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Metallic K.O.

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Since its release in 1976, The Stooges' Metallic K.O. has been wrapped in mystery and legend. This live document of the band's final implosion is an imperfect recording of outright hostility between performer and audience. It is so easy to focus on its outrageousness that it would be simple to dismiss it as a novelty record—some sort of protopunk Blowfly with an attitude.

Focusing on the album's outlandishness does it a great disservice because Metallic K.O. is so much more than dick jokes and smashed bottles. It is, in fact, the perfect artistic representation of madness, self-loathing, and psychic terror. In it, everybody's favorite well-mannered boy Iggy Pop spills out the contents of his ramshacked psyche and it is not a pretty sight. All the while, the rest of the band holds on tight with both hands while taking the music farther and farther out in brutal reaction to Iggy's disintegration. Metallic K.O. has given Iggy a case of the heebie jeebies for years—and it's easy to see why. It's an uncomfortable album, somewhere between a car wreck and a snuff film. However, one of the recurring threads throughout The Stooges' oeuvre is that they always functioned like the antenna of society, capturing the psycho-emotional content of the moment. From the youthful boredom of The Stooges to the high-wattage experimentation of Fun House to the searing explosiveness of Raw Power, the band always sounded like how they felt. So, judging from the sounds on Metallic K.O., The Stooges at the end felt like a million dreams shattering in hostility, self-hatred, and drug-fueled delusion. In other words, they felt like shit.

Metallic K.O. is often believed to be a document of a single concert, but in reality it was recorded over two separate nights: October 6, 1973 and February 9, 1974, both at a theater in Detroit called the Michigan Palace. (Movie buffs and hip-hop fans will recognize that location from the Eminem movie 8 Mile, but in real life the ornate former theater is now a parking garage.) Both shows have subsequently been released in their entirety on a set called Metallic 2xK.O.
By 1973, The Stooges were heading nowhere good. Raw Power was released in the spring of that year with great hopes that The Stooges would ride the David Bowie/MainMan glam train to new heights of fabulousness. The Stooges played one show of the Raw Power material at Detroit’s Ford Auditorium in March 1973 before the deal with MainMan fell apart. “After that,” Iggy told me in 2005, “any other live shows that you come across, you’re hearing a band left to its own devices.”

Such was the Raw Power lineup of Iggy; James Williamson on guitar; Ron Asheton on bass; and Scott Asheton on drums was augmented by future Heartbreaker Scott Thurston (that’s Tom Petty Heartbreaker, not Johnny Thunders Heartbreaker). Not only were The Stooges suffering from a bad management deal, they were also the victims of public indifference. “We were serious about everything,” said Scott Asheton. “But it got to a point where there was nothing to be serious about because nobody wanted us.”

With the band left to try and conquer the world on its own, Iggy’s performances began turning more tortured and weird. “On the musical side, we were still for all of the chitter-chatter about this band in that period. Iggy the primary head-chomping geek.”

Meanwhile, The Stooges had turned into a circus sideshow, with Kansas City in New York and the Whisky A Go Go in Hollywood. “It was pretty wild and wooly on the personal side. I’ll leave that to your imagination,” Iggy said. “On the musical side, we were also the victims of public indifference. “We were serious about everything,” said Scott Asheton. “But it got to a point where there was nothing to be serious about because nobody wanted us.”

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“It was pretty wild and wooly on the personal side. I’ll leave that to your imagination,” Iggy said. “On the musical side, we were still trying to forge ahead. In other words, we weren’t standing still for all of the chitter-chatter about this band in that period. Listeners, heroin wasn’t chic yet unless you were the Rolling Stones.

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Even the band members found Iggy’s behavior strange and engaging. “For me, every show was like I was in the audience,” Scott Asheton said. “I had no idea what he was going to do. I was as interested as the audience as far as what was going to happen next. For me, every show was kind of like going to a show. I had the best seat in the house. It made it more entertaining for me.”

Iggy was doing battle with his stage persona, egged on (no pun intended) by people who would give him drugs and instigate his antisocial tendencies. “People want to give him stuff and they want to make him a little monster,” Ron Asheton told me. “People were always shoving things in his face and it’s even harder if you’re expected to top yourself every night and you’ve got two shows every night.” But, Ron added: “We were there to take him wherever he wanted to go.”

“So by the time The Stooges made it to the Michigan Palace, the weirdness had consumed Iggy and the rest of The Stooges were compelled to follow him. In the middle of Iggy’s dissipated, decimated, and desiccated state, the band attacked the music with aplomb. They didn’t so much exhibit the precision of a watchmaker; it was more like precision of a crack special forces unit: it wasn’t always pretty, there was frequent collateral damage, but just making it to the end of the day alive was a victory.

Even as the prospects for The Stooges were dimming, the band was well-practiced and tight. Scott Thurston pounds the piano mercilessly, offering a vague reminder that this is supposed to be rock ‘n’ roll. There’s something about Williamson’s playing that is distinctly unfriendly, as though it carries with it the suggestion of great psychic discomfort. His approach is lethal. “James has a very intense Scorpioic energy,” Iggy said. “James will just come in and basically run you through. That’s the way he plays. It’s not blunt. It’s not a blunt instrument, there’s an edge to it. But he’s out to kill.”

If Williamson added sharp lethality, the rhythm section added a certain musical panache—somehow the brothers Asheton possessed hearts big enough to create beauty in the midst of insanity. “Scott has a particular ear on drums and he plays the song. He doesn’t just beat on the drums,” Iggy said. “Take a look at Ron’s hands sometime, which is what attracted me to him as a musician in the first place, because I was looking for people who could go somewhere beyond local bars and third bill at the ballrooms. Ron has a fine arts pair of hands and you hear a certain elegance to his touch and his playing.”

There is a distinct difference between the two shows documented on Metallic K.O. In the October 1973 show, the band sounds a little crispy around the edges, but not totallyfried. Iggy rails against the “Buttfuckers trying to rule this world” in “Head On” and before “Open Up And Bleed” there’s some audience abuse: “Who hates The Stooges?” asks Iggy, to some applause. “Well we don’t hate you, we don’t even care.” But there’s also some standard rock-singer-to-audience banter and, in total, the show comes off more or less like a standard rock show, albeit a little bit bent.

The February 1974 show is way more out there. The original LP took the misogynistic and anti-Semitic rant “Itch,” “Cock In
The Stooges planted the seeds for their own enduring legacy: “The Stooges Are Dead! Long Live The Stooges!” At the end of that final show, standing amidst the hurled debris from a bloodthirsty audience, Iggy says: “You nearly killed me but you missed again so you have to keep trying next week.”

“Next week” may have turned into three decades but The Stooges did return, triumphant in their own strange way, with the knowledge that they were right to believe they were something special. And while Metallic K.O. spooked Iggy and marked the beginning of years in the wilderness, it electrified generations of listeners and assured them that it was OK to be messed-up, freaked-out, and fucked up. That it was OK for artists to put their most ugly emotions on public display. That it was OK to open up and bleed.

Artistically, the highlight of the 1974 show is a tortured version of “Gimme Danger,” which Iggy sings with extreme pathos. It’s an intimate delivery, each line a window into Iggy’s suffering. “I wanna be touched and I’m gonna be loved,” he howls, “and I’m not afraid to say that I need you more than you need me.” The wretchedness, self-hatred, and vulnerability he expresses is the same sentiment underpinning much of the best punk rock: souls damaged by modern society, reaching out, yet unable to connect so lashing out is a way of self-preservation. Which Iggy does on the Welkian countdown to “Cock In My Pocket”: “A-one, two, FUCK YOU, PRICKS!”

Iggy heckles the audience, and they respond by hurling missiles—ice, eggs, bottles—which are audible on the recording. Finally, the act devolves into a profane rendition of “Louie Louie” that Iggy honed years earlier playing Ann Arbor frat parties. “I never thought it would come to this, baby,” he says. In defeat,