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EDITOR'S NOTES

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Four years ago we shut down the city. None of us who were there will ever forget it: so many peaceful protesters showed up that the police had to close down Market Street. Mission Street was pretty much the same way. You couldn't get anywhere downtown; nobody seemed to be at work. The police were, in more than a few instances, out of control — but there were no water cannons or rubber bullets, just a lot of arrests. Overall, it was a day of joy: the United States was going to war, and San Francisco would have no part of it.

The anniversary protests, while exuberant, weren't quite that dramatic. I understand: it's been a long, long war, and we've all be fighting for a long, long time, and things just seem to be getting worse. The antiwar movement, and the frustration of the nation at a conflict that has dragged on longer than US involvement in World War II, tossed the Republican majority out of both houses of Congress, but the Democrats are still talking about nonbinding resolutions and incremental plans that can't be backed up. The war seems to be without end. Even the *New York Times*, that voice of mainstream moderation, is starting to sound pissed off: the March 18 lead editorial referred to "the unnecessary, horribly botched and now unwinnable war."

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The sound of war

With *The Locust Years*, Hammers of Misfortune lean a heavy, hobnailed boot on the tender throat of commercial rock 'n' pop and take the idea of protest music to a whole new level p24



Hammers of Misfortune — (from left) John Cobbett, Sigrid Sheie, Ron Nichols, Jessie Quattro, Patrick Goodwin, and Chewy Marzolo — take a stand with *The Locust Years*. | GUARDIAN PHOTO BY PAT MAZZERA; MAKEUP BY DENIZ TWELVES

Screaming for vengeance

With *The Locust Years*, Hammers of Misfortune lean a heavy, hobnailed boot on the tender throat of commercial rock and take protest music to a new level

By Josh Wilson
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It was the unquiet dead, whispering in the dark, who set John Cobbett on his path.

In December 2001, Cobbett — a longtime Mission District rocker and guitar hero with such notably heavy outfits as Slough Feg, Ludicra, and Hammers of Misfortune — was on the East Coast visiting his identical twin brother, Aaron, a photographer living in Brooklyn, just across the East River from the smoldering ruins of the World Trade Center.

"I visited the site. It was at night and freezing cold," Cobbett notes. "I remember the sounds of the cranes and demolition machinery wrenching huge slabs of twisted metal and concrete from the wreckage. All through the night these eerie, mournful sounds reverberated off the surrounding towers. It was an incredibly haunted place."

The wound at that time was still so fresh, you see. But the grief, fear, and uncertainty were being transformed, alchemically, inexorably, into something very different: a television spectacle and a justification for war far removed from the dust, the heat, and the stench of burning corpses that Cobbett says lingered in his brother's neighborhood for months.

As the tragedy played out — the dead painstakingly named and num-

bered, the TV newscasters falling easily into the cadence of wartime rhetoric — Cobbett realized he had to respond. But the methods of political rock seemed far too self-righteous, and even patronizing, given the scale of blood-letting and demagoguery.

The way forward was finally revealed one month later, during the 2002 Super Bowl halftime show, which included a performance by U2 and a remarkable moment of patriotic kitsch: at the show's climax, Bono, with the names of the 9/11 victims scrolling overhead on a huge banner, opened his leather jacket to reveal the Stars and Stripes beneath.

The crowd went wild, but for Cobbett it was shameless propaganda. The phrase "trot out the dead" leaped into his head, and music and lyrics quickly followed.

"I got so fucking pissed," Cobbett says. "These victims are rolling over in the superheated rubble below Ground Zero. It was so cheap and so tawdry. I decided, 'I'm going to take these motherfuckers to task.'"

Gloriously rocking and extraordinarily angry, "Trot Out the Dead" would become one of several jaw-dropping centerpieces of *The Locust Years* (Cruz del Sur Music), a record that took five more years and several new band members to complete and may well be one of the most urgent and affecting works of rock 'n' roll — not to mention protest music — pro-

duced by a band in San Francisco or anywhere else. It is *the* soundtrack to the George W. Bush years, a musical wail of sorrow and fury all the more overwhelming for its mythic metal lyrics and its seamless blend of prog rock ambition, hard and heavy bombast, and massively killer riffage.

If this sounds over the top, well, it is, a fact to which Cobbett gleefully cops.

"No matter how ridiculous we are, no way can we get more stupid and ridiculous than the real thing," he says. "No matter how grandiose I can get with a metal song, there's no way I can go to Iraq and start a war. No matter how sanctimonious I get, there's no way I could match what was coming out of Rumsfeld's mouth. The shit coming out of those people's mouths — it was gold."

HAMMERS COME AND GO

One of five siblings born to a middle-class Rochester, NY, family ultimately sundered by divorce, the teenage Cobbett wound up in Washington, DC, in the 1980s and quickly fell in with the breakthrough hardcore scene of the era. Minor Threat, Bad Brains, and the Obsessed were his bread and butter, but with the emergence of Revolution Summer's early emo bands in 1986, the music became, in his words, "specious and cloying."

Taking his cue from a friend who said he'd like San Francisco, Cobbett

spontaneously packed his gear and hit the road. "Within a week I was living in the Mission District," he says, "and still do."

Before too long he had fallen in with Chewy Marzolo, a drummer with the heavy and hardcore outfit Osgood Slaughter. That carried them both into the 1990s, at which point the musical chairs began in earnest. Cobbett joined the Lord Weird Slough Feg, a band packing equal parts Celtic folk mythos and old-school metal pomp. There he connected with vocalist Mike Scalzi, who would later help define Hammers' sound with a manly, operatic holler that would do Rob Halford proud.

Marzolo, meanwhile, was busily following what he calls a "one-band-to-the-next continuum" all the way to Cobbett's first incarnation of Hammers of Misfortune in 1998. Along the way he founded Poverty Records, a vital imprint that documented the Mission's explosion of grimy and creatively unfettered rock 'n' punk with a slew of 7-inch records and CDs from such essential bands as Fuckface, Lost Goat, Towel, and Hickey.

After an initial outing as Unholy Cadaver — a devil-voiced combo that congealed around San Francisco's cultish homegrown black metal scene, along with such peers as Weakling and Ludicra — Hammers' lineup was refined and completed with the addition of vocalist-bassist Janis Tanaka,

late of L7 and Stone Fox. Black metal became not an end in itself but a subordinate element in a larger musical palette that came together on Hammers' full-throttle debut, *The Bastard* (tUMULt, 2001). Despite its acoustic flourishes, spooky harmonies, medievalist illustrations, and Joseph Campbell-inspired lyrics, it ain't no teenage Dungeons and Dragons fantasy adventure rewarding its heroes with heaps of treasure and experience points. *The Bastard* turns out to be an ecological revenge fantasy, in which the "trolls of wood and stone" storm the village to "slay the ones who chop and cut / Slay them in the their wooden huts." It's a wicked metaphor for the fate awaiting those mortals who dare abuse the blessings of nature.

Despite the record's subcultural acclaim from magazines such as *Terrorizer* and *Lamentations of the Flame Princess* — and the admiration heaped on its follow-up, *The August Engine* (Cruz del Sur Music, 2003), a hard rock parable of cliquish music-scene self-destruction — Hammers of Misfortune had chosen a road that was neither wide nor easy. What kind of metal was this anyway? True? Black? Epic? These fine points of genre fidelity may seem irrelevant to a die-hard music fan, but for labels the difference is a record they can sell or not. "I loved Hammers the first time I heard them, and it never occurred to me to question or examine their sound, which was this gloriously confusional, amazing, and intricate chunk of mind-blowing music, metal or otherwise," says Andee Connors, who put out *The Bastard* on his tUMULt imprint. "It might be confusing for folks who are very strict with their genre divisions."

There is only so much small labels can do, however, and Tanaka's departure to play with pop vocalist Pink was another monkey wrench. The addition of Jamie Myers on bass and vocals carried Hammers through *The Locust Years'* recording sessions until she too took a bow, moving to Texas to raise her first child. Scalzi, disinclined to divide his time between two bands, also departed, to focus his attention entirely on Slough Feg.

ANTHEMS FOR DARK DAYS

Today Hammers are touring with a refreshed and potent lineup, teaming Marzolo and Cobbett with bassist Ron Nichols; vocalist and second guitarist Patrick Goodwin of retro muscle rockers Dirty Power; and the musically omnivorous vocalist Jessie Quattro, who was raised on Doc Watson and the hymns and "occasional barking" of Pentecostal Christianity. Sigrid Sheie, a classically trained pianist, has been a constant on the last two records, bringing musical formality and some of the most boss Hammond B-3 and Leslie