

My Week With Metallica

By Marcus Teague

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"Marcus", he drawls. "How'd you get so cool? You're tall, you're an awesome writer..."

Lars Ulrich's voice trails off from the back seat of the limo cab. It's 4am, we've left the Metallica End of Tour party and we're on our way to notorious Melbourne rock dive bar Cherry, for reasons absolutely more to do with drunken bravado than common sense.

I don't know." I don't know", I say. "It's probably similar to being in one of the biggest bands in the world".

Zippering through the cold, empty streets of Melbourne, we arrive outside Cherry and wobble down AC/DC lane. Lars holds his hand out for a stamp like the rest of us and we file into the tiny, dimly lit backroom. Half-populated by Metallica crew and support band members, the other half reedy, faux rock types and their platinum blonde partners, a gaggle soon forms around the drummer. I stand back with the rest of us; Steffan Chirazi, editor of the Metallica fan club magazine *So What!*, Barbara, Lars' PA and Allen Bickle, drummer from support band Baroness. A glance into the front bar reveals a vision of torn denim jackets and skinny jeans, dancing and posing to the kind of music being made by the people in the back. Returning, I find Lars has poured my drink into his own glass. OK then. This is the lay of the land.

Exactly a week prior I had received a call from Lars Ulrich on my mobile. "Hey Marcus this is Lars from Metallica. How you doing?" I wasn't sure. A month beforehand I had seen the band's first Australian show of the *World Magnetic* tour in Melbourne and wrote a review. I liked the show a lot, but I'd singled out Lars as the night's potential achilles. "Lars has the hardest task here," I wrote. "His nemesis? His younger self. Ulrich clearly struggles with some of the decisions he made on the kit when he was in his youthful prime, things the older body doesn't want to do." I did add, "what he does achieve is formidable". But I also said he looked like a "gurning elf". He was calling me, no doubt, to offer personal retribution.

I was wrong. Lars loved the piece, thought it the kind of perspective on his band - he said - he hadn't read in a long time. And so would I be interested in hanging out with the band over the last four days of their *World Magnetic* tour, (which after two and a half years circling the globe, was conveniently due to wrap up in my hometown of

Melbourne), and write it up for the Metallica fan club magazine, *So What!?*"Sure." I said. To Lars.

It's the following Thursday, the first day of the Melbourne shows, and I'm sitting in the foyer of the Grand Hyatt. I've waited for half an hour with no sign of *So What!* editor Steffan Chirazi nor anyone from Metallica. "What's the difference between the Grand Hyatt and the Park Hyatt?" I ask the concierge. "It's more boutique" they say. "And up the road".

I run uptown to find Steffan waiting amongst the deep couches, red marble and gold encrusted boutique-ness of the hotel. We're immediately led into a waiting Tarago van, a bevy of international accents, and a journey through the money end of town and down into the bowels of Rod Laver Arena.

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Arena shows are dramatically plain affairs behind the scenes. Hallways of fluoro lighting, officious looking boxes, staff and instructions laid about with all the rockstar effects of a hospital waiting room. Steffan takes me on a tour and I do my best to remember names while being introduced to key crew members responsible for my survival over the next four days. Tom, the head of security, who looks like a cross between Kerry King from Slayer and a UFC fighter (and who would tell me days later, that - as an ex-NFL player - he won't flinch at flattening stage invaders), and the mystically-named 'Bean', who is 'Dressing Room Coordinator' and also the mother of the "baby" that Kirk Hammett savagely booted into the audience two nights previous in Sydney. (So global media has reported: the footage shows the child - who is not a baby - was hidden from Kirk's view by the Metallica beachball he was booting boot off stage. It hit the child, she fell, was fine. That management had to release a statement explaining the situation with an accompanying pic of Hammett and the kid smiling together, hints at the scrutinised air we're ingesting).

After receiving a rundown on who might hold the backstage passes that will allow me to not have my larynx ripped out by Tom should I graze on the wrong bag of chips, I'm led to a lounge-like area outside the band's dressing room. A six-seater brown leather couch faces a large LCD TV. Beyond lies a makeshift, plain dining room for the band. And then the actual member's dressing room. It's comfortable enough but clearly transient - like a quiet corner of IKEA. Outside the dressing room door sits a smaller table where a guitar and show programs wait to be signed. "For the promoter", says a sign above. The band aren't present, so while Steffan disappears to find me the right pass, I wander out to the main dining area, where clusters of black clad and variously hirsute crew members are scattered across a dozen or so cafeteria-like tables.

After eyeballing rooms of officious-looking workers and passing lockers smattered with photos of family members, kids and children's ephemera, I round a corner to the band's dressing room and come to face to face with James Hetfield. He's in conversation with Steffan about...soccer. The breathtaking thing about meeting super famous people face to face is you've seen their image so many times the real thing seems off. Like a waxwork figure come to life. So it is with Hetfield, who is powerfully intimidating in close quarters. It's the way he stands; like a gunslinger - chin juttied, arms laid across his chest like ship ropes, his ice-blue eyes boring through your inquisitive local villager's face.

"James, this is Marcus", Steffan says as we shake hands. "He's the fly on the wall for the rest of the tour". Hetfield looks me up and down. "Big fly". I look down as if it's my pants-fly he's addressing, he chuckles some, and we're off discussing - of all things - the recently released *Jackass 3D* movie. Hetfield thought much of it was funny, but didn't go for the "disgusting" stuff. I find myself asking the emotional force of Metallica if he thought the exploding dildo sequence was hilarious. He did.

Bassist Rob Trujillo exits the dressing room, shakes my hand and carries on to the cafeteria, passing guitarist Kirk Hammet who now appears with his own plate of food. He also shakes my hand before disappearing into the band room. (Over the course of the weekend Rob and Kirk will present as the laid back Yin to Lars and James' forthright Yang. This 'ships in the night' sequence seems apt.) Hetfield welcomes me once more before following Kirk. We didn't talk music or Metallica. This seems important.

Finally, compact and with the leaned hunch of someone who's been coiled behind a drumkit for the majority of his physical evolution, a beaming Lars Ulrich strides across the room like the centre of attention he's clearly used to being. He slaps me on the shoulder while shaking hands and telling me how it good it is to see me. Physically Lars is completely disproportionate to his outsized persona; all intense concentration and charismatic introductions emanating from his slight frame. I've been invited here by him and this meeting makes it purposeful. "All this is your playground", he gestures smiling. "You're our guest. Have fun".

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Over a backstage lamb, roast vegetable and salad dinner, Steffan backs up Lars' words. I'm free to go wherever I like. Which is all well and good to say. But a journalist's natural state is one of rules and restrictions. Don't ask this. Don't go there. Time's up. So to suddenly agree I should shadow Metallica seems absurd. Especially if Tom catches me.

On this advice, I take off on a solo orbit. Though it's maybe just me and what I'm there to tune into, the sense of family here is immediate. You'd need it to be for a production on this scale. But you so often forget that giant touring bands are essentially, small transient office blocks, lugging their computers and chairs and accounts and dirty laundry around the world, so at some point, four guys can run about with guitars, punch the air and thank the fans for coming. At the pointy end it's a noble, fleeting, artistic pursuit. But when you go deeper, also incredibly ordinary.

In this case, everyone's employers walk amongst their midst. I poke my head into the band's dining room and find Lars having dinner alone. I ask to join and he responds by pushing a plate of chicken and salad across the table. We talk about his feelings on ending this colossal tour. "Looking back on the last couple years, it's been such a positive experience", he decides. "On every level you can conjure up. In terms of the record, the tour, the fans, the vibe. I don't think we've ever done anything in Metallica that's had such an overwhelmingly positive feel to it. So I think rather than getting all emotional and melancholy about it ending, it's more like, celebrate the triumph! Celebrate the end of this chapter".

We carry on talking until his assistant Barbara joins, and when Lars leaves to warm up, she talks of how fun it's been traveling to cities across the globe. Cities like this one, that "seem beautiful" but will remain unexplored.

The arena itself lies somewhere off down a hallway, but I can hear the sound of guitars coming from behind a door marked 'Tuning Room'. I find Steffan takes me in to a rehearsal room set up with the kind of instruments and recording gear that would make the most jaded guitar store pony-tail quiver. Kirk and Rob are holding their respective instruments, trying to work something out. They fiddle for a while before departing, leaving me with the room's "Protools guru" Mike Gillies and another quiet guitar tech. Gillies sits in here every night on tour, recording and mixing the show on the fly, which the band then post online immediately afterwards. He's also worked on a bunch of their studio albums. As such he's recorded - and has access to via a series of hard drives scattered around - every Metallica live show and song on record. Meaning that if they're fiddling around with an old tune, one of the band members can say, "Oh we should do this like the second night in Frankfurt, four years ago", and Mike can bring it up within seconds. This seems insanely excessive, but entirely useful.

Before long the full band arrive and start jamming on some stuff. I won't lie - it's exciting having Metallica play three feet away from you in a space the size of your living room. They're in a playful mood. Lars feels like he doesn't need to rehearse something. "Too boring?" jokes Hammett, "Too many notes?" Rob chimes in, "Too many words?" Towering tour manager Dick Adams pokes his head through the door and taps his

watch. The band were due on five minutes ago. Above our heads an arena of paid-up Metallica nuts are nervously fingering their camera phones and we're here picking chickpea shells from our teeth and looking at lyric sheets. I've been in rehearsal rooms of all sizes, and the thing is, away from the filter of amplification and natural reverb and pyro explosions, rooms like this are a leveller. Metallica sound mostly fantastic in here, no doubt. But the drums are tinny, Hetfields voice sounds small and unfocused, and Rob's bass is lost in the mix. So, a lot like most bands then. If it weren't for the metronomic riffage coming from Hetfield's guitar and - especially - Hammett's impressive fretwork, this could be a Thursday night down at your local space. Though you probably don't have access to recordings of songs you played in Tokyo five years ago. Nor Tokyo.

I follow the band into the hall, where headset-wearing security dudes are bustling about like worker ants. Longtime band photographer Ross Halfin is leading Metallica on a series of mugging hallway poses, snapping his way through to a brightly-lit alcove of white lino and roadcases. The band pause next to steps descending to a black curtain and the sound of 15,000 people now roaring to the traditional show-opening soundtrack, 'Ecstasy of Gold'. Someone (Lars) is joking about pissing on Halfin as the photographer tries to get a shot off while on his back underneath their group hug, before James, Kirk and Rob head out through the curtain. We're waiting for him to follow when Lars yells at me and a handful of others, "Well go on! I'm fucking going out last. Go, fuck, go!" I stumble with Steffan down the steps, through the curtain being held back for us and out into a vast, heaving dark ocean of purple light.

A static roar infiltrates everything, all I can see are silhouettes of hands and snatches of faces illuminated by speckled camera flashes, all pegged back by security just enough to show a clear black gauntlet to the stage. I smell dry ice and deodorant. I roll as if on rails to some position by the side of stage, overwhelmed by the sudden transition from minutiae to massive. In shock at the ferocity of sensory overload; hysterical fans with pinched faces grasping for anyone they can reach. Kirk holsters his guitar, Lars clutches his drumsticks and both run on stage to meet James and Rob in the middle and the opening crack of 'That Was Just Your Life'. Cue lasers, everything. Weeks ago I wrote in my review of Metallica's entrance to 'Ecstasy of Gold' as being perhaps one of the seven wonders of the musical world. This then now is imprinted on my DNA.

Metallica play well, though I'm most taken with the theatre of it. The forest of kids bouncing up and down. The prop-coffins descending from the roof. The sweat. I'm standing next to four Aussie surfer-looking dudes, one of whom claps me on the shoulder every so often and yells, "How good is this?" The set culminates with the house lights on for 'Seek and Destroy' and those black beachballs raining from the roof. While birthday boy Kirk waves to the crowd, behind him marches a posse led by a bearded

stagehand dressed in the same Snow White uniform worn by the kid in the recent "child kicking" incident. Comic retribution. Hammett is cream-pied, Hetfield leads the crowd in singing Happy Birthday, and Hammett yells into the mic, "I can't fuckin' think of a better fuckin' place to have a fuckin' birthday than fuckin' Melbourne!"

While the band are still throwing out guitar picks, we walk through the backstage area and into a waiting van. As we make the short trip through the city and into the hotel's entrance, a bevy of black clad fans peel off from the driveway wall expectantly. Inside the lobby, James arrives in a dressing gown - already -, Rob too, and they disappear into the elevators.

Outside I talk to a few of the superfans about how they found out where the band was staying ("Friends of friends") and whether they've done this kind of thing before ("Oh yeah. Last time they were here"). I tell them the band have probably gone to bed. On cue, Hammett, newly showered, arrives to sign autographs. Turns out the Aussie dudes I was standing with at the show are professional surfers of various stripes. They've been taking Hammett and Trujillo to a series of breaks along the East Coast of Australia during the tour, and despite it now being nearly 1am, they're about to chaperone them down the Victorian coast tonight so they can get up early for waves. As Metallica's minders discuss distances to the petrol station, miles on the odometer and other, I suppose, extremely important things for ferrying millionaire rock stars around unlit foreign clifftop roads, I steal away from the scrum and by the cathedral next door. Its black spires are framing a full moon, and it provides an elegant buffer to my busy mind, blurred with images of the arena, the tuning room, Lars' head, gold handrails on red marble and an endlessly unfolding buffet.

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We'd started the night at the Australian Centre of Contemporary Art, a large, rusted red building artfully sunk into the dirt next to the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne. I'd been granted a guest spot for tonight's End of the World Magnetic tour party (even though there are two shows to go). After arriving unfashionably early to suck down free booze, waltz through the art exhibits and graze on oysters and sushi laying atop a hulking slab of ice, I mingle with the slowly growing Metallica crew. Rob is entirely comfortable answering my stupidly specific questions. ("Oh the Suicidal Tendencies tour here with Alice in Chains? Man that was a fun tour. I was in St.Kilda with Mike Starr late one night and... **insert story**...he was in hospital for two weeks!")

Elsewhere, Stage manager Alan Doyle spills the beans ("Those coffins above the stage? Rubbish") and the hulking, aforementioned Tom Robb, (who it turns out, is a gentleman), backs up Doyle's claim that, despite working on some of the world's biggest

tours (from Motley Crue to Taylor Swift), the Metallica experience is one of a kind. "The best". Each of them impart the convincing wisdom that they're not completely looking forward to winding this thing up.

Later in the party I tap Hetfield on the shoulder and ask him about his feelings regarding the end of the tour. Conflicted, he says. Looking forward to being home and seeing his kids but also aware that it signifies the beginning of a new cycle. "I've got eight hundred and something riffs in my iTunes" he says. "And that's about it. But I'm excited". I like James. It's evident he doesn't suffer fools; he chooses his words just as carefully as he takes on yours. He talks candidly, surprisingly so. I'll hear later on when pressing for more interview time that Hetfield considered this "our chat" - which seemed disappointing when I was first told. But in hindsight I see the good trade.

Three fuzzy hours later the Metallica drummer is staring at me accusingly. Lars has an uncanny ability to deflect attention to the other, to connect people. To collate details and make them personally significant. To arrange things. All of which inevitably returns attention to him tenfold. It's the perfect talent for a band mastermind; that it's a default for Lars also makes him hugely likeable. Soon nearly everyone has left. Steffan and I try to convince Lars to go meet up with the portion of the crew that have gone to Cherry Bar. Support band Baroness arrive. The iPod is being over-programmed amongst the clutter of oyster shells and empty Champagne bottles, and Lars is staring at me, deciding whether or not to - as he still says in interviews - flex the ability to "throw down". "Cherry?" he says. "OK". We walk out the door and into the idling limo.

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Tragically hungover in the Melbourne heat the next day, I arrive at the hotel lobby on Saturday afternoon just in time to miss traveling with the band to the venue. Again. The same fans from the last two days are back also, lurking on the other side of the driveway like some ragged battalion; gazing suspiciously across as they plot their next move. Attack. Retreat. Reassemble. Repeat.

James has invited the local chapter of the Californian Hot Rod club to attend this evening's show, evidently on the proviso that they bring along their machines. A row of gleaming (if a little rickety up close) hot rod cars sit outside the back entrance to the stadium. While the sun goes down, Hetfield wanders between them and their coiffured, cuff-panted greaser owners, inspecting our quaint local approximation of American culture. In keeping with the occasion he's also wearing a pork-pie hat, blue jeans with cuffs (though still with the ever present black bandana hanging from the back pocket) and a white 'My Brother's Keeper' tee, gifted to him by surfer thug Koby Abberton.

Inside the crew area, someone's erected a large sign outside the management office detailing events occurred around the world whilst Metallica have been on tour. The kind of signposts that throw the enormity of the period in sharp relief. *BP Oil Spill. Spain wins the World Cup. Release of iPhone 4. NZ Earthquake. Ronnie James Dio (RIP).* Amongst the global events there's a handful of personal footnotes. *Tori's engagement to opening act drummer, goes one. Josh has baby. Katie starts kindergarten.* It's a reminder of the humanity behind the theatre of this. While you're shrieking 'MASTER. MASTER' in your hometown, someone very nearby is Skyping home to look at their kid.

It's 40 minutes from showtime and I'm in the tuning room. James is yet to show up. Lars yells out 'Marcus, you play guitar right? Do you know 'The Outlaw Torn?'' To my crushing dismay, I don't. James arrives and they begin working on the ending to 'The God That Failed'. Not having played it since 2006, the band recently resurrected the *Black* album cut for a once-off at the Brisbane show in October, where they fiddled with an alternate ending. Lars is keen to end it the same way as they did then, so Mike brings up a perfectly mixed version of that same recording about 15 seconds after being asked. The band listen through the PA, playing along a little before returning to face each other and running through it. It's a profound luxury having such a set-up as this. The ability to recall nearly every musical thought - in concert, in rehearsal or on record - at the push of a button. It could almost make you mechanical. And then Lars vocalises a universal rehearsal room thought. "Can I ask a question? It sounds better in the house than in here right?"

It does. The show tonight is amazing; for reasons beyond Metallica's control. Standing down on the floor looking up, the arena hums with energy; a cauldron of humans rippling as one fleshy, pink beast, roaring in concert around the band from the get go. The band can tell. While Hetfield's nightly exhortations of 'Can you feel it?' **cue roar** sometimes seem perfunctory, tonight's comes as an attempt to genuinely pull focus. To harness the hysterics seething around them and send it back into the maelstrom. After the first batch of songs I run through the pit side of stage, dodging a teeming row of punching hands and swinging hair, to position myself at James' and Rob's end of the stage. The band reach the end of 'The God That Failed' and stop on a pin, just like they talked about earlier in rehearsal - Lars smiles at Hammett as if to say, 'got away with it.' James steps off stage at the end of the main step and fist bumps me on the way to high-fiving fans in the front row.

After the show the band are whisked away for a late dinner with management. The crew disperses and I wander alone into the early Sunday morning. Not wanting to see friends, but not ready to go home. I drink up the back of the smallest place I know is open and make notes. Try and not let the duality of this version of reality set in.

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It's Sunday, the last day of the Melbourne shows and thus the very last of the band's tour. Once again there's a swarm of fans waiting outside the hotel lobby. I ask one if the band has come out yet. "No" he says, narrowing his eyes. "But we've seen their cars". I ask another, in plastic-flame sunglasses and an enormous goatee, why he's waiting here. "I don't know really. I've never done this for any other band", he searches. "I'm not one of 'those' guys. I just...love them". The kid next to us suddenly bolts at speed to his car and I turn to see Rob emerging to sign a round of autographs. The fans circle. The careful unraveling of posters, the hopeful crates of CDs, the slow erosion of Rob's personal space. Over at the lobby Tom is waiting for a ride to the venue and together we look across the driveway discussing the fans that wait outside hotels the world over. He tells me one of the rules he has for them is that no-one is allowed to take a photo of a band member signing a guitar. That can then be used as proof of authenticity when an eBay seller is trying to hock it. I have not considered these things.

'It's gonna be a free for all I can feel it'. Aaron Michalski, guitar tech for the band, is shifting things around in Hetfield's guitar pit out in the arena. The place is empty, the lighting-rig coffins hang impotently above our heads. The band use no guitar pedals on stage (save for Kirk's wah pedal at key points.) As I can see here now in the pit, each guitarist's tech has a 15 switch pedal board at their feet, with which they can change the sound - from clean to crunch to phase and so on - throughout the show, leaving our heroes to rush about the stage unencumbered by such trivialities. The purist in me finds this somehow dishonest; though the band's live show wouldn't be nearly as great if each member was rooted to the spot. It's their movement around the stage that gives them life, the physicality of ground covered combined with the sheer complexity of their playing, essentially adds up to a nightly triathlon. Play the songs. Run around. Be Metallica.

Outside the dressing room, I bump into Hetfield again and, seizing the moment, thank him for allowing me this insight into what he calls his "family". "You're a good fly", he says. "Mellow. I like that". Hard to imagine coming from the once-infamous party-hound, but alluding to it all the same. After an all-crew photograph out on the arena stage, James and I, along with Steffan and Ross Halfin, sit on the couch in front of the TV watching a countdown of the "100 best Australian artists of all time". I give backstory to the passing videos, like Paul Kelly ("Australia's Bob Dylan"), The Presets ("the biggest band in the country right now") and Kylie ("hotpants"). Punk/rockabilly act The Living End comes on and Hetfield knows them. "I like these guys" he perks up. It's one of the few musical discussions we have.

What can you ask Hetfield that hasn't already been asked? Or any of them? In the tradition of being a journalist, my being here surely supposes that at some point I'll ask the band "what will the new record sound like?" and "Napster...?". But there's nothing to be gleaned from that road. In my brief time with the band, what's clear is they're still enjoying what they're doing, as much as what they've already achieved. And, if the in-jokes and good natured ribbing in the tuning room are anything to go by, each other as well. So much of the music business is rooted in myth, and Metallica have more than most. All of which seemed to give way at that crossroads documented in and around *Some Kind of Monster*. When *deconstructing* their myth became the myth of Metallica.

It's a subject Lars warms too when we speak on record before the show. An insight illustrated by the fact I'm talking to him as he lies half-naked getting a pre-show massage.

"It sets you free in a way, because there's no more secrets," he explains of their newfound access-all-areas approach. "And there's nothing to hide. You know, you always get the five detractors that say 'Oh we shouldn't see all that'. Well don't see it! But at least respect the purity of the approach. Which is, the minute you swing the door, you let the door swing as [wide] open as it can be. There's a freedom in that which is that you're completely exposed and vulnerable. And it's kind of liberating. You don't have to walk around and go 'You can't see that. You can't do this'. It keeps things on the up and up. It, brings a kind of impulsive energy to the whole thing which I kinda like."

The masseuse moves to his neck. "One of the things that I think people genuinely have missed about this band, is that because of our success, there's all these very careful, pre-planned deliberations. But most of what we do on a day to day basis has an impulsive undertone to it. That sometimes works great and sometimes gets us in trouble. But I like the purity in that. That's more exciting than to sit there and talk to 38 planners and lawyers and publicists about every move you make. I think as you've seen, there's not a lot of stuff around here that's guarded."

It's true. I'm here, for one. But I can't believe that a business dragging nearly 200 people across the globe for two and a half years has the ability to be impulsive. Though an exchange before tonight's show might prove him right. Before our chat Lars had asked an assistant to head into the filling stadium to pull out a clutch of serious fans. The one's the band and crew have recognised pressed against the rail around the world. They're gingerly brought backstage into a conference room and the drummer sits down with them to personally offer each his thanks. He asks how many shows some of them have seen. "35", one says. "Or 36". Another trumps them. "67...and I'm from Australia."

Lars goes through their thoughts, pick-pocketing their experiences of his band. "What were the best moments that stood out? The worst? What should we play tonight?" These fans are more composed than the wide-eyed fan club Meet n' Greeters I've seen before every other show, the ones clutching drawings and homemade guitars and piles of CDs to be signed. These guys have a casual confidence from conquering the world a little. Emboldened by Metallica being their guide. God knows how they pay for it. A Russian kid says, "there's no other band that can do it like this. It's Metallica. The drummer of the band can come out and say 'Hey guys'. It's like....". He trails off.

"I'm down there with you on the rail each night", says Lars. "In spirit".

"You *should* come down with us" says the Russian.

"Well maybe I'll come down on the rail tonight", says Lars. "Give you something to throw at James."

Talk turns to jokes about the band taking a break so these fans can save some money, an intimate show everyone witnessed in New York, and various setlist requests ("There was a very sweet girl in Adelaide at the Meet n' Greet who said that her daughter was born as she was listening to 'The Struggle Within'", announces Lars. "How's that for a story? If there was ever a fuckin' night to play 'The Struggle Within'...")

After a discussion about the fan's favourite support bands, Lars brings it to a close. "OK...anything else?" An American girl pipes up. "I think it's so cool that you guys interact with all of us and that you give us recognition", she says. "We're here to see you, and you guys are always really great with us".

"Well like I said, I'm one of you," says Lars. "Seriously, I mean that. This is what I used to do when I was a kid. Follow bands around."

"That's how we met", says the 67-show Australian, motioning to his girlfriend seated beside him. "Touring around Europe, and we met because of Metallica. So... it's been the best journey ever".

She blinks. "That's the nicest thing he's ever said to me", she turns to Lars, beaming. "And he said it to you!"

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The last time I see Lars before he leaves, it's the end of the night. He's squished in behind the rail, surrounded by grinning fans, pretending to ask Kirk for a guitar pick. Kirk dives on top of him.

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