

Q&A: Randy Blythe of Lamb of God

On making metal, doing time in a Czech prison and standing trial for murder

by SARAH JORDAN • 1/15/2016, 4:41 p.m.

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Even if you're not a fan of heavy metal, chances are you got wind of the outrageous headlines Lamb of God's frontman, Randy Blythe, made in 2012. Blythe, a tender-hearted man with a voice like Lucifer, was arrested in the Czech Republic when he and the band arrived to do a show in Prague. He was charged with the death of a teenage fan at a concert they'd played two years prior when it was alleged that he'd pushed the fan off the stage causing the teen to suffer a lethal head injury. Blythe had no recollection of the incident in question. So began a Kafka-esque series of events, a 38-day incarceration in notorious Pankrác Prison, challenges to his bail, and eventually a trial — where eyewitnesses contradicted each other and a key video of the event in question proved to be footage of a different fan entirely. Finally, Blythe was exonerated. Lamb of God fans were ecstatic, as were his friends and family. Blythe was relieved at the acquittal, but, having suffered the loss of his own child, was deeply shaken and sorry for the parents of the boy. He took time off from touring, wrote his memoir, *Dark Days*, which was published last fall, and completed the seventh album, *VII: Sturm and Drang*, out last summer. Lamb of God plays the Electric Factory on Saturday. Blythe spoke to me by phone from his home in Richmond, Virginia.

Your memoir *Dark Days* is extremely candid. It goes to some really raw places of the heart. Was it hard to be so open in this book?

Not really, I guess. I was convinced to write the book by my literary agent. I thought I'd do it eventually, but I thought I'd be older and wiser, sitting in a rocking chair, you know some kind of Norman Rockwell-esque fantasy. But memory fades and there was so much misinformation out during the trial. A lot of people only knew about it from a Google [Czech-to-English] translated tabloid. I wanted to set the record straight. It's something people always ask me about. 'What was it like there? What was Czech prison like?' I wrote a 500-page book about it. So now I can say: 'Here it is.' There was already so much hubbub about it in the press, at least in my [metal] arena, so it's not like the story was a secret. It's not like I'm not a public person either. So I thought there would be some things that would help people by reading about my experiences.

In your book, you write that as you were being taken away by the Czech police you thought it would make for a good book. Did you continue to feel that way or did things get too "real" — like your shower story with the guy with the colostomy bag and the venereal disease

Nooo.... That was a very brief thought. It was my artist-mind kicking in for a second thinking 'this would be a great story one day.' That was one small part of my mind. The other part, I was yelling at myself, 'Are you an idiot!' So no, I didn't think about a book during my time there. That was a fleeting thought and I even noted the inappropriateness of it. I didn't keep a prison journal of notes for a book. I didn't go there to do research. [laughs]

Did keeping a journal keep you sane or merely give you something to do?

There's a few reasons why I kept that journal. I was in prison for a few days before I received my journal [from the guards], which I had in my jacket. Once I got it, I started writing down everything I remembered because I thought it could be useful in a legal context. But yes, it was to keep myself occupied. There's not a lot to do in prison. Also, and this is kind of grimmer or darkly pragmatic, but I was writing so if something happened to me in prison, if I died — and that was a distinct possibility in the penal system — I wanted my wife to know what my thoughts were while I was in there.

Oh no. I hadn't even considered that would be a reason.

Well, it's the kind of thing you think about when you're locked up with murderers. It becomes a very real thing — not hypothetical at all. And writing helps me organize my thoughts.

What was your favorite book to read while in prison? Your American lawyer Jeff Cohen brought you Kafka's *The Trial*.

Definitely the one my wife brought me: *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. I didn't enjoy reading *The Trial* there. It was a great book, but it made me think a lot about my situation. But the book that really brought me the most solace was *The Letters & Papers From Prison* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer [The German pastor who was put to death by the Nazis in 1945]. My father brought me that book... Christ, my lawyer brings me *The Trial* and my dad brings me a book about a guy who gets executed at the end. [laughs]

How did you get connected to Don Argott and Demian Fenton, the two Philadelphia filmmakers who made 2014's *As the Palaces Burn*, the critically acclaimed documentary about your Czech experience?

Our former manager Larry Mazer had conceived of that documentary originally as something focused on our fans. So he had contacted them. Don, in particular, became a really good friend.

How did they feel about you getting arrested in the middle of filming? Were they thinking: 'Jackpot!'

I talked to Don about that. It was a moment where he had to separate himself as a filmmaker from someone who knew me as a human. He did not haul off to start interviewing the guys. He made inquiries through proper channels to my bandmates to ask if he should be doing that. When my wife came to visit me in Prague, he did some filming then, but because he is friend, he filmed a little bit but stopped, saying, "I felt it was more important to be there for her." He's a good dude. During my trial he was there, but not sticking his camera in my face. He's a real human being and thinks about what he's doing. That's sadly lacking in the media.

I was struck by your compassion for the family of Daniel Nosek, the Czech teenager. You were able to have an extraordinary perspective on the whole experience as you were in it. Was it your own personal loss as a parent of a newborn child that guided your reactions?

When you've lost a child, that certainly puts things in perspective. Only someone who's gone through that can understand. Having experienced that allowed me to think about someone other than myself during the whole thing. I went through [my loss] in a negative way, where I figuratively drank myself to death, and I didn't deal with it. So being a sober person allowed me to view my situation clearly for what it was. I wanted to find out what my accountability was. That's what the book is about at the core. Me being arrested is the vehicle that carries that story along, but thematically it's all about personal accountability.

In retrospect, how lucky were you to get the Mongolian prisoners, Dorj and Ganbold, as your cellmates? Any updates on them? [laughs]

There could have been worse, but there could've been better. Ganbold was awesome and Dorj kind of drove me insane — that whistling [Dorj continuously whistled the same short tune over and over while they were locked up together]. Luck isn't the word I would use, but I suppose I could have been with axe murderers. It wasn't 'lucky,' but it was unique. It could have been a TV sitcom: An American rock musician and two Mongolians stuck in a Czech prison together. Or a joke, you know, three guys walk into a bar... I wish I'd had a camera filming the ludicrousness, the constant communication breakdowns... Dorj, unless he did something incredibly stupid, got deported back to Mongolia. Ganbold is out of prison and doing well.

Security had broken down the night of that 2010 concert, allowing Nosek and many other fans to climb up on stage and then jump off. Has that trial and death changed Lamb of God's shows and interactions with fans?

Not really. We had security protocols in place beforehand to insure this type of thing didn't happen. Our contractual requirements were not met at that concert, even though we had a security meeting before hand. We are certainly more stringent now that our requirements are met. Fans still try to get on stage. There are idiots and attention-seekers in every group of humanity. If one makes it up onto the stage, they are taken off immediately and out of the venue directly. No refunds.

Can you tell us about the lineup for your Philly show with Anthrax, Deafheaven and Power Trip. Some fan called it a "weird cool" package. Why?

If you look at metal music, there are sub categories to a ludicrous degree. A lot of times, tour packages are clumped very tightly by genre, so for example you'll get an entirely death metal bill or a deathcore tour. This tour is a bit more well-rounded. Anthrax is the elder statesman of the scene. They are one of originals of metal. Deafheaven is weird and strange. I'm a big fan of them. I don't listen to a lot of heavy metal music since I do it for a living, but I do listen to them. They have a weird ambient shoe-gazing sound with a black, Norwegian, grim metal sound. They don't look like a standard metal band either. They wear suits. Power Trip puts on a really good show. They're a bit more from the punk rock scene. So the bill is not just straight thrash metal, but an eclectic bill of sub-genres.

What are you listening to lately?

Lately, I've been listening to the German composer, Nils Frahm. He's younger and does piano music. I've been listening to an ambient orchestral duo from Germany, A Winged Victory for the Sullen, and John Coltrane... I'm listening to anything but heavy metal. I'm stuck in that for life.

Last question: Have you been back to play Prague? Will you?

[laughs] No. I have not been back to Prague, and I don't have any plans on returning to Prague any time soon.