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What The Hell Happened To... 09.08.08: Soundgarden - *Down On The Upside*

Posted by Dan Marsicano on 09.08.2008

This week, Dan Marsicano goes into the superunknown and continues Fan Appreciation Month with Soundgarden's last studio album, Down On The Upside.

The Introduction

Welcome, once again, to the column that is changing Monday's one edition at a time, What The Hell Happened To. I'm the man that most readers of 411 Music look up to, Dan Marsicano.

This is a big week for music. The reason? Metallica's *Death Magnetic*, which is being released on Friday. The early reviews paint the album in a positive light, the tracks I've heard sound phenomenal, and the hype is at an all-time high. Look for ten different reviews of the album on 411 Music by Saturday.

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We have a contest going on, the BIGGEST one that 411 Music has ever had. You could win an Xbox 360, a year's worth of RockStar energy drinks, a "SmackDown Vs. Raw 2009" video game, an autographed copy of Jet Black Stare's new album, *In This Life*, and copies of the latest WWE dvds. All of this is part of the "Ready To Roll" WWE Summerslam package. Just click on the [official contest page](#) and register to win. That's it: it doesn't get much easier than that!

Last week, I debuted **Fan Appreciation Month** with a look at Shadows Fall's *The Art Of Balance*, which included an awesome guest column from Andrew Crow and lots of grainy live video. This week, it is back to the one man show, as I take a recommendation from Luke, who asked that I analyze Soundgarden's *Down On The Upside*.

Soundgarden's last studio album was quite experimental, with the band using classical instruments, slower melodies, and odd time changes. It sold well, going platinum in the states, but compared to the multi-platinum success of *Superunknown*, it was considered a disappointment. Band tensions were on the rise, leading to the band's dissolution a year after the release of *Down On The Upside*. So what happened to the band? Where did all the experimental tendencies suddenly come from?

**The Band**

Chris Cornell-Vocals, Guitar
Kim Thayil-Guitar
Ben Shepherd-Bass
Matt Cameron-Drums, Percussion

The Track Listing

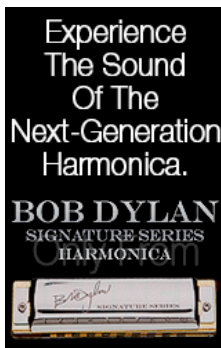
1. Pretty Noose-4:12
2. Rhinosaur-3:14
3. Zero Chance-4:18
4. Dusty-4:34
5. Ty Cobb-3:05
6. Blow Up The Outside World-5:46
7. Burden In My Hand-4:50
8. Never Named-2:28
9. Applebite-5:10
10. Never The Machine Forever-3:36
11. Tighter & Tighter-6:06
12. No Attention-4:27
13. Switch Opens-3:53
14. Overfloater-5:09
15. An Unkind-2:08
16. Boot Camp-2:59

The History

Soundgarden was formed in Seattle in 1984 by Cornell, who pulled double duty as drummer and lead singer, guitarist Thayil, and bassist Hiro Yamamoto. The band went through several lineup changes, eventually enlisting drummer Matt Cameron, who would ease the amount of work Cornell had to do.

1988's *Ultramega OK*, Soundgarden's debut album, gave the band a lot of media recognition, even earning the band a Grammy nomination for Best Metal Performance a few years later. The album's success helped Soundgarden to get signed to A&R Records. Their first record with the major label was 1989's *Louder Than Love*. It would be a minor success, but the band lost Yamamoto, who was growing frustrated with the direction the band was going in.

After a few bassists, Soundgarden decided on Ben Shepherd as Yamamoto's permanent replacement. 1991's *Badmotorfinger* was a huge hit for the band. Bands like Pearl Jam and Nirvana were dominating the charts and that helped the whole Seattle music scene to get more publicity, helping Soundgarden to reach a wider audience. Many singles came from the album, but their most popular one was "Jesus Christ Pose," with MTV banning the video for the single.



"Black Hole Sun" Official Music Video (I just had to put this up)

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After several high-profile tours with hard rock bands, including Guns N Roses and Skid Row, Soundgarden entered the studio to record their fourth album, *Superunknown*. Released in 1994, the album was their most successful one, with sales nearing 5 million. We all know how great the album is, so I don't need to go into the details.

In 1995, the band entered the studio for their fifth, and final, album. The tensions in the band were slowly bubbling to the surface, and while success was at their doorstep, Soundgarden was falling apart behind the scenes...

The Analysis

Soundgarden has always been one of those bands that I've tried to "get into". I remember buying *Superunknown* years ago, loving the singles and a few selected tracks, then setting it aside to basically collect dust. That statement may make a few readers react in a negative fashion, and they would be correct in doing so. It wasn't until recently that I began to listen to *Superunknown* again, with a fresh perspective. This clearer outlook helped to gain an appreciation for *Superunknown*.

So that would make me a casual fan of the band. Personally, the whole grunge movement sort of flew by me during the 90's, as I was too young to really appreciate it, and too concerned about finding \$15 behind my couch to buy *Reign In Blood*. That's why, when Luke recommended *Down On The Upside* in the comment section a few weeks back, I was more than intrigued at the prospect of furthering my Soundgarden collection.

Listening to *Down On The Upside* for the first time is like your first time at Cold Stone Creamery. It's all new to you, it seems kind of weird, and takes a while to warm up to. Once you do, though, you are hooked for life...or until you get diabetes and can't eat it any more. I digress; the

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point I'm trying to make is that *Down On The Upside* took a while to sink in. Hell, even after two weeks, I still find myself adjusting to the musical ideas that Chris Cornell and company threw at me.

"Burden In My Hand" Live 1996

The band released several singles from the album, some which are still played from time to time on the radio. Unlike *Superunknown*, the singles on *Down On The Upside* are not as memorable. The former album had "Black Hole Sun," "Spoonman," and "Fell On Black Days." The latter had "Ty Cobb," "Pretty Noose," and "Burden In My Hand." Now, listening to the radio today, which of those tracks is still played live today? I'll let you readers figure that one out on your own.

Don't think that I'm trying to compare *Down On The Upside* to *Superunknown* because I'm an asshole (even though some of you feel that way already). I don't really think it is fair to compare albums, since most bands go through different creative stages as time goes on (unless your Slayer or AC/DC). The fact remains, though, that people do compare those two albums, and most of us agree on which one is the better on. I'll let you readers figure that one out on your own.

The first thing to mention on *Down On The Upside* is the production, which was self-produced by the band for the first time in their career. While always having a hand in producing, Soundgarden usually enlisted high-profile producers, such as Terry Date and Michael Beinhorn, to help them out. For *Down On The Upside*, the band went at it alone. Now, I've always believed that when a band tries their hand at producing themselves, especially after years of having producers help the band out and lead them in the right direction, it can lead to internal problems.

Down On The Upside could have benefited from having an outside producer take some charge on the proceedings. While not their longest album, *Down On The Upside* had the most tracks. While that may not seem like a big deal, the problem becomes one that a few bands (Red Hot Chili Peppers, The Eagles) have had recently; too much material on the album. It was like Soundgarden went into the studio, recorded, and decided to keep them all. That's not always a bad thing, if the material is consistent and solid throughout.

My problem with *Down On The Upside* is that the material isn't consistent. There are some fantastic Soundgarden songs, especially a few near the end, but if you were to ask me today if I wanted to listen to the entire album, front to back, I would tell you, "No thanks, I got the new Metallica album to check out." *Down On The Upside* doesn't keep my interest like *Badmotorfinger* or *Superunknown* did.

"Pretty Noose" Live 1996

I will say though that *Down On The Upside* starts out strong with a series of solid greatest-hits-worthy tracks. "Pretty Noose" was the first single and with good reason. It has a catchy chorus, slight groove to it, and that trademark Soundgarden flavor that fans ate up during the

90's. "Rhinosaur" is Soundgarden getting all stoner-rock on us, wearing their Black Sabbath influence on their sleeves, evident in Thayil out-of-control lommi-ish solo in the second half of the track.

Nestled deep in the first half is the criminally underrated "Ty Cobb." A punk song with mandolins, "Ty Cobb" is sheer brilliance, that still doesn't get the recognition it deserves. C'mon, honestly, who else would think of having a chorus with Chris Cornell yelling "fuck" angrily with mandolins dominating the background? Soundgarden would play "Ty Cobb" live during their 1996 tour, but it isn't the same without the mandolins.

The rest of the first half is pretty good, with Soundgarden bringing out the acoustic guitars ("Zero Chance," "Dusty") and going all Alice in Chains on us ("Blow Up The Outside World"). The first half ends with "Never Named," which is a throw-away track, in my mind. There's some decent ideas strewn about, but it never caught my attention.

What did catch my attention is "Applebite," a five minute extended jam, eerily reminiscent of Black Sabbath's "Planet Caravan." This is no more apparent than in Cornell's vocal performance, which uses the underwater vocal effect that Ozzy used in the Sabbath track. It's different for Soundgarden and while a little over-long, the track does an effective job of being innovative.

The biggest surprise to me on the first listen was the one-two punch of the epic "Tighter & Tighter" and the punk-metal fusion "No Attention." The former is definitely as underrated as it can get, with a fantastic performance by Thayil, who pulls out a solo that reminds listeners that Thayil can still shred with the best. The latter is metal-tinged and the entire band steps it up, with a speedy riff underneath the melodic chorus and Cornell's soaring vocals. These two tracks are worth the price of admission alone.

"Rhinosaur" Live 1996

The rest of the second half flies by with nothing to compare to the two tracks listed above. What is most disappointing is the anti-climatic ending to *Down On The Upside*. "An Unkind" and "Boot Camp" seem like filler tracks and don't offer the substance that "Like Suicide" gave us on *Superunknown*. I find myself skipping a good portion of the second half, with the exception of the three tracks I positively identified, and "Overfloater," if I'm in the right mood.

Down On The Upside has its share of positive and negative elements. The songwriting mill seemed to be running dry for Soundgarden at this point. The album was moderately successful, but the band was falling apart behind the scenes. Was this tension around during the recording of *Down On The Upside*? I don't have an answer to that, but I could see that happening. The band changed their sound, which I assume wasn't the wishes of all the band members. Their grunge sound was being pushed to the side, in its place, a more melodic and accessible image. Personally, I find myself enjoying portions of the album, but not as much as their previous releases. *Down On The Upside* has enough strong material to make it worth a listen, but the album as a whole suffers from more filler than was usual for a Soundgarden album.

Who The Hell Is...Strive?

Official Website: [Strive](#)

MySpace Page: [Strive MySpace](#)

I get a lot of albums from bands that I've never heard of. Sometimes, these albums get pushed aside for more "hits-worthy" bands like Slipknot and Disturbed. As a music critic for 411 for the past year and a half, I've learned that the most important thing, other than the material itself, is getting people to read your writing. People love bands that evoke an emotional response, one that people can argue about for days (Metallica).

When I got *Fire*, the debut album from Chicago rock band Strive, I listened to it briefly and shifted my focus away, to worry about albums that people would care more about. However, a funny thing happened along the way. I found myself coming back to *Fire*, something I usually don't do.

There's a catchiness, a certain "fire" that burns within the trio, that helps to elevate Strive's debut album beyond what was expected. Will that translate to album sales and publicity? Maybe, maybe not, but what Strive does well is compose short and melodic songs that leave a mark on you.

The best way to describe Strive is take John Mayer, Coldplay, and Billy Joel and have them involved in a winner-take-all steel cage match covered in barbed wire made from piano strings. Or you could just click on their MySpace and judge for yourself. That might make more sense than my metaphor.

"Leave With Me" Music Video

The Conclusion

Well, that is it for another edition of What The Hell Happened To. I want to thank Luke for picking a solid Soundgarden album. Next week's topic is still up in the air, but I got a few choices I'm deciding on.

Remember, this month is **Fan Appreciation Month**. While I have gotten some great requests, in my own greedy way, it's not enough. So if you got an underrated/overrated album for me to analyze, or even want to have a guest spot on the column (great way to publicize yourself) let me know asap and we'll work something out. This is your month; you readers are taking over What The Hell Happened To..., so make your opinion count!

The 411:

Final Score: 0.0 [Torture] [legend](#)

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This album rocks

Posted By: [thedouce \(Guest\)](#) on September 08, 2008 at 12:21 AM

Good review. I always thought this album got the shaft. I'll give you that Badmotorfinger and Superunknown are the two that everyone go for, but I prefer Loud Love and this one just to show their diversity.

Posted By: [Dan Halen \(Registered\)](#) on September 08, 2008 at 12:36 PM

i felt the same way about this album. even down to enjoying the same songs. i disagree with the fact that superunknown is their landmark album (and i know you never said that) it has their epic song on it so everybody remembers that one. badmotorfinger is he one i listen to from start to finish though.

Posted By: [the dude \(Guest\)](#) on September 08, 2008 at 03:12 PM

thank you for doing this album, i was one of the people asking you to do an album from soundgarden's collection

Posted By: **jcon (Guest)** on September 09, 2008 at 03:24 PM

great column man, like always. but i would also love to see a review of tool's undertow, completely underrated and it showed a mix of their early straightforward metal days combined with their current progressive (kick ass) sound

Posted By: **the dork (Guest)** on September 09, 2008 at 03:36 PM

I wrote quite a long comment to this that seems to have been lost. Oh well. In lieu of writing it out again: nice analysis, Dan and thanks for using my suggestion. If they released this before Superunknown I think it would get a lot more praise.

Burden In My Hand is brilliant, but the record is too long.

Posted By: **Luke (Guest)** on September 09, 2008 at 03:40 PM



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