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# HELLBILLY DELUXE

Hank Williams III is the heir to the greatest country music legacy in history. On his latest album, *Straight to Hell*, he steps out of that shadow—and into someplace even darker.

By ANTHONY HEAD



**Y**ou say you hate country music? Good. So does Shelton Hank

Williams—Hank III to you. Hank III is the grandson of legendary country music star Hank Williams, and the son of infamously rowdy Hank “Are You Ready for Some Football?” Williams, Jr.

Hank III is the best goddamn country singer out there, but according to him, country music today consists of “a bunch of fuckin’ shit.”

OK, there’s clearly a contradiction brewing somewhere in there. Let’s try to clear things up. What Hank III truly despises is that insipid Garth Brooks/Shania Twain/Kenny Chesney crap known as pop country—the lovey-dovey stuff that makes you want to stuff a big cow turd in your ears when you hear it. When Hank III plays with his Damn Band, at least part of the time, it’s rebel country music from the outlaw’s side of town. Songs scraped up from the bloody floors of a bar. Songs that are about drinking, smoking and fighting. Songs about the South. Songs about losers who ain’t never gonna win in this lifetime. Songs with titles like “Thrown Out of the Bar” and “Angel of Sin.” In other words, real country music.

Then there’s Hank III’s other band, Assjack, composed of the same musicians. Those songs are basically cut from the same cloth as the Damn Band’s catalog—though, as is typical of thrasher music, no one actually hears the lyrics. Assjack is all about energy, and Assjack truly rips it up.

Did we mention that Hank III plays with both bands each night at the same show? To figure out why he’s created one of the most unique live-music experiences out there, it’s best to go straight to the source. On board the tour bus parked outside of The Vibe Bar & Grill in Riverside, California, Hank III is wearing a ripped-up Slayer T-shirt that exposes many of his tattoos. He groans at me.

Does he like being interviewed? “Honestly? Not really,” he drawls, letting me slide by to his room in the back. “But I always talk, no matter what. I’ll give you what you need and tell it like it is.” Normally, I don’t trust anyone claiming to be an honest man, especially when he doesn’t make eye contact. But when he immediately lights up a bowl of weed, I figure he’s got little to hide.



Hair, hair: Hank III in Assjack mode.

The tiny cabin is littered with Marlboro boxes, and after he finds one with a couple sticks left he fires one of them up with another groan. He’s just 33, but he’s dog-tired. Hank III has been on the road for about 11 years and he’s exhausted from being constantly asked all the same stupid shit, like how it feels to be the grandson of Hank Williams. But he tells it like it is—how he’s at peace with his legacy: “I’m from that blood. It’s got its plusses and its minuses. It doesn’t matter. It’s just one of those things, man.”

Hank III hasn’t always claimed his country birthright, playing instead in bands with names like Buzzkill, Bedwetter and Whipping Post around Nashville, where he still lives for a few weeks a year in-between tours. Even though young Hank was aware of his country pedigree, he headed down a different road, “Probably because my mama and stepfather burned all my music. They wouldn’t let people with Metallica T-shirts in the house,” he says. “That just pushed me to the darker stuff, man, and I’ve never outgrown it. Never will.”

Darker stuff? Well, okay, here’s where Hank III’s story gets weird. It’s clear from talking with him that he’s a firm believer in both sides of the celestial coin. God and

Hell, yeah: Hank III’s latest.

the devil are real, but only one claims his loyalty right now. “I was raised in a Christian upbringing, which meant church Monday, Wednesday, Sunday morning and Sunday evening,” he says while lighting up a second bowl. “But the way I live my life now is definitely on the darker side. I believe my granddad sang about the light, and I’m supposed to sing about the dark.”

Here’s the thing: Granddad—

known as the “Hillbilly Shakespeare”—drank himself to death at age 29, dying in the backseat of a car on New Year’s Eve on the way to a honky-tonk gig. The eternally depressed Hank Williams solidified his legend singing about cheating, drinking, loneliness and death. If that’s “the light,” what could possibly be left over for “the dark”?

Let’s start with Hank’s latest studio release, *Straight To Hell*, which, it has been reported, is the first major-label country album with an “explicit lyrics” warning attached. Hank III sings of blacking out for days from taking pills; defines his “drinking problem” as the woman who torments him rather than the bottle; and, from the point of view of a Louisiana prisoner, dreams of the freedom that comes with death. I’ll say it again: Hank III is the best goddamn country singer out there.

Ask him something crazy—like, “Did you make some kind of deal with the devil?”—and Hank III finally makes eye contact. He says that his fame, whatever that is, is from the devil. He’s not about spilling blood, but he defines his life, at least at this point, as living in that shadow. “I’m a nice guy, but some of my beliefs...every time I take the stage or play the music, it’s for that. It’s a crossroad and I



unfortunately crossed it a long time ago," he concludes with a weary, distant stare.

Back inside The Vibe, well, it's not exactly a honky-tonk. The crowd is mostly black T-shirts and epic tattoos, lots of piercings and not a scrap of flannel. The only cowboy hat in the crowd appears to be ironic. Why has this decidedly Black Flag crowd shown up for this? Because they all hate country music.

When Hank III appears onstage, he's got a fiddle player who sets the place on fire. His long-time bass player, Joe Buck, has a wavy mohawk and a seriously demonic look in his eye—and he gazes at the crowd as if he'd like to devour them. The music—pure outlaw country—is incendiary. Each song becomes some kind of anthem of living fast and hard, and everyone in the joint knows that


the tormented troubadour is singing about himself.

Then suddenly the music turns a dark corner. A mosh pit forms. Hank III's voice takes on the consistency of chopped concrete as he fuses country and punk into something he calls Hellbilly. Same band. Same instruments. Different devil.

After a few more brilliant songs that simply defy categorization, Hank III announces that the country portion of the evening has concluded, thank you very much. He says that if anyone wants to leave before Assjack begins, "...well, no hard feelings and we'll see you next time around." While most fans take him up on the offer, some stick around. The next 40 minutes is just a punk-metal screaming mess, with bodies flying around. When it's all over, the place looks like

the scene of a riot.

Hank III's been mixing up this chaos for 11 years, but he's nowhere near the end of the road, and he told me on the bus that this grueling life is taking its toll: "I'm definitely living for the fans—until I'm 50. Then, I'm gonna quit the rat race. It's a very self-destructive atmosphere out here, man. I'm gonna enjoy the other side of life."

Still, I can't help but think of one of his granddaddy's songs: "I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive." 



The O.G.: Hank Williams, Sr.

Shout at the devil: Hank III gets horny.