





SO MANY ROADS
SO LITTLE TIME

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HELLBANGERS IS AN AFFIRMATION THAT AT ITS CORE SHOWS THE STRENGTH AND POWER OF THE METAL COMMUNITY IN AFRICA, AND HOW IT CONNECTS AROUND THE WORLD. • THESE BRILLIANT AND EXCITING PHOTOGRAPHS DRAW US INTO A SPECIAL AND UNIQUE STORY. I FEEL PARTICULARLY ENGAGED BY THE CONNECTION WITH THE CRADLE OF CIVILISATION, FROM THE DAWN OF HUMANITY TO THE PRESENT DAY, THROUGH THIS LENS OF METAL LIFE AS CAPTURED BY PEP. • THE LOVE AND DEVOTION TO THE MUSIC THAT THESE WONDERFUL MANIACS SHOW SCREAM OUT TO US WITH ABSOLUTE CONVICTION – WE ARE ALL UNITED BY THE ESSENCE OF THE METAL HEART AND SPIRIT OF THE HELLBANGERS!

Rob Halford, Judas Priest





INTRODUCTION

My first visit to the African continent was when I was 15 years old. I was living in Tarifa in southern Spain, having moved from Mallorca, and we used to cross over to Morocco. That was my first taste of the continent in any sense, but my first time in sub-Saharan Africa was 2002.

I was selected for the World Press Photo Masterclass, and I ended up, out of the blue, in Freetown in Sierra Leone. It was my first long-term project on war. I was inexperienced and, looking back, I have no idea why I went there. Probably because I was stupid and unaware of the dangers, but in many senses it was a good start for me. But there's no doubt that ignorance played a very important role in me ending up in a place where there was a brutal war going on that I knew nothing about. I witnessed human suffering at its greatest level. For five or six years, I photographed and documented the physical and psychological consequences of war. That resulted in my project *Faith in Chaos*, which won me the Eugene Smith World Press Photo award, a Spanish photo press award and the Zilveren Camera Holland prize, so it was a project where people started to know my work.

Africa then became a focus. I started collaborating with MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières). In 2003, I started to photograph an AIDS projects in Zambia, which ended up involving 12 countries. I was documenting the first antiretrovirals that were going into Africa, which was amazing, because when I started photographing the HIV and AIDS crisis at that time, AIDS was a death sentence. These are the places where I learned what it means to be a photojournalist – and what it means to be a person too. The photographs were very strong, radical and dramatic, which meant some people had problems looking at them because they thought I was stigmatising people. I learned how to become an activist, how to look at the bigger picture and how to be a part of the solution too. Consequently, in a way I feel Africa shaped me as a person, as a photojournalist, as a photographer and as a human being. I basically learned, through confrontation and very harsh, radical realities, what I didn't understand in life. Before Africa, I was very shy, and all these wars and harsh realities shaped who I am today. Then I photographed Darfur, and then spent four or five years in Somalia

(another country at war), which led to *The Invisible Trace* project. So the Africa I knew for many years, was the Africa of problems.

I am a Nikon European Ambassador, and every year we do a Nikon group project. We decided we wanted to do a group project on Africa, but we wanted to shine a new light on this amazing continent; we didn't want to spotlight the war, the disasters, the famine, the refugees and the sad stories.

It was called *A New Light on Africa*. And one day, someone sent me a photo of one of these 'hellbangers' from Botswana. I didn't know the country, but this one photo intrigued me so much that I thought it'd be a good story. It was a time when I had decided that I wanted to indulge my personal love of heavy metal in my professional life too. I had recently formed a great working relationship with Motörhead, which also led to an amazing ongoing series of collaborations with the annual Wacken Open Air heavy metal music festival and foundation in Germany. So this photo had really got me thinking that, maybe, I could combine two of my greatest loves – the wonderful continent of Africa and heavy metal – into one project. I didn't know for sure, but instinct told me it was a real possibility.

I started doing some research, and discovered that, yes, there was a scene there. I didn't know how big or small it was, but I wrote to Vulture in Letlhakane, Botswana (he's the figurehead of the Hellbangers) and Vulture replied, saying I was welcome to visit and explore. He was working as a policeman, and he said he'd take time off and be my guide. And so this Hellbangers journey started...

For me, it was mind-blowing. The passion, the pageantry, the sheer dedication was just – wow, man! I soon decided to make these portraits. I didn't want to burrow deeply into documentary photography; how they lived, what they ate and so on. When we went out for a night in the clubs, or if they were performing, it was in my blood and nature to take some photographs, but the main premise was always to make portraits using natural light and a reflector. That was all that I needed.

There was such a deep and profound sense of comfort and joy for me when I was with the

Hellbangers. We'd be in the car, having some spliffs, we'd go and grab some beers and listen to old albums from bands like Iron Maiden, Metallica and Motörhead. I felt like I was going back in time to when I was 14 or 15. Vulture would buy his 'coffee' (a strong coffee liquor), I'd get the beers and we'd drive around town just listening to, and talking about, music and metal in that very pure way. Every day, Vulture would take me to meet one or two friends, and I would photograph them outside their homes. I didn't want to take them out of their environment. For me, it was very important that the context of Botswana and Africa was also captured in the images. Even if it was just by a tree or in front of their house, it was necessary to understand that we were in Botswana, Africa and not something like Carnival where people dress up for a special event.

No.

This is life for the Hellbangers.

They work from 8am to 5pm in their jobs, whether as security guards, nurses, whatever, and then they go and have beers and *this* is who they are, *this* is how they dress. And with a story like Hellbangers, where I felt they were my brothers and sisters, I saw and found the story as I went along, and as I understood what the story was. Talking to people, speaking to people, being part of the scene and, of course, me being a metalhead helped a lot too, because we became family. I managed to help bring Vulture's band Overthrust to perform at the huge Wacken Open Air festival in 2016. For the first time in history, a band from Botswana played at Wacken – and it was amazing. Just think about how incredible a thing that was.

Sometimes when you're taking photographs or documenting the world in Africa, you feel like a messenger. You say: "There is an injustice here, I want to make a change." But it's very naive to think that your photography alone will change the world. You need an active role, and Hellbangers is a great example of that. And I was so proud that our journey could result in such a powerful moment. I felt that, as well as maybe being a messenger, I was also the bridge between the metal culture of Africa and the biggest metal festival we know, Wacken.

For me, Hellbangers is about the power of freedom. After witnessing so much fighting, suffering and injustice (especially injustice) in Africa, then seeing Botswana's heavy metal scene and these beautiful Hellbangers, I thought: why didn't I see or experience heavy metal scenes in, say, Sierra Leone or Darfur or Somalia? Then you realise it's

because Botswana has, for the last 60 years, been at peace. This peace brought freedom, which in turn brought freedom of expression... and you know, for me, this is the beautiful message of Hellbangers.

It's about the tribe that got acceptance from society. But, at the same time, it's *screaming* to the world that *if* there is freedom, *if* there is peace, then there is room for *everyone* to be who they really want to be, and expressing themselves how they really want to express themselves.

That is the main lesson of Hellbangers, and I am so proud and privileged to have been able to experience these wonderful dreams, friendships and people.

I hope that you too can access at least some of that joy from this work.





















