see At the Gates live when we toured with Morbid Angel and Napalm Death. I know when [*Slaughter*] came out, Tomas

was really into hardcore and he kept talking about various bands during the interviews—so I'm not sure if that's got anything to do with it or not. It seems far-fetched actually, because that was like ten years ago. Without trying to sound cocky, some albums withstand the test of time, I guess. And I think whatever genre of heavy music you're into, that will come through. I don't wanna draw any comparisons to *Reign in Blood*, but that was another album that hardcore kids, emo kids—anyone who's into heavy music will relate to it. So I'm really flattered that there are people from different genres who are into it.

**LINDBERG:** It's amazing. Especially the hardcore kids getting into it means a lot to me. I've always been 50 percent hardcore, 50 percent metal—that's always been my direction. Adrian played with me in my hardcore band, Skitsystem, while we were still in At the Gates. Everyone in the band was into hardcore to one degree or another, but maybe I was most into it. My lyrics were getting more—I wouldn't say political, but more hardcore-oriented. Also, the song structures we probably fought over most back then—a lot of that was in the hardcore sense, you know, thousands of riffs versus, like, three or four. For me, it's rewarding that it came across that we actually had a hardcore influence in the band. We even had some gigs here in Gothenburg—parties and stuff—where we played some hardcore covers. If you had been in Gothenburg around '93 or '94, you could've actually seen At the Gates doing "Skins, Brains, & Guts" by 7 Seconds.

#### How did you settle on the cover art?

**A. BJÖRLER:** I think Tomas had some ideas about the whole thing being about... well, not really suicide, but the lyrical content is very dark. We did some over the top things, too—we had a gun upside down as the Nike symbol on [an At the Gates] t-shirt that said, "Just Do It." We have that kind of stuff with the Haunted as well—it's a powerful image.

**J. BJÖRLER:** It's not the best cover I've ever seen, but it fits the music. It's pretty good, but maybe it's too brown [laughs]. If you play metal music, guns are good symbols for violence—and it fit the concept and lyrics as well.

**ERLANDSSON:** I was a bit shocked, actually. I wasn't sure about having Jesus on the front, with guns and stuff. At the time, I was more conservative than I am now. We were really psyched about the music at the time, so just the fact that we actually got to choose the album cover ourselves was pretty cool.

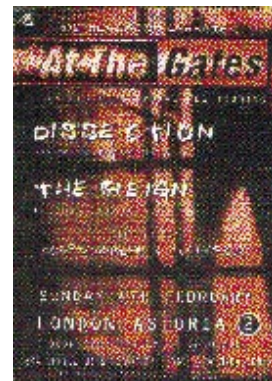
**LINDBERG:** It was really fun to get Kristian [Wahlin] to do the artwork for what we felt was a big album for us. Kristian and me go back a long time—we're childhood friends. We had a band before At the Gates; he's also playing with me now in the Great Deceiver. I remember giving him mix tapes of songs that, for me, portrayed the same atmosphere we wanted for the album—I know he likes to paint with music in the background. Everything from hardcore to



◀ "Drunken" inner sleeve photo from *Slaughter of the Soul*

▶ Rare promo only cover of *Slaughter of the Soul*

▼ Rare UK *Slaughter of the Soul* Tour Flyer



satisfied with it, but my favorite is *Terminal Spirit Disease*.

**LARSSON:** The songs are a bit samey to me. The ultimate album is a mixture of *Slaughter of the Soul* and

death metal to noise music was on those tapes. Then we went to magazine shops looking for copies of *Guns & Ammo*. [Laughs] We settled on guns and religious symbols—but most of the actual ideas come from him.

#### The drunken band photo in the CD booklet was staged, wasn't it?

**ERLANDSSON:** Yeah. We went to this friend's house to snap some pictures, and we had a few drinks. Pretty soon the night was over, and there were no pictures taken. We went back there the next day and thought it'd make a pretty cool shot, like *Master of Puppets* or something. We all grew up listening to that album, and we wanted to show it somehow.

**J. BJÖRLER:** It was half-staged, maybe. The picture was taken in the photographer's living room. We wanted a picture like *Reign in Blood*, you know?

**LARSSON:** We put together all the empty bottles and brought out all the cool albums to make it look right. And it does.

#### In retrospect, is there anything you'd change about the album?

**LINDBERG:** No, I don't think so. There are always details—some words on the album have a strong [plosive] sound, but it's stupid to change stuff like that afterward. Yeah, there are misprints in the lyric sheet, but people already figured that out ten years ago. It's one of those albums I wouldn't change too much on because of the impact it had. It must've been right.

**A. BJÖRLER:** I think it's very complete. I'm very



*Terminal Spirit Disease*, with the production of *Slaughter*. I think the composition of songs is better on *Terminal Spirit Disease*—I think *Slaughter* could've been more varied.

**J. BJÖRLER:** If you'd asked me that directly after we did it, there were probably a lot of things I'd change. But now I'm pretty satisfied with it. I wouldn't change a thing.

**ERLANDSSON:** Had we done another album, I'm sure there would've been other ideas for it, but as far as being our last album, I couldn't wish for a better one. That was actually one of the twins' arguments for quitting the band—that we'd never be able to come up with anything better. Then again, they're really cynical. Had I gone with the feeling I had when Anders wanted to leave the band, I would've pushed to do another album, to be honest. I didn't want to let go at the time that it happened, but it wasn't really a choice for any of us. It had to be that way. I'm obviously really fucking happy that I was part of it, but it's kinda hard to try to recreate that feeling that was there when that album was being written. Everything surrounding it just had this aura about it, but we were sort of magically unaware. Had we known that we were doing something good, it would've been a bit more pretentious, I think. [dB]