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Photos by Jarrod Anthonee, Anne Munition / Sarah Dopelt's easy to look back now and say it would all work out, but somewhere between "the great reopening" and "the Delta variant" was one of the

most stressful periods of what has already become the most stressful period of the modern live entertainment industry.

“Every night you’re waiting for your phone to ring or for a text to come through,” says 5B Artists + Media CEO Cory Brennan, whose company manages the three bands that topped the “Metal Tour Of The Year” – Megadeth, Lamb of God and Trivium. “Whether you’re an agent or manager or promoter, right now, during this time in our world, we’re all glued to our phones throughout the day and night, ready to deal with whatever situation is thrown our way. And we definitely had situations. We didn’t come out of it unscathed.”



Jarrod Anthonee **Lamb of God** The aptly titled 'Metal Tour of The Year' featured very different sets for the co-headliners, with Lamb of God frontman Randy Blythe saying the pyro was so extreme it even spooked him the first few nights.

Just getting to the tour was an accomplishment, having been derailed from its original 2020 opening like virtually every other tour, festival or mass gathering.

Technically a co-bill topped by Virginia groove-metal veterans Lamb of God and thrash pioneers Megadeth, the aptly named “Metal Tour Of The Year” brought in multiple generations and subgenres with backing from prolific melodic prog-metal workhorses Trivium and stalwart hardcore veterans Hatebreed, which replaced Swedish metal mainstays In Flames, who were on the 2020 lineup.

After the initial 2020 onsale for the original 60-plus-date tour, it was clear they had a hit on their hands. So, for 2021, involved parties including 5B, the agents at Artist Group International and Sound Talent Group, with Live Nation’s support, put in the work to scale back the tour to 24 dates (and two festivals) with Europe and Canada still not certain, and made the call to go out in

2021 with a new budget and road map. They also hit the road fully knowing it was in their hands – at least to some degree – to make this thing a success.

“The easiest answer is always ‘no,’” says 5B President Bob Johnsen, explaining the team’s decision to go for it in 2021. “Of course it was rife with issues. What’s going to happen? We don’t know; literally nobody knows. All we can do is look at the evidence in front of us at the time, and it looked as though things were going to wind down, and between management, artists, promoters and agents, is everybody in? Everybody was in. You push your chips in and don’t leave it to chance – you set up infrastructure on the tour where you’re being as careful as you can possibly be, which we did, and thankfully it played out the way it did.”

The way it played out was successful publicly, with four uncompromisingly metal bands spanning subgenres and generations, as well as at the box office. \

The tour, running from Aug. 20 to Sept. 28, reported 171,365 tickets sold on just shy of \$8 million grossed, an average of more than 7,000 tickets per night at mostly amphitheaters including more than 10,000 tickets sold to FivePoint Amphitheater in Irvine, Calif., and more than 11,000 to Soaring Eagle Amphitheater in Mount Pleasant, Mich.



Jarrod

Anthonee **Randy Blythe** Randy Blythe is one of the most dynamic performers in all of rock music – and a gifted vocalist able to pull off an extreme style at will in any setting.

The one thing during COVID that can't be overstated is the responsibility of the artists to do what it takes to get through, as a sick frontman or drummer or positive COVID test in the band means lost dates and can turn financial success into ruin. It also requires a promoter willing to take the risk and believe in the tour as well, which all involved parties say wasn't an issue with Live Nation and longtime rock promoter Rick Franks involved.

"This is an area of music with a passionate fanbase and amazing artists, so I absolutely wanted to support and be sure the tour happened," Franks told Pollstar via email. "The billing we got to go on this tour was incredible and a command performance for metal fans."

Metal Sells, But Who's Buying?

It wouldn't be a metal tour of any year without an established titan of the genre, and Megadeth is widely regarded as one of "The Big Four" of thrash metal pioneers dating back to the mid-'80s, with influential early landmark LPs including *Peace Sells... But Who's Buying?* and the 1990 sci-fi thrash metal masterpiece *Rust In Peace* to 2016's Grammy-winning *Dystopia*.

Counting more than 50 million albums sold, the band's powerful but tuneful take on metal took the genre to new heights with masterful guitar work and catchy hooks to go along with imagery of paranoia, anti-authority and an often bleak, dystopian sci-fi future that have become hallmarks of the genre.

"The feedback we got pretty much affirmed what we were thinking," says Megadeth frontman Dave Mustaine, shortly after wrapping the tour during which he got to celebrate his 60th birthday backstage. "In the simplest way, it's, 'How do you feel after being on stage?' We were all 'Fuck yeah!' and high fiving after the first night, and the adrenaline didn't stop."

As the "Metal Tour Of The Year," it was important not only to give fans multiple types of heavy music to enjoy, but to present it in a big way.

"It was two completely different-sounding bands with two completely different shows," adds Brennan, who credits 5B's Brad Fuhrman and Justin Arcangel for much of the tour. "That's the thing we're really proud of. We worked really closely to make sure the shows didn't compete and both bands had their own unique show. Lamb Of God went the direction of pyro and was based heavily around that, and Megadeth went more with video and theatrical, with amazing video content. And it all worked. The event shirt we put out was the highest selling shirt on the tour. People loved the event of it. 'The Metal Tour Of The Year' really sank in and became the rallying cry."



Jarrod Anthone **Megadeth** Thrash metal legend Dave Mustaine got to celebrate his 60th birthday while on tour, which he says he would hope all musicians get to do. **The Metal Stewards of Safety?**

It can't be overstated that successfully pulling off a tour in 2021 requires a heightened level of responsibility from the artists themselves, traveling and living in close quarters and unable to risk getting sick or testing positive.

"I'll be honest, it was stressful to me," says Lamb of God frontman Randy Blythe, known for stage theatrics including leaping from the stage with dreadlocks flowing and somehow able to replicate his guttural vocal stylings with ease. "The audiences were definitely ready to see live music, you know, but on my end it was different and sort of stressful. It's just so different than any other tour we've ever done before, just really trying to adhere to COVID protocols," he says, adding that the backstage and catering areas were mostly deserted and he wore a mask any time not in his own particular bubble, which in this case was separate from the band's road crew.

However, the effort paid off.

"We were really one of the only tours, at least from our world that I know of, that made it all the way through without a musician falling out from COVID and everything having to be postponed, or rescheduled or canceled, even."

Taking pride in putting on the same energetic performance, whether it's in a warehouse or mainstage at a major festival, Blythe agrees the tour lived up to the name.

"Every night you saw it. I don't think there'd be a single review that said it kinda sucked," Blythe adds. "Everything you saw about the tour was, 'Holy shit, the bands are bringing it' – I don't think that's just because the fans haven't had music in a while. It's the fact that everybody brought their A game. It was really good, and good to see the fans having such a good time; that's what music is about."

Fans having a good time means a lot of people behind the scenes having a stressful time, or having to reconcile their own personal opinions against what's taking place in real life.

"Music, or at least the form of music I work in, is about rebellion, about having an opinion and sharing it and being proud of it," adds Brennan.

"No artist standing on that stage wants to tell their fans what they can and can't do, but every artist on that stage wants their fans to be safe or feel in an environment that is safe. And they did."



Suzanne Cordeiro / AFP / Getty Images **Trivium** Trivium's Matt Heafy, maybe officially the hardest working man in heavy metal, didn't blink at the prospect of touring during COVID, saying he wears a mask during long flights already.

All In A Day's Work

Perhaps it should be no surprise then that Trivium, which has put out two full-length albums just since 2020, was more than willing to do what it took to make the tour work. In some ways it may have actually simplified things.

"It was super easy," says Trivium frontman Matt Heafy, who may be the hardest working man in metal, doing daily livestreams on Twitch as an official music ambassador for the streaming service, along with regular writing and recording.

"I've been wearing masks on airplanes for the last 15 or 20 years. It's a germ-filled tube. The same thing with sleeping on buses, I've been wearing a mask to sleep on a bus for probably 10 years. Think of all the disgusting dietary habits of those around you. You don't want to be breathing farts and coughs in the middle of the night. It was almost no extra precaution for me. It was actually nice, not having to worry about getting sick because, let's not forget, every other virus still exists. I hope the hygiene upgrade sticks for all of us."

Heafy specifically credited the band's driver, who kept the bus spotless and sanitized top to bottom regularly, at a time when finding drivers at all – especially vaccinated ones – can create more headaches.

Although traveling in modified bubbles between parties, Heafy, a regular road veteran who has toured with plenty of metal royalty despite being barely 35 years old, says the tour still had its personal moments.

"We were still able to hang out and chat, it was awesome to get to know the funnier side of Randy Blythe a little more. He popped in during the stream a few times and was hilarious."



Photo by Jarrod Anthonee **Megadeth** Megadeth's stage setup varied drastically from Lamb of God's, with high-tech screens, a wall of amplifiers and even guest stars such as the one and only Rattlehead.

He also got to work on his jiu-jitsu, with Mustaine being an accomplished martial artist and having his own instructor on the road with him. "That was fun, but we always kept in the back of our minds to make sure this tour keeps going; that's the first and foremost thing. The shows must go on, and going into this, the whole band's mission was that we're not going to miss one show."

Going forward, all parties say they're eager to reschedule the Canadian and European legs of the "Metal Tour Of The Year," but maybe more than that.

"Stay tuned," Live Nation's Franks adds. "We are talking with both Dave Mustaine and Lamb of God about what our next adventure could be. This one was definitely too good and too much fun to not continue to do similar packages again."