

PARTING SHOT

A weekly snapshot from The Daily Astorian and Chinook Observer photographers



The Milky Way peeks through the clouds and trees above Svensen June 17.

EDWARD STRATTON — The Daily Astorian

ODDITY

A heavy metal escape from mayhem

Iraq band goes from war-torn Baghdad to an American studio

By VIVIAN SALAMA
Associated Press

NEW YORK — The name of the album is “Gilgamesh,” the ancient Mesopotamian king with superhuman strength and courage who undertakes a perilous quest to discover the secret of eternal life. The epic tale embodies the complexities of life and finding one’s self that the four-man heavy metal band Acrassicauda believe is symbolic of their own journey from war-torn Baghdad to an American recording studio.

With roots in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, the band members discovered their love for heavy metal through Slayer and Metallica cassettes they dug up in the black markets of the then-heavily sanctioned country. Fifteen years later and half a world away, they’ve released their first full-length album with songs they feel are true to their past but will speak to anyone, regardless of their path in life. “This album is like a dream coming true,” said Marwan Hussein, 30, the band’s drummer and one of its founding members. “And it’s also been funded by the fans. It’s such a huge thing for us to have such support,



AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews

Members of the Iraqi heavy metal band “Acrassicauda,” lead vocalist Faisal Mustafa, left, drummer Marwan Hussein, center, and guitarist Muhammad Al Ansari, rehearse in New York. The band formed in July 2000 in Baghdad.

global support.” There’s never been a big heavy metal scene in the Iraqi capital, particularly pre-2003 when Hussein and fellow band members Faisal Talal and Firas al-Lateef were growing up, when access to anything but regional music was slim. The U.S. invasion kicked off in 2003, but Acrassicauda continued to rehearse and perform for their tiny fan base, despite the upheaval tearing Iraq apart. “War has always been a damage point,” said Talal,

31, the band’s lead singer. “As a musician first of all you try to survive, make sure all your loved ones are secure, and then of course, you get inspired. You get a lot of idea changes in your head.” **Intense war, sectarian strife** Saddam was gone, but with the U.S. invasion came a period of intense war and sectarian strife. Millions fled the country and many more were displaced. Baghdad, once a center for culture, art and music, had become the

scene of bloodshed. Heavy metal, as it turned out, was a great escape. “The reason we wanted to play in a metal band is because we were kind of fed up,” said Hussein. “Instead of going to therapy, or group therapy, or having post-traumatic stress ... we just come here and we sing about it, talk about it and play. We come out of this door feeling better, feeling refreshed.” As fate would have it, their music would also be their ticket to America. The group was featured in the

2007 Vice documentary “Heavy Metal in Baghdad,” which detailed the band’s struggle to stay true to their art in an Iraq that was increasingly hostile to foreign music. Studios were being destroyed by militant and militia groups, and the capital was in mayhem. The international recognition was great for their careers, but a threat to their lives. The group fled to Syria, and with the help of the documentary makers, eventually earned their way to the U.S.

Far away from their families but living in peace, the group could now focus on writing music and building a domestic fan base through live performances. **Toying with Arabic beats** But years would go by before the group was able to finally get into a recording studio having to work multiple jobs to earn money and support their new lives. Then last year, a friend suggested they launch a Kickstarter crowd-funding to raise the money for studio time. Forty days and \$37,000 later, they were in the studio. “We have songs we wrote like five years ago, but we didn’t have the budget,” said Hussein. “It’s such a huge thing for us to have such support, global support.” “It’s awesome,” said Mozart al-Hamawandi, 23, an Iraq-born guitarist who joined the group after they moved to the U.S. “We have some endorsements happening ... and we’re waiting to get some tours, have some big bands call us, maybe we’ll tour with them.” Now the men in Acrassicauda, the name of a black scorpion found in the Iraqi desert, are turning back to Arabic music for inspiration. The group says it’s toying with some Arabic beats to blend in to their heavy metal music to create a one-of-a-kind sound. “It’s fun to be Iraqi,” joked Talal. “We love the country. It’s always a part of who we are.” **Online:** <http://acracassicauda.com/>

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From left: Peter Wong, Hillary Borrud, Mateusz Perkowski