Chapter 12

The Ultra-Violence

Death Angel and Asian American Presence/Absence in Heavy Metal

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> "When I was really getting into music, I was falling into some rocker/stoner crowds out there in Concord [California], and I was definitely the rare, non-White dude in that mix."
>
> Rob Cavestany, founding member, main composer, and lead guitarist for Death Angel

Asian Americans are often ignored in studies of popular music of any genre, not simply in metal studies. There are studies of metal in Asia, but there seems little interest in studying *Asian American* musicians involved with heavy metal beyond the less-often-than-you'd-think mention of guitarist Kirk Hammett's Filipino heritage. It is not unusual—or difficult, it seems—to ignore Asian Americans and their contributions to popular music (Castro 2007). While there is a small cohort of high-profile Asian American musicians in popular music, including guitarist Dick Dale (Lebanese), guitarist Tommy Bolin (Syrian), the Van Halen brothers—guitarist Edward "Eddie" and drummer Alex (Indonesian), guitarist and vocalist H.E.R. (née Gabriella Sarmiento Wilson, Filipina), vocalist Arnel Pineda (Filipino) of Journey, vocalist Bruno Mars (Filipino), vocalist Olivia Rodrigo (Filipina), guitarist James Iha (Japanese) of Smashing Pumpkins, and MC/guitarist Mike Shinoda (Japanese) and DJ Joseph Han (Korean) of Linkin Park, with the exception of Shinoda and, more recently, H.E.R., most of these artists have not explicitly

referenced their Asian heritage in their music. Nor, it should be added, does their Asian heritage play into discussions of their musicking.[1]

In this essay, I think through this predicament—that is, the absence of Asian Americans in heavy metal music histories—by focusing on Death Angel, a thrash metal band founded by Filipino musicians, who were part of the subgenre's early formation, yet have been relatively ignored in most accounts of San Francisco Bay Area thrash. Initially formed in Daly City, a San Francisco suburb known colloquially as "Little Manila" due to the large numbers of resident Filipino families, it is small wonder that both the early thrash metal band Death Angel, and the seminal Filipino turntablist crew, the Invisibl Skratch Piklz, emerged out of this suburban enclave (O. Wang 2015). In any case, Death Angel were early participants in the development of a style of heavy metal initially called speed metal but which has become more commonly referred to as thrash metal in San Francisco Bay Area rock clubs and other public spaces throughout the 1980s. Despite Kirk Hammett's early promotion of the band, including producing the band's demo (or "demonstration" recording produced to interest record labels), Death Angel remains a cult favorite. Touring relentlessly while periodically releasing recordings, Death Angel has managed to forge a successful career despite their relative marginalization in thrash histories (never mind the exhaustingly larger heavy metal history project). What role does the band members' racialization as Asian American—troubled and debated as the term might be in the twenty-first century—play in Death Angel's position in thrash metal history?

In 1982, a quartet of Filipino musicians hailing from the same extended family—Rob Cavestany on lead guitar, Gus Pepa on rhythm guitar, Dennis Pepa on bass, and Andy Galeon on drums—formed a metal band, eventually settling on the name Death Angel. Soon, another member of the band's extended family, Mark Osegueda, joined as vocalist. In the wake of the success of their demo tape, Hammett's advocacy helped the band eventually get signed to the Enigma/Restless record label in 1987. The band's debut recording from that year, *The Ultra-Violence* (see figure 12.1), which inspired the title of this essay, heralded the multiracial nature of the emerging thrash metal scene centered in the San Francisco Bay Area despite an overarching discursive rendering of metal music culture as an articulation of white working- and lower-middle-class suburban masculinity (Fellezs 2016).

While that view of metal has been challenged, problematized, and expanded, at least within metal music studies, and there has been an increasing awareness of women, queer, Black, and Indigenous participants in the global metal scene, the category Asian American continues as absence. I have explored Asian American absence in jazz (Fellezs 2007), particularly in relation to blackness and the (US) American-ness of jazz while acknowledging the larger Black/white binary framing that relationship. Due to the ways in

Figure 12.1. Artwork for the album *The Ultra-Violence* (1987) by the band Death Angel.
Source: Image provided by Robert Cavestany.

which whiteness continues to shape heavy metal discourse, thinking through Death Angel as a "problem" to be "solved" in heavy metal approaches Asian American absence from the other side of the Black/white binary. However, I hope to dislodge the centrality of that framing and replace it with a pluralism that mirrors the theorists and activists of the so-called Global South (itself a colonialist construct) concerned with decolonizing knowledge production and dismantling colonialist structures of feeling as well as restructuring the material institutions established by settler-colonialism through the implementation of indigenous and subaltern knowledges (Canclini 2014; Chakrabarty 2000; Ciccariello-Maher 2017; Hessler 2018; Mignolo 2000, 2021; Steintrager and Chow 2019). I mobilize this line of critique to suggest that the contributions and, indeed, attention to the legacies of Asian American musicians to global popular music cultures indicate their *foundational* presence.

In addition, I am in sympathy with Deborah Wong's rationale for studying Asian American musicians: "If anything, I have gravitated toward the position that any music being performed or created by an Asian American is Asian American music, and I don't think this is as dissembling as it might seem. Rather, *I want to understand why some Asian Americans make music, what sounds they make, and for whom*. This is a very different question from the more common one of *whether* Asian American music exists" (Wong 2004, 12, added and original emphasis; see also Castro 2007). Accordingly, I am not presenting Death Angel as representative of a particular Asian or Filipino American musical formation within metal but, rather, as a specific case study of Filipino American musicians performing in a musical genre that is not only heard as "white" but that also challenges the Asian American "model minority myth," which pigeonholes Asian Americans as eager assimilationists into mainstream US American culture with little interest in artistic pursuits or creative careers. Additionally, I want to measure the band's challenge to the model minority myth against a Filipino-specific stereotype, namely, their purportedly native affinity and fluency with non-Filipino popular musicking, especially in "the West," from jazz and ballroom dance to rock and disco. Death Angel's presence in thrash metal echoes against these two racialized discourses, each bouncing off one another in a complicated dance between race and sound.

WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE: DEATH ANGEL TRAPPED "BETWEEN SELF-ORIENTALIZING AND SELF-ERASURE"?

A couple of qualifiers before I begin: First, I am focused primarily on Death Angel within a context of US (North) American discourse and practices; and second, I am interested in how a perception of Asian American-ness (and Filipino-ness in Death Angel's case) plays any role in their critical and listener reception, though I am more interested presently in guitarist Rob Cavestany's reactions to the reception Death Angel evokes. The band's over thirty-year history allows us to think about how a band that enjoys a large discography and videography, including an online presence with numerous interviews and live performances throughout Europe, Asia, and the Americas over the past decade or more, not only survives but thrives in a current music industry inundated by overlapping crises of overproduction, media hypersaturation, and the 24/7/365 demands of streaming culture.

Yet, despite the renewed attention to thrash metal history, I am compelled to inquire into the band's near-absence in recent thrash metal documentary films and books.[2] Tellingly, even in a 2015 documentary focused on the band,

Death Angel: A Thrashumentary, Randy Blythe of Lamb of God opines near the end of the film, "Well, Death Angel is one of those, like, legendary bands, y'know? They're totally—old, [growling] *older than us*, you know? [laughs] So, they were part of the first wave of thrash metal, you know? And, in a way, I don't think they ever really got the accolades that they were due." Following up, Chris Adler of Lamb of God, states somewhat later in the film, "The way I always viewed them, is they were kind of the underdogs . . . not necessarily the innovators but the guys that were constantly overlooked because they were just a little bit before when the flames caught for the whole scene to blow up but I think they played a huge part in how and why all of us do what we do today."[3] Adler seems to contradict himself—how is it possible for Death Angel to fail at being innovators yet overlooked because they were around a little bit *before* the thrash scene blew up and yet somehow remain an influence on "what we do today"? How, in other words, are they *not* part of the innovative scene that gave birth to thrash metal?

Adler's response characterizes the predicament as I would like to pursue it. Namely, Asian American participation in heavy metal registers as absence—even in a documentary on Death Angel. This is especially poignant at a time when the term is under pressure from Asian Americans themselves as an inadequate category of belonging (Espiritu 1992; Kang 2021; Lee and Zhou 2004). Yet the term appears in media accounts to describe a community under increasing assault in a xenophobic, pandemic-era United States. Another term, Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI), a similarly contested category, further complicates any sense of a cohesive collective identity formation (Hall 2015; Kauanui 2004).

In this context, Asian American musicians, particularly those involved with popular music, are often seen as anomalous to mainstream popular culture rather than as integral to its formation—or lending any substantial contributions, for that matter. Meanwhile, scholarly attention to Asian Americans' involvement with music has generally focused on genres such as folk, jazz, hip hop, punk, and classical music (Balance 2016; Fellezs 2007; Tongson 2013; G. Wang 2015; O. Wang 2015; Wong 2004), with the tendency to argue for their inclusion based on virtuosic technical abilities and against a larger backdrop of a general lack of familiarity with Asian musical traditions by American-born artists of any Asian ethnicity. In other words, Asian Americans cannot organically occupy a place in popular music but must prove they are worthy of inclusion by being exceptional. But exceptionalism is never ascertained in terms of drawing from their Asian heritage—virtuoso *koto* (Japanese zither) players need not apply. As journalist Ligaya Mishan put it, "Asian [American] musicians in the West have . . . had to navigate between self-Orientalizing and self-erasure" (Mishan 2021, n.p.).

Christine Bacareza Balance (2016) pushes productively against this convention, mentioning both Metallica and Death Angel, noting that "both bands . . . happened to feature Filipino musicians" (124) in her study of Filipino American involvement in non-mainstream popular music through a translocal examination of indie rock scenes in San Francisco and Manila. But Balance is not interested in heavy metal per se and the scene around Bindlestiff Studios, which opened in 1989 in the Mission District of San Francisco and that serves as one of her primary research sites, had little to do with the emergence of thrash metal in the early 1980s.

I will think through Death Angel's predicament—their presence/absence in heavy metal history—by listening to three songs, which are taken from three distinct periods in the band's long history. "The Ultra-Violence" appears on Death Angel's 1987 debut recording of the same name. "A Room with a View" appears on the band's commercial high-water mark, 1990's *Act III* (Geffen Records). Finally, rounding things out is "The Dream Calls for Blood," the title track from the band's 2013 recording (Nuclear Blast Records), which sees the current iteration of the band take thrash into the twenty-first century. Each song reveals the band's wide range of musical influences as a reflection of guitarist and main songwriter Rob Cavestany's eclectic musical interests and ability to integrate new approaches into his fundamental orientation in thrash metal.

"THE ULTRA-VIOLENCE": THE MODEL MINORITY MYTH AND THE RACIALIZATION OF FILIPINO MUSICALITY

I want to begin with Adler's assertion that Death Angel was *not* innovative or among the early metal bands in the San Francisco Bay Area that shaped thrash metal. As mentioned, Death Angel formed in 1982, and while a demo recording was recorded in 1983—the same year as the debut recordings of Slayer (*Show No Mercy*) and Metallica (*Kill 'Em All*)—their debut recording would not appear until 1987.[4] In terms of innovative moves, however, none of the early thrash bands recorded a nearly eleven-minute instrumental as fully conceived as "The Ultra-Violence" on their debut recordings.[5] The band recorded this remarkable track when Rob Cavestany, the composer of "The Ultra-Violence," was the oldest member of the band at nineteen, while the drummer and youngest member, Andy Galeon, was fourteen. However, the music press attention to their young age would quickly feel less than complimentary to the band members as interviews and media attention seemed fixated on their ages rather than their music.

No matter how you sliced it, 1987 was a banner year for heavy metal: Besides Death Angel, debut albums were released by influential bands such as Death (*Scream Bloody Gore*) and Heathen (*Breaking the Silence*); sophomore recordings were issued by Candlemass (*Nightfall*), Celtic Frost (*Into the Pandemonium*), Exodus (*Pleasures of the Flesh*), Faith No More (*Introduce Yourself*), Helloween (*Keeper of the Seven Keys: Part I*), King Diamond (*Abigail*), Sepultura (*Schizophrenia*), Racer X (*Second Heat*), and Joe Satriani (*Surfing with the Alien*); while Anthrax (*Among the Living*), Bathory (*Under the Sign of the Black Mark*), and Voivod (*Killing Technology*) released third albums. This is not to mention releases from stalwarts such as Black Sabbath (*The Eternal Idol*) and KISS (*Crazy Nights*), while Metallica put out a record covering a mix of songs from the Misfits, Budgie, and Diamond Head, among others, reflecting the wide listening practices of thrash musicians, titled *The $5.98 E.P.—Garage Days Re-Revisited*, and Mötley Crüe released *Girls, Girls, Girls*. In other words, there were all sorts of flavors of heavy metal music in 1987, meaning Death Angel was part of a mature field, as Bourdieu might define it (Bourdieu 1993). This field enjoyed a robust ecosystem of production and circulation of music recordings (including videotape recordings by the 1980s) but also required a corresponding performative commitment by fans in terms of fashion and speech, for instance, as well as global networks of consumption and reception in activities such as cassette tape trading and 'zine culture (Drew 2019; Waksman 2009).

My point in attending to this chronology is to underline the fact that Death Angel were not only innovative but were among the first crop of San Francisco Bay Area thrash metal bands. Despite their relative youth compared to most of their thrash metal peers, Death Angel was not part of a "second generation" or "next wave" of thrash. They were present from the outset, opening for bands such as Metallica, Exodus, and Megadeth, as well as performing as headliners at San Francisco Bay Area clubs throughout the early 1980s.

As Adler's comments indicate, Death Angel's artistic ambitions did not always register as such, however. Beginning with a motif related to "Tubular Bells," Michael Oldfield's instrumental theme and title to his debut recording, which became a hit when it was used for the film *The Exorcist* (1973, Warner Bros., William Friedkin, director), "The Ultra-Violence," the longest track on the recording by far, announced Death Angel's willingness to explore the limits of speed/thrash metal. Coincidentally, Oldfield was nineteen years old when "Tubular Bells" was released in 1973, for which he was lauded as a prodigy realizing his potential. Why was Cavestany, a composer of the same age, not accorded similar acclaim?

In attempting to answer this question, I want to draw attention to two interrelated, though not entirely overlapping issues. The first concerns the model

minority myth, which sits atop other Asian racializations that are more easily seen as pernicious, such as the perceived threat of a perilous yellow Asiatic horde—all resting on a bedrock assumption in the US American imaginary in which Asians are not automatically assumed to be "native" US American citizens but, rather, are seen as "perpetual foreigners"—constantly pressured to assure white Americans, in particular, of their native bona fides (Chou and Feagin 2010; Lee 1999, 2010). Second, and salient in considering Death Angel, Filipinos have been seen as preternatural musicians with a proclivity for emulating musics of non-Philippines origin (Castro 2007).

Asian Americans—or, more specifically, post–WWII Japanese Americans (later expanded to include Chinese and, more recently, South Koreans and South Asian Indians)—suffer from the so-called model minority stereotype. The emergence of the model minority stereotype supported the racial status quo with its congratulatory attitude toward Asian American conformity to bourgeois White Anglo-Saxon Protestant norms in their efforts to climb the social ladder from their Asian immigrant parents' working-class origins into the middle class. This post–WWII "silent generation" of Japanese Americans (again, soon expanded to include other Asian American groups) would be stereotyped by their focus on upward social mobility, a tendency toward political passivity, and an abiding belief that, despite the racial discrimination Japanese Americans had endured in the US concentration camps during the Second World War,[6] the American system was based on a meritocratic ideal in which they could excel through educational achievement and adherence to a strong work ethic; in essence, the "color blind" American Dream ideology of the Cold War period, which insisted on a social order built on the foundation of a heteronormative nuclear family structure held together by males focused on their careers and a domestic sphere of women and children (Peterson 1966; Gupta, Szymanski, and Leong 2011; Lee 2010).[7]

The model minority myth, which emerged in the mid-1960s, retained earlier stereotypes of Asian males as emotionless automatons, figuring them as bland individuals who lacked deep personal feelings or commitments other than to material success and the attainment of middle-class social status (Chiswick 1983; Gardner et al. 1985; Hirschman and Wong 1986; Mar 1999; Sakamoto, Liu, and Tzeng 1998; Wu 2013). One of the consequences of the model minority stereotype taking hold was in its support of figuring Asian Americans as technocrats rather than as artists, as brains—though not intellects—with little heart—meaning, emotionally distant—and therefore unable to inhabit an artistic sensibility.

Despite a desire to melt into the broader US American body politic, Asian American males remained an insular population, corralled for the most part in Asian American spaces and disconnected from the broader culture and thereby indelibly maintaining their "forever alien" status (Chou and Feagin

2010; Fujino 1997; Gupta, Szymanski, and Leong 2011; Hurh and Kim 1989; Hwang, Saenz, and Aguirre 1997; Shek 2007). As Won Moo Hurh and Kwang Chung Kim argue, "The success image of a minority group does not . . . necessarily reflect the increased acceptance of the minority group by the dominant group in the society's mainstream. In other words, Asian Americans remain a socially segregated minority, whether they are called 'model' or 'successful'" (Hurh and Kim 1989, 531; also, Chou and Feagin 2010, particularly chapter 5).

Filipinos reside somewhat outside of this particular Asian racialization, however. Due to the long history of non-Asian colonization in the Philippines, from the arrival of the Spanish in the sixteenth century to the transfer of authority to the United States in 1898, Filipino musicians and audiences have enjoyed and performed non-Asian music, running the entire gamut of art to popular music, soon creating their own versions of such music, which became the basis for new hybrid forms of Filipino music (Keppy 2019). The model minority exceptionalism that would accrue to Japanese and other so-called Far East Asian groups did not adhere to Filipinos or Southeast Asians more generally. Filipinos, in other words, were relegated along an Asian "color line" that privileged lighter-skinned Asians and "Far East" Asians over darker-skinned South and Southeast Asians (Cortes, Boncan, and Jose 2000; Espiritu 1995; Root 1997).

This racialized cultural taxonomy, however, allowed Filipinos, known as the "entertainers of the East" since the early twentieth century, to be heard as particularly adept by Asian audiences and critics in emulating the latest Western popular music styles (Keppy 2019; Ng 2005). The nearly four centuries of Spanish rule had also bequeathed Filipino popular music culture with, for example, the performance practice of male serenading, as well as dance forms such as the *pandanggo*, or "Filipino fandango," and the Spanish *jota* and Cuban *habanera* (Villaruz n.d.). Their status as exalted entertainers, however, did little to displace other stereotypes US Americans held toward "their little brown brothers," as William Howard Taft infamously described Filipinos in his justifications for US intervention in the island nation. Understanding colonialism as a conduit for popular music that granted Filipino musicians and dancers a deep understanding of Western music as well as the ability to travel abroad, however, is a twisted and limited reading of the interlocking matrix of imperialist histories and discourse about Filipino musicians (Castro 2011).

The point of this historical digression is that Filipino Americans' popular music sensibilities were rendered "natural" due to their centuries-long colonization. Given their association with dark skin, Filipinos' seemingly natural affinities for Black American music styles such as swing jazz, soul, and hip hop or dance-related genres such as disco, are heard as innate given this larger

historical and discursive backdrop. Unlike other Asian musicians, they are less apt to appear as soloists in international European art music concertizing, however, and their acceptance in genres such as gospel remain largely limited to intra-Filipino markets and audiences. But, as Mary Talusan's exemplary study reveals, this is not a new story. One of the most celebrated ensembles of the early twentieth century was the Philippine Constabulary Band (PCB), led by African American officer Lt. Walter H. Loving, which rivaled the world's best military marching bands, including the US Marine Band under John Philip Sousa's baton. Talusan notes, "The [PCB's] popularity with American audiences, therefore, was much more than an appreciation for musical artistry; *the band's achievements validated the political aims of US imperialism and provided aural and visual proof of the success of 'benevolent assimilation,'* a concept rooted in a proclamation by President McKinley that the United States intervened in the Philippines 'not as invaders or conquerors, but as friends,' in order to 'win the confidence, respect, and affection of the inhabitants of the Philippines'" (Talusan 2021, 4, added emphasis). Dispatched to the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, the PCB's "orderly, disciplined bandsmen performing familiar American patriotic marches were juxtaposed with unassimilated tribal people of the Philippines playing 'primitive' music in order to impress upon fairgoers the magnificent progress achieved by US colonization" (Talusan 2021, 4).

As this history reveals, Filipino popular musicians have faced a double-edged critical perspective that, on the one hand, praises them for their musicality yet denigrates them because of their purported lack of an indigenous music culture, on the other. Consequently, their artistic impulses are seen as cultivated by their familiarity with Western music rather than through their own aesthetic sensibilities and creative traditions. Similarly, because of their race and their youth, Death Angel was seen in its early years as coming into heavy metal not as "natural" participants but, rather, as facile mimics. In fact, the music press in Death Angel's early years emphasized their young age rather than their music and creative work, including some of the cover artwork produced by various band members throughout the years. Similar to the PCB, Cavestany and Osegueda have been portrayed as exceptional Filipino American musicians—which they certainly are—but their skills have been gained at the price of assimilation into a white-identified genre, echoing the stereotyping of the model minority myth and the "exceptional but unoriginal Filipino musician." Death Angel challenged this reading of their work, however, by consistently pushing against the boundaries of what constituted "real" thrash metal.

"A ROOM WITH A VIEW": MAJOR LABELS AND RAISING ASPIRATIONS AND VISIBILITY

A mere three years after their debut, Death Angel signed with Geffen Records, releasing their third studio recording, *Act III* (see figure 12.2). The band members were beginning to see all their road work pay off with major label support, which included chartered travel and full-service tours in and outside of the United States, heady with the promise of global fame and fortune seemingly around the corner. Given their new label home with more resources at their disposal, Cavestany and Osegueda had been publicly critical regarding the eclecticism and experimentalism of their second album, *Frolic Through the Park* (Restless Records, 1988). In our conversation, Cavestany surmised that there were "too many cooks in the kitchen" (personal interview 2021)

Figure 12.2. Artwork for the album *Act III* (1990) by the band Death Angel.
Source: Image provided by Robert Cavestany.

and that trying to include everyone's increasingly divergent tastes may have been a mistake. At the same time, *Act III* revealed a band continuing to develop beyond the aesthetic strictures of "heaviness" and thrash.

There was no surer sign of this move in the band than the song, "A Room with a View," penned by Death Angel's main composer and lead guitarist. Cavestany begins the track strumming an acoustic steel-string guitar, the pick noticeably sounding against the strings. Taking the perspective of a blind person, Cavestany's lyrics caution against the sighted feeling any sense of superiority or advantage. Following a short acoustic guitar solo, the electric guitar finally enters as the voice of the blind individual's emphatic declaration of autonomy due to an awareness gained beyond mere physical sight, linking the power of metal music with the delicacy of a singer-songwriter's acoustic guitar. Ending as a fingerpicking acoustic guitar figure takes center stage, the electric lead guitar slowly fades to the background. The blind yet visionary protagonist may yet lead the sighted yet blind to "true sight" or enlightenment. "Who's fooling who?" asks Cavestany, but he gives no answer, allowing listeners to answer the question for themselves, only offering that "the boundaries of [the blind man's] wisdom" are obscured by "the solitude of his kingdom." Did Cavestany feel isolated as his aspirations began to encompass more than simply being the heaviest band in thrash?

As Cavestany repeated a number of times in our conversation, he had long been attracted to "heavy music." His initial introduction to heavy metal was a 1979 KISS concert: "We always credit KISS as our original 'What the fuck is *this*?! It's *amazing*!' That was our first real concert. I saw KISS in '79 at the Cow Palace on the Dynasty tour. I was eleven . . . and we all saw that and said, we gotta do *that*. That's what we're gonna do. KISS and that show was responsible for us getting a dream of making a band" (personal interview, 2021). When I spoke with Cavestany, he was clearly excited by the memory of this concert—chaperoned along with his cousins by his mother and aunts—which remains an affective high moment, echoing in the music he performs today.

Yet, when compelled to demonstrate his growing musical sensibilities, Cavestany turned to the acoustic guitar and the romantic ballad form rather than a heavy, riff-oriented song. While it is a rare rock ballad in the band's repertoire, it reflects Cavestany's formative listening years. "When I was really young and listening to my dad's records, I just totally wore out all the '70s music. That's my original heart and soul of music. Like Elton [John], Stevie [Wonder], Earth, Wind, and Fire, Fleetwood Mac, and, like, Pink Floyd, Bread, The Guess Who. All these killer '70s rock and, not necessarily rock, but just killer '70s music. So, that's always in my heart, and until this day, I can sing every word to all that music because I just heard it so much back then" (personal interview, 2021). "A Room with a View" readily

calls to mind 1970s-era recordings from bands such as Led Zeppelin, Bad Company, and Traffic, with its acoustic guitar and vocal introduction, slowly bringing the rest of the band along with the song's transformation from a singer-songwriter acoustic ballad, including a tasteful acoustic guitar solo, before the band "goes electric" into a full-tilt rock anthem, leading to a brief climactic, searing electric guitar solo. As the solo ends, the song returns to the softer, acoustic beginning, complete with a false "silent" ending before fading out with a psychedelic-flavored electric guitar solo sailing above the acoustic strumming and restrained drumming of the final cadenza.

This refashioning of the young thrash band's focus on heavy riffing and power drumming through an injection of Cavestany's early taste formation in 1970s "classic rock" was not entirely self-motivated. Cavestany readily acknowledges the benefits of being signed to Geffen beyond the material support of touring busses and technical staff:

> [I began to compose differently] because then we had a fucking serious producer, Max Norman. That era is where I learned the most of everything. That's where we turned from a boy to a man, going through that album . . . We went to a major label and working with Max Norman, and they weren't just allowing us to do whatever. They are making us write and write and write so much, and [the label would say] "Okay. That's pretty good. Let's hear more songs, more songs." I was getting so fucking pissed. I was like, "You already have plenty of songs. There are fifteen songs. That's enough songs." They're like, "No, better songs." We wrote like thirty songs for that album, but that taught us how to work hard. Very, very hard. Much more than we thought we were doing before. (Lehtinen and Syrjälä 2020, n.p.)

Cavestany's idea of work and maturing as a laboring musician, as well as developing an interest in expanding his aesthetic limits, blossomed under Norman's tutelage. "A Room with a View" reveals Cavestany's foundational musical formation with the soft rock of his father's record collection lyrically, as well. The lyrical concerns hew closer to Bread than Iron Maiden (though, perhaps, we might now hear the connections between the two bands irrespective of their genre placement), centering the protagonist of "Room" in the solitary, alienated space of the "too wise for the world" recluse, who is "looking through you" from his room with a view.

This period of growth and achievement would come to a devastating end, however, in a bus crash in 1990, nearly ending the life of drummer Andy Galeon and effectively shuttering Death Angel as a performing unit for the next twelve years. At the time, the band members considered the ending permanent. The band's absence from the metal scene for the next few years—including Cavestany's retreat into funk-rock, among other nonmetal styles—speaks not only to the frustrations these Asian American musicians felt at the

time as their career aspirations came grinding to a halt. It also speaks to Death Angel's singular Asian American presence within the seminal San Francisco Bay Area thrash scene, which meant that when the band was no longer in the mix, Death Angel's absence became even more acute.

"THE DREAM CALLS FOR BLOOD": CONTESTING AND CONFORMING TO THE MODEL MINORITY MYTH

While Death Angel entered the scene younger in age than most of the other participants in the local San Francisco Bay Area metal scene, Cavestany is now one of the elder statesmen of thrash metal. Age, in other words, continues to be a talking point about the band though the racial aspect is more pronounced four decades after "The Ultra-Violence" announced a Filipino American presence in heavy metal. Pointing to their still-youthful appearance, guitarist Gary Holt (Exodus, Slayer) notes, "They're stalwarts, you know. They're still here, making some of the best music they've ever made now. And kicking serious ass, and *they still look sixteen!* That's the important thing, right?"[8] Guitarist Doc Coyle of God Forbid and Bad Wolves, spins the race canard despite being biracial (Black/white) himself, stating, "They look younger than *me*, y'know what I'm sayin'? It's like, you know, got them good Asian genes, you know? [They] never age, doing crunches and kickboxing and all the pre-show workouts that they do. You know, they are very fit gentlemen."[9]

Underlining Holt and Coyle's assessment of Cavestany, Osegueda, and Aguilar's physical appearance, "The Dream Calls for Blood" invokes an even more robust metal than their high-spirited youthful debut recording (see figure 12.3). If "A Room with a View" represents Cavestany's aesthetic development and sense of maturing as a composer, "Dream" is a return to the intensity of the band's original impulse for creating thrash metal. Heavier, louder, more intense—the eternal grail of sonic submersion for thrashers, as one of the band's early songs, "Thrashers," attests—makes its return in *Death Angel Mark III*, as Cavestany joked.[10] The vocals remain in classic thrash mode, certainly as performed by Osegueda over the decades, and while he growls with the aggression required of the subgenre, he is clearly more influenced by older metal "bel canto" vocalists such as Ronnie James Dio rather than the guttural vocal style of death and black metal vocalists like Kam Lee (né Barney Kamalani Lee) of Death.[11]

"Dream" opens with an aggressive rhythm guitar, taking advantage of the heavily compressed yet overdriven timbre of contemporary metal guitar to produce a two-guitar wall of sound. Part of the attraction of this sound is the

Figure 12.3. Artwork for the album *The Dream Calls for Blood* (2013) by the band Death Angel.
Source: Image provided by Robert Cavestany.

way guitarists are able to articulate the rhythm with the brief silences allowed by the various picking and strumming techniques that necessitate damping and muting (or the strings would continue to sound, attenuating the desired rhythmic effect). The compressed distorted metal guitar rhythmic-sonic trope is part of the other desired trait, namely, heaviness. The silences alert listeners to the antecedent and subsequent sounds, lessening the sense of a determinate pitch and serving a percussive rhythmic function produced by dramatizing the difference between sound and silence in metal (Mynett 2017; Brown 2012; Pillsbury 2006).

Osegueda describes the song as "brutal," which is a "major theme of this record" (Osegueda 2013, n.p.). However, Osegueda also describes "Dream" as a cautionary tale to listeners: "It's about whatever you're into, whether it

be music, athletics, any sort of thing if you truly want to make that happen for a living, you know, you've got to bleed for it. And it's blood, sweat, and tears, but, mainly, you gotta bleed for it. You do. *If* you want your dream to happen" (Osegueda 2013, n.p.). This idea of paying your dues as one of the preconditions for success drives the band with its relentless work ethic of touring, recording, and composing. Espousing this ideal of hard work and its rewards for its value as a sign of self-discipline as well as for its purported economic benefits may fall too easily into line with the model minority myth, but it indicates the depth of internalization by many Asian Americans of the myth—even by those who wield metal axes onstage.

LEFT FOR DEAD: RE-FORMING THE BAND

In some ways, Osegueda is describing Death Angel's own renaissance in 2001, when they reformed for a one-concert-only reunion for the Clash of the Titans benefit concert for Testament vocalist Billy "Chuck Billy" Child, who was undergoing cancer treatment. Cavestany had been concentrating on his then-current band, The Swarm, a group with a very distinct musical agenda from Death Angel, blending funk and hard rock to produce groove-oriented rock (but not metal) music. Frustrated that audiences continued to yell out for Death Angel songs at Swarm gigs, Cavestany was ready to abandon the musician's life due to a perceived lack of audience (and label) interest for The Swarm. Perhaps most discouragingly, Cavestany was troubled by a past in which he had once been a member of a band that had been signed to a major label but was now relegated to traveling in a band van, sharing motel accommodations, and sometimes playing to near-empty rooms. Importantly, he was not getting any younger.

The call to re-form Death Angel was not entirely welcome, though, notwithstanding the travails of The Swarm. Describing the final days of the original Death Angel as "a trap," Cavestany listed the reasons for his hesitancy in reforming the band: "At that point [of disbanding Death Angel to form, first, The Organization and, then, The Swarm], to be honest, we were sick of the metal scene. You know, we were going through a time of just trying to expand our musicianship, listening to different kinds of music and trying to open up [our] mind into the entire music world and the entire music scene, and then starting to see and not like a lot of the closed-minded-ness of the heavy metal world" (personal interview, 2021).[12]

Yet, despite only having two rehearsals with then-new guitarist Ted Aguilar before nervously debuting at the 2001 benefit concert, the band "kicked ass!" (personal interview with Cavestany, 2021). Following their triumphant performance at the benefit, Cavestany and Osegueda began receiving calls to

tour and record. Initially, Cavestany remained reluctant, claiming that he had retired from music. Relenting, finally, to perform at the Dynamo Festival in Holland, other performing dates and recording opportunities began to accumulate, finally inducing Cavestany and Osegueda to resume their musical careers in a band called Death Angel. As Cavestany noted with wry humor toward the end of our conversation, "Now, nineteen years after [the benefit concert], we're still here! We managed to rise from the dead once again. And not only that, but come back strong" (personal interview 2021).

"UNDER PRESSURE": SURVIVING THE PANDEMIC

It is not as if no one knows the band was formed by Filipino American rock musicians or that it continues to be led by Filipino American founding members Cavestany and Osegueda. In *Thrashumentary*, Osegueda describes the way in which relative "newcomer" (he's been with the band for two decades now), guitarist Ted Aguilar, fit in easily with the band: "[Aguilar] is a great guy. Has a great vision for the band . . . for people who don't know Death Angel from anything but pictures, *they just assume he was an original member because he [is] Filipino* [laughs]."[13] Osegueda is less phenotypically "Filipino" than Cavestany or Aguilar—and there are two white band members, Will Carroll on drums and Damien Sisson on bass—but everyone knows Death Angel as the "Filipino thrash band from San Francisco."

In 2019, Death Angel was nominated for a 2020 Best Metal Performance Grammy for their song, "Humanicide." Tool won for their song, "7empest," which, as Cavestany admits, is "not very metal." He continues, clarifying, "Tool is a great fucking band. I'm not trying to put them down. They're incredible musicians. I think they're fucking amazing. For the category, our songs, to me, sound the most metal for sure" (Lehtinen and Syrjälä 2020, n.p.). While it is relatively unimportant in the overall scheme of things that Jethro Tull beat Metallica in the first year that the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS) recognized heavy metal with the Best Hard Rock/Metal Performance Vocal or Instrumental Grammy award, the mixed title award is indicative of heavy metal musicians' relative perch within the cultural pecking order, at least as deigned by NARAS and the Grammy awards. Still, it is quite an accomplishment for a relatively obscure thrash metal band to be nominated along with the more recognizably popular and well-known bands and musicians such as Tool and Black Sabbath guitarist Tony Iommi (nominated for a Candlemass recording on which he is featured).

Another visible sign of the band's ability to persevere despite personal tragedies, music industry constraints, and the inevitable "growing up in

public" issues of a group of teens trying to forge a career in popular music, can be seen in the band's continuously expansive view of music it considers "metal." Speaking to me about a series of COVID-related mishaps that hit the band since the spring of 2020, Cavestany remains optimistic:

> Let me throw in that we recorded, during that time, while the pandemic was in full swing and [drummer] Will [Carroll] was in ICU [due to COVID], *and* while the massive riots were going down because our country was a burning hell. At the same time, during this time, me and Mark [Osegueda] got together and created the *Under Pressure* EP, which we put out [as] an all-acoustic EP. We were feeling that, you know, everything was under pressure, and it was a perfect song [for the times]. We're big fans of Queen and David Bowie, so we did that. Then, while we were at it, we wrote a new song called "Fated Remains," we did a new version of "Room with a View" and a song called "Revelation Song" off of our recent album, *Humanicide*" (personal interview 2021).

With the cover of Queen and Bowie's collaborative hit, Cavestany's father's record collection continues to prove its long-lasting influence on the guitarist.

ALIVE AND SCREAMING: DEATH ANGEL AND ASIAN AMERICAN PRESENCE IN METAL

Along with creating a body of substantive work, giving future Asian American metalheads pride of place in the metal sanctorum may be among Death Angel's most lasting legacies—and they still have plenty of time yet to build on the solid foundation they have been constructing since *The Ultra-Violence*. Their influence, in any case, will cast a wide shadow, covering more than the US metal scene as the band enjoys a large, devoted following in Europe and Asia. Cavestany described the band's reception in the Philippines: "We've played the Philippines, like, five separate times. We show up, and they've got signs, they've got banners with, like, 'Welcome, Death Angel' with our logo and all this stuff, singing along to songs. It's amazing!" (personal interview 2021).

Thrashumentary closes with Death Angel performing in Manila at an outdoor festival concert. The crowd is enthusiastic, headbanging along with the music, singing along to songs composed before many of them were born. After the concert's final song, "Thrown to the Wolves," the crowd remains enthusiastic, chanting "Death Angel! Death Angel!" while the band members stroll around the stage, throwing the devil's horn hand sign, dispensing guitar picks into the audience, and high-fiving and fist-bumping fans gathered around the stage. It is no surprise, after all the road work Cavestany and

Osegueda have put in, the artistic growth they have continuously challenged themselves to achieve, and despite the tragedies they have endured, to hear the crowd scream for more. Just before throwing out his Death Angel–embossed wrist band, guitarist Aguilar turns to look directly at the camera and says, "It's the Philippines," then, turning to Cavestany, yells excitedly, "We're in the Philippines!"[14] Cavestany replies with equal enthusiasm, "Oh, *hell* yes! I've got this, too, bitch!" before both musicians fling their wristbands out into the clamoring crowd.

Figuring out an Asian American absence/presence in metal history may not be the central issue, after all. It may, in fact, be more productive to listen for the pluralism Death Angel brings to thrash metal as a gift from these Filipino American musicians caught among Asian American and Filipino stereotypes, the discursive limits of metal music culture, and the economic imperatives in dealing with the music industrial complex. Cavestany's eclectic musical interests beyond thrash speak to the pluralist sensibilities of Asian American musicians who, on the one hand, must negotiate hegemonic understandings of their place in the world and, on the other, carve out their own space for musical creativity regardless of their racialization. Death Angel continues to embody and express the central tenets and contradictions of heavy metal: an individualism tucked within a larger sense of collective belonging; a performative display of power alongside an identification with the oppressed; and a critique of normative social relations cloaked within a sometimes-puerile cloth. In the final reckoning, however, Death Angel offers a potent response for those replying from the "Global South" to their erasure and silencing.

In many ways, Death Angel has used this double-consciousness[15] to write its own metal history, answering the dream's call for blood with their uncompromising music and forcibly challenging the global metal culture to recognize Asian American contributions. As *The Ultra-Violence*'s opening track, "Thrashers," announces, "Posers strike us in the back, I can't take their bullshit, turn around and attack." No members of a passive orientalist model minority, willing to "go along to get along," Death Angel's Cavestany, Osegueda, and Aguilar—as well as original members, Andy Galeon and Dennis and Gus Pepa—are musicians who, as self-defining agents, "turn around and attack" Asian/Filipino American stereotypes as well as the racist biases of the music industrial complex to stake a powerful claim for their—and other Asian American metalheads'—rightful place in metal music culture.

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NOTES

1. There are a number of Asian American artists in hip hop such as the Neptunes' Chad Hugo (Filipino) and the Black Eyed Peas' Apl.de.ap (né Allan Pineda, Filipino). A recent *New York Times* article, "The Asian Pop Stars Taking Center Stage" (August 11, 2021), by Ligaya Mishan, features a number of Asian American female popular music artists of various genres a generation younger than cult favorites such as Mitski.

2. See, for example, the band's glancing mentions in Harald Oimoen and Brian Lew, *Murder in the First Row,* 2nd printing (New York: Bazillion Points, 2012, book); *Get Thrashed: The Story of Thrash Metal* (Rick Ernst, dir., Saigon1515 Productions, 2008, documentary film); and *Bay Area Godfathers: The True Story of Bay Area Metal* (Bob Nalbandian, dir., UMN LLC, 2020, documentary film).

3. *Death Angel: A Thrashumentary*, Blythe, 02:11:14–02:11:38; Adler, 02:11:39–02:12:04.

4. The Kirk Hammett–produced demo, *Kill as One*, was recorded and released in 1985.

5. Metallica recorded bassist Cliff Burton's four-minute instrumental, "(Anesthesia)—Pulling Teeth," on their debut, *Kill 'Em All* (Megaforce 1983). Megadeth begins its debut, *Killing Is My Business . . . And Business Is Good!* (Combat 1985) with a brief instrumental introduction titled "Last Rites," which was based on Bach's "Toccata and Fugue in D minor." "The Ultra-Violence" remains in the band's live setlist as fans have continued to cry out for the song, even when Cavestany was leading The Organization and The Swarm, two bands he formed in attempts to extricate himself from thrash and heavy metal, as described in the body of the text.

6. The ten concentration camps have been more widely known by the euphemistic term, "internment camp." There were also what are known as "assembly centers," which refers to the initial removal of Japanese Americans from their homes into recently vacated horse stalls at racetracks throughout California, often for weeks, sometimes for months, before transport to one of the camps (Hay 2012, W. Ng 2002).

7. The "silent generation" was described in a November 5, 1961, issue of *Time* magazine as "waiting for the hand of fate to fall on its shoulders, meanwhile working fairly hard and saying almost nothing. The most startling fact about the younger generation is its silence . . . It does not issue manifestoes, make speeches or carry posters." (http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,856950,00.html). This silent generation was born between 1925–1942, immediately preceding the baby boomers.

8. *Death Angel: A Thrashumentary*, Holt, 02:13:25–02:13:37.

9. *Death Angel: A Thrashumentary*, Coyle, 2:13:38–2:13:53.

10. Cavestany is referencing the way in which the many lineup changes in Deep Purple are known variously as "Mark I/II/III, etc." versions of the band.

11. Both Cavestany and Osegueda have expressed some indifference, if not antipathy, toward black metal's "cookie monster" vocal style. When I asked about black/extreme metal, Cavestany admitted, "To me, [when black metal appeared on the scene, heavy metal] was starting to sound stiff and sterile and mechanical. The vocals were less melodic and more guttural and monotone. I just wasn't digging it, you know? It was going against what I wanted. I wanted more groove, more soul and melody. And that wasn't the flavor of the month." He would also joke with me, that black metal is "way too Satanic!" As he recalled, "Like, we were just kidding when we were talking about devil's metal and shit like that. We weren't trying to burn down churches and shit. So, yeah, we weren't wanting to be attached to that, so [the 1990s] was a weird time for us" (2021). As Cavestany's remarks reveal, Death Angel's engagement with such iconography and symbolism draws more from the world of horror films—he is an admitted fan of Hammer horror films, for instance—than any involvement with actual Satanism. Like many thrash metal bands, Death Angel played with Satanic and sacrilegious iconography and rhetoric as a response to mainstream rock as well as broader social norms.

12. Cavestany spent the years between The Organization and The Swarm performing music that was not meant to launch a professional music career nor had anything to do with heavy metal.

13. *Death Angel: A Thrashumentary*, Osegueda, 00:58:16–00:58:28. This same misapprehension does not seem to occur with the "Mark III" band members, drummer Will Carroll and bassist Damien Sisson, who are white.

14. *Death Angel: A Thrashumentary*, Aguilar, 2:27:48:14–2:28:01.

15. The concept of double consciousness was initially developed by W. E.B. Du Bois, who coined it to refer to Black/African American's difficult positionality within the United States as both American and Black individuals, and the ways in which this push and pull of both identities influences, reveals, but also weighs on the Black experience in the United States.