

Piecing Together the Puzzle: High on Fire, October 8 at RIBCO

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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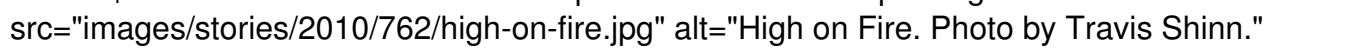
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In 2007, *Rolling Stone* named Matt Pike one of its “new guitar gods,” and the High on Fire frontman is notable for being among the two or three least-known people on a list that included John Mayer and members of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Wilco, Tool, Pearl Jam, Rage Against the Machine, and Radiohead.

Pike is certainly a luminary in the world of metal – both the heavy and the stoner varieties with which he’s associated – but he’d probably prefer to keep his appeal selective. High on Fire – performing at RIBCO on October 8 with [Kyleesa](#) and Torche – is for metal purists, fans of Metallica’s *Master of Puppets* who think that band has been pandering and floundering for the past two decades.

There’s none of that desperation for acceptance with High on Fire, partly a function of its method. The songs are less organic than constructed out of often-disparate parts, and therein lies the key to both the music’s appeal and difficulty.

Pike said in a phone interview last week that the band’s albums are usually “put ... together like a puzzle.” When the trio went into the studio for its latest album, “we had two to three hours’ worth of music that was finished. It was just piecing it together to make a record. ... That’s pretty typical of the way we run.” Only half of the album’s eight songs were arranged prior to the recording process.

Snakes for the Divine – released in February – announces its intentions quickly: It will take its sweet time killing you. The eight-minute title track kicks

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things off, with a 45-second guitar intro followed by a 40-second section developing its core riffs that leads to the first verse.

That patience is hardly a surprise. Pike's seminal doom-metal band Sleep (reunited earlier this month for a U.S. tour) in the mid-1990s infamously delivered to its record label a 63-minute-plus album ... featuring a 63-minute-plus song. (The [album](http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=10:wzfexqta1dae) finally got a proper release in 2003 – five years after the band's dissolution.)

Snakes for the Divine isn't nearly so ambitious, challenging, or stubborn, but that's not to say that it's weak. The All Music Guide [raved](http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=10:j9foxzesldke) that High on Fire's "wildly engaging brand of pulverizing, apocalyptic battle metal [has] returned unchanged and utterly undiminished." If that description doesn't give an adequate sense of the band's style, the album title, song names, and cover art – complete with a naked, ripped woman and plenty of snakes – should do the trick.

Working within that clichéd metal aesthetic, High on Fire is darkly earnest with a welcome digressive streak. "Bastard Samurai" features a slow build to Pike's hoarse scream in the chorus, but the two-part break veers off unexpectedly: to a tuneful interlude that then breaks down, with each of the players going in a separate direction. "How Dark We Pray," with its melodic opening, sounds like it might be approaching the mainstream, but it soon reverts to an uncompromising scorched-earth soundscape.

Pike said he went to school for jazz guitar, and improvisation is clearly an important part of the High on Fire composition and assembly process. Songs typically have distinct sections that often feel like distant relatives rather than a nuclear family.

High on Fire's unusual sound is also a result of Pike's style; he said he plays rhythm guitar with a bass player's upstroke. "There's a proper way to play guitar, right?" he said. "Which I can kind of do, but the way that I play it doesn't come out like that."

For those reasons, Pike said he wasn't worried that producer Greg Fidelman (who engineered Metallica's *Death Magnetic* and produced Slayer's *World Painted Blood*) would make the band unrecognizable. *Snakes for the Divine* drains the sludge that characterized Sleep and High on Fire's previous high-water mark, 2002's *Surrounded by Thieves*, but the cleaner sound is no less authentic or black.

"We have a certain way of playing that not a whole lot of people can duplicate," Pike said. "I had no fear that I was going to sound just like Slayer or Metallica ..."

High on Fire, he stressed, is "going to sound like itself no matter who records it."

High on Fire will perform on Friday, October 8, as part of the Sanctioned Annihilation Tour, also featuring Kylesa and Torche. Advance tickets are \$20 and available from [RIBCO.com](http://www.ribco.com/). The show starts at 9 p.m.

For more information on High on Fire, visit [HighOnFire.net](http://www.highonfire.net/).

For an interview with Kylesa's Phillip Cope, click [here](music/kylesa-october-8-ribco/).