

Why You Should Care About Tool

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Unless you're of a certain age (under 30) and with a certain musical taste (complex loud music), there's a good chance you've never heard the music of Tool. The band gets little airplay, rarely writes the standard verse-chorus-verse song, and – to the untrained ear – produces something more akin to formless noise than music.

But when Tool comes to The Mark on Saturday (with Tomahawk opening), any lover of music should pay attention. Why? Here are but a few reasons:

Tool is the most cutting-edge act The Mark has ever hosted.

Tool is not the greatest band ever (in spite of what its fans might say), or even the best band working in rock music. But on the strength of one great record (1996's *Aenima*) and a very interesting one (last year's

Lateralus

), Tool has become the most artful popular band around, rivaled only by Radiohead. (And Tool isn't nearly so precious as Radiohead has become.)

Aenima debuted at number two on the Billboard charts, and *Lateralus* opened in the top spot. This is in spite of an uncompromising musical vision that is tightly controlled yet sounds organic, and is more experimental than any platinum-selling artist has a right to be. The band's obvious intelligence is balanced by a visceral punch; it's music for your head, whether you're banging it or thinking with it. (

Lateralus

fatal flaw is that doesn't feature enough release points; the tension builds effectively but too often fades rather than exploding.)

Tool music is progressive in the best sense of the word.

Tool records don't have proper singles, they aren't geared toward a trend or demographic, and if you're not watching the track counter on your CD player, you might miss transitions between different pieces. They feature all the trappings of hard progressive rock – dense rhythmic textures, elliptical lyrics, hairpin shifts in tone and volume, and ferocious musicianship – but with

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almost a symphonic level of compositional sophistication. Pieces are just as likely to *progress* and develop as merely return to a chorus or musical pattern.

If it seems silly to compare classical music to contemporary rock, check out the string-music tribute *Third Eye Open*, which is too literal in its reading of Tool's music but is perhaps a more accessible entrée into the band for people who aren't metal fans.

Tool is a truly collaborative project.

The Los Angeles-based quartet shares all songwriting duties, and you can hear it. The bass, drums, vocals, and guitar are all given equal prominence, and Adam Jones is perhaps the only guitarist in metal seemingly without any ego at all. Egalitarianism is nice in theory, of course, but in Tool the payoff is that all members put the music first. There are no masturbatory solos in Tool.

Tool is hard-working.

Without radio support and with its sporadic output – partly a function of a dispute with its label following *Aenima* – Tool has built its fan base with incessant touring, dramatic stage shows, and a playful showmanship. There might well be an overriding philosophy expressed in the music, but it doesn't show itself in the form of pretension or overly serious presentation.

Tool is fun.

You'd never know it by listening to the band's dark records, but Tool has a great sense of humor. It's obvious on throwaway tracks such as the phone-menu frustration of "L.A.M.C." from the CD/DVD *Salival*, but the best example is more subtle: *Aenima*'s "Die Eier Von Satan" (translated from the German as "The Balls of Satan"). The track sounds like it's taken from a fascist rally, but the lyrics (shouted in German) are actually a recipe, with "one knifetip Turkish hash" and an emphasis on "no eggs."

Tomahawk will be ... interesting.

Opening act Tomahawk is one of the many projects of Mike Patton, the lead singer of now-defunct Faith No More. It's an all-start outfit, featuring members of Helmet, the Jesus Lizard, and the Melvins.

Patton's post-FNM bands have included Fantomas (which recorded an entire CD of music drawn from film scores, primarily from horror movies) and the always fascinating Mr. Bungle. Patton is all id, a vocalist and visionary with great range and few if any inhibitions. If the result isn't always pleasant, it's guaranteed to be as mesmerizing as a car wreck.