

**G: Now, after 14 years of hard work and lots of life struggles and many other problems you finally released your first album *Gilgamesh*. Congratulations!**

**M:** Thank you!

**G: So how's the vibe in the band?**

**M:** We are actually still struggling. We're good, I mean we finally got album out so now we have start to practicing and book some shows. Hopefully we'll get on festivals for 2016, because it's already late for metal festivals this year. We're doing couple of shows here in the US, so hopefully we get to do US tour in August and September. We're still not sure about that, because the whole album was taking six months to record, it kind of pushed back everything.

**G: Yeah, but still the album is great!**

**M:** Thanks, do you like it?

**G: Yeah, I like it. *Quest for Eternity* is really good one. Speaking about background story of your band, it's pretty huge. You can see all the details in the movie *Heavy Metal in Baghdad*. But still there are people here in Latvia who haven't heard of *Acrassicauda* yet. So could you give us a short story about where you came from and how you decided to play in such a metal act as *Acrassicauda*?**

**M:** Ok, well basically the whole thing started when I and present lead vocal, Faisal, got together and we started a couple of projects, bands. None of them were actually metal, they were more like alternative rock. And then in 2000 we met Tony and he led us to Firas, who is playing bass currently. We got the practice space that was shown in the movie and later blown up. Destroyed. We started practicing the songs early in 2000. Then Firas came up with the name *Acrassicauda*, because his dad was an animal vet. We named the band and then we decided to go on and play a show. At the time the vocalist was Waleed who's no longer in the band and we went out and played a show I think in July of 2000. And ever since we have been playing together and we performed 4 - 5 shows in Iraq. Sixth and the last show was in 2005 which was shown in the movie. After that the situation just, you know, went in decline. Political situation and the civil war in Iraq escalated, so we had to leave. I think Waleed left first and then we stayed practicing and we performed one show without him. After that Tony left and then I left to Syria and then followed by Faisal and Firas. That's when the whole documentary *Heavy Metal in Baghdad* kind of started.

**G: Yeah, we're gonna come back to the *heavy metal* movie a little later, but in Latvia after regaining the independency from the Soviet Union in 1990, metal scene exploded, I mean, dozens of metal acts showed up. It is hard to believe and hard to even think about that in Iraq the first metal act showed up just in 2001.**

**M:** What are the famous metal bands in Latvia?

**G: One is called *Skyforger*. They're one of the oldest ones. Actually they released an album this year.**

**M:** Yeah, well we didn't have metal, we did have bands, but they were mainly rock and alt-rock. They were in early 90s when the situation was less intense. There was always projects coming up, but none of them really get to the stage as a metal act. We're probably like the

only ones during that era, who dared to get on stage and start performing. Right now actually there are more bands emerging from Iraq.

**G: Nice!**

**M:** Yeah, but the problem is that they don't sustain, just because of the situation. I guess in a way we're the only line-up that stayed together that long being active. I mean it took us 15 years to release an album, but then also during that time we released EP and toured and then released a bunch of demos. Whenever budget and the time allowed us to do it.

**G: How was the metal scene in year 2000 just when you showed up?**

**M:** Well, we thought nobody will show up for the first concert. We told our friends that we were doing a bunch of covers so people could come and see us. I think 400 people showed up for the first concert. We were surprised. I think we covered *Slayer*, we covered bunch of bands. We even covered *Nirvana*. We were only two months old and nobody knew us, and we were the only metal band at the time. We made all these people happy.

**G: Yeah, actually the number is huge. Well, not huge, but it's pretty big.**

**M:** It's pretty big, yeah, for a band that nobody knew at that time. And I think it was because the youth was just repressed, you know, they didn't have any shows happening, there was no clubs, there was no nothing and there were no social clubs and definitely there was no metal scene. I guess when we put flyers out about that there's a metal show happening, a lot of guys showed up and I think the support continued, even in the last show that we did when the situation was pretty horrible. I don't know if you remember the movie, there were missiles falling.

**G: Mhm, I remember. I watched again the movie a few days ago.**

**M:** Oh, okay, so it's like your memory is fresh. Even during that time like about 100 people showed up, and we thought that's really bad, not a lot of people. But now looking back at it and seeing metal scene also here in US which is sometimes taken for granted, because you see these emerging bands and there's is only like 10 people there to watch. At that time even with restrict security, even with the ID check and even with the mortar rounds, bombs around and the power that went off and of course with the eight o'clock curfew, the guys showed up and headbanged just like you see in the movie.

**G: That's awesome! The whole attention was really concentrated to your band.**

**M:** Well yeah, I mean you can describe them as the diehard fans, you know. These guys just didn't give a fuck. They just wanted to come and see a show and listen some music.

**G: Speaking about the movie *Heavy Metal in Baghdad*. It's really emotional story and it makes me even happier to see how you guys evolved. It was probably the right push at the right time. But what do you think, if it wasn't for this movie where would you have gone?**

**M:** It's really hard to imagine, because now the movie is part of who you are now. It's like part of your history and that's really hard to imagine, like what band would be like. Even before the movie we had huge amount of press during that time, because I think in a very dysfunctional way we played it right and sometimes I feel bad saying that, but I think the circumstances at the time were fortunate for a metal band emerging from Iraq and especially in 2003 when the war happened. A lot of media started covering the situation in Iraq and so

it happened that we were already there. The fact that we never stopped performing, never stopped being a band even though the circumstances that played in our benefit. It saddens me to say, because I wish the country was in peace and all these things that happened never happened, but it did happen and we stayed loyal to metal and we stayed loyal to our craft which is music, so I think people noticed that and appreciated that. And that's why we have solid base of underground followers. I think that's what they tried to show in the documentary. We thought about quitting all the time, but it still didn't happen. Why would you play in metal band if you don't have electricity? We went through so much just to be able to practice. You know, the drive in the band was insane. I still remember I had a small generator for my house so we could all sit down and practice. And even during the time when we got kicked out or when we were threatened or when we were pushed around by other people who didn't understand what we're doing exactly, we still continued to play and I think all this persistence played a huge role. And then followed out by the documentary, which none of us, not even the documentary makers or us thought that this thing will fly. But we're doing the documentary, we just didn't give a fuck. These guys wanted to film us around, you know, we said okay.

**G: You didn't think about consequences.**

**M:** None of them actually. I met with the filmmaker, we didn't see each other for a while, and we sat down and talked about it now, years after. I think that movie was huge. It still affects my life too and none of us made money out with it. The fact that this movie is out there is important, that's a good stone in your career. It seems like it spoke to a lot of people, a lot of musicians, a lot of metalheads. And even to people that doesn't listen to metal.

**G: Yeah, the story just speaks for itself and the story is, as I said before, it's really emotionally full and it's a deep movie. It shows the artistic part of Iraq and Baghdad, you know.**

**M:** Yeah. I mean a lot of people thought in stereotypes, for example, there's certain type of people in Latvia and there's certain type of people in Baghdad and Iraq. But actually it's not very diverse and there are a lot of metalheads in my country and basically our goal is to deliver this fact about diversity to the people who doesn't know about my country. To understand and to make other people think: "They're like us! They put metal t-shirts on, they like Dio, they like this, they like that. They're just in different country and have different circumstances." I think the movie is successfully building this bridge between us and others. Like you said the story spoke for itself and that was the whole idea behind the movie. When they were making the movie they were thinking: "We don't want to add a lot of commentaries and stuff like that. You guys do what you do!" Nothing was actually staged. It was just the truth really.

**G: Mhm. You know, music is the common language without any borders.**

**M:** Exactly.

**G: The movie gave you the opportunity and motivated to go from Syria to Turkey afterwards looking for opportunities to play your music. Later you moved to USA, and that's how I met you, that's when I saw the video with you guys and *Metallica*. I think it was like a dream come true for you guys. Just being few days in America and not only seeing *Metallica* but meeting as well.**

**M:** Well yeah, I mean I was in the US for two days the rest of the guys were ahead of me. And when they said *Metallica* I was jet lagged, I was tired, I was like, yeah, *Metallica*, okay, cool. Then the day came and two days later we met the filmmakers and as I remember, as I was walking my heart starts racing. I thought that this is not really happening and that's when reality hits, shit, I'm about to meet *Metallica* now. I remember James Hetfield walking down the hallway and my heart just sank in. Like, I can't do it, I can't fucking do it. I remember the guy, he just walked down the hallway and saying: "I wanna talk to you!" And it was such a cool thing to see that he actually watched some videos of us rehearsing and he watched the movie. I think, at the time he was the only one that watched it and he was asking us about stuff and he was like, you guys are inspiration to me and that was coming from James Hetfield. Even when he was on stage actually, when he was performing and I think in a song called *What don't kill you make more you strong*.

**G:** Yeah, *Broken, Beat, Scarred*.

**M:** Yeah, and he dedicated that song for his friends, us. I thought: "Holy shit, this is not happening!"

**G:** Amazing!

**M:** Hetfield dedicates a song for you. Really fucking amazing.

**G:** Just only two days and seeing *Metallica* and meeting *Metallica*. That's awesome!

**M:** Come on, this is the cool thing about metal. That's what always attracts me towards metal.

**G:** Moving forward to your first EP. I think it's one of the most thoughtful album titles, you know - *Only the Dead See the End of the War*. It's really impressive title. How did you and where did you record it?

**M:** We recorded it at the same studio where we recorded the album, *The Spin Recording Studios* in Long Island City in Queens, New York. I think at the time Vice wanted to release an EP in 2010 and we were working with Alex Skolnick from *Testament*, he wanted to produce the band. Alex was showing up every day to practice with us and told us what to do and what could work for the EP. At the time three songs were *Message from Baghdad*, *The Unknown* and *Massacre*. *The Stones* wasn't even on and I think I wrote *Garden of Stones* with Tony in Turkey, but we didn't think it was fit. We went to the studio, we played, and we recorded. At the end they were like, we think you guys should record *Garden of Stones*. We just recorded it so we can have four songs. It was three days processed working with Nik Chinboukas who's now the producer of the album as sound engineer and mixing Josh Wilbur who has worked with *System of a Down* and he's producer for *Lamb of God*.

**G:** I think Nik also worked as sound engineer for *Testament* last album.

**M:** Yeah, he did actually *The Formation of Damnation* or the last one?

**G:** I think the last one, *Dark Roots of Earth*.

**M:** He's good friends with Alex Skolnick. We trusted Nik also because he's Greek. He has Mediterranean influences and Middle East influences so it was good to work with him. And just because we worked with him on *Only the Dead See the End of War* that made us think that we should work with Nik and Alex again. So yeah, that was for EP and the, I think the EP

was good, people kind of perceived it well. Followed by video for *Garden of Stones* which actually was people favorite even though it wasn't supposed to be on the fucking record.

**G: Yeah, I think I saw the video as well when it came out. It's like five years ago but still I remember how I first saw it. Did you use James guitar actually on the record? Did you ever use it?**

**M:** For this record we used James Hetfield guitar but for the EP we used the old other guitars. For this record we actually used James' Hetfield guitar a lot. Well, we used it on bunch of songs, *Unity*, *House of Dust* and others. It has really fuzzy, sharp edged, cutting through sound. We even used Van Halen custom guitar. We used bunch of guitars, we used like 10 guitars for this record just because every song was different, like C sharp and then B and then E and then D and so. We had a variety of tuning in this album that's why we had bunch of guitars just lying around.

**G: Yeah, we're gonna come back to the new album but there was this small gap between the first EP and *Gilgamesh*. What did happen in the meantime? As I saw you played with *Ministry* and Uncle Al even said that you're his favorite new band!**

**M:** Yeah, I remember, Al was based in Texas and we went to see him and we gave him the album. He had never heard it before, but he heard about us and I think he watched the movie. So we went to his home studio to hang out and I gave him EP and I asked him if he's going to play it and he said fucking yeah. He put it in and he blasted it. I remember his words exactly: "You guys need to buy me a new floor. My jaw dropped on the fucking floor."

**G: Awesome!**

**M:** That was a great fucking evening. He said that he wanted to produce us so much. If we're not going to let him produce he'll gonna hunt us down and kill us. He's crazy, I mean, crazy Al, but he's such an amazing guy, and such an entrepreneur and what he does with the music and his style. We ended up opening for him in Best Buy Theatre in Times Square, which was amazing. We toured for five months during that time. We played bunch of shows but what happened is we got dropped of Vice label. We got managed by Rachel Martinez, who did a great job for two years to maintain band on the road and to play shows. But the problem was like, budget wise. I think during that time there was no *Kickstarter* and stuff in 2011-2012. Then there was no funding. We weren't making money out of band and shows really don't pay much. It was clear that we needed just to perform and play live. In the time gap we didn't have a label and we were looking for funding the album. We needed really to make something that is worth the wait. We didn't want to record anything like within the budget or something like that. It's been such a long time and this is gonna be the first album. Some of the songs on the album actually been written before like *Rise*, we wrote it in 2009 or 2010. So most of the songs were written like a while ago, yet we didn't find the funds to record them. So I think that's what happened at the time. I think ideally we should have released an album in 2011.

**G: Mhm, shortly after the EP.**

**M:** Exactly, yeah. A year after or less but we didn't do that. So that kind of cost us to lose some of our fan base and momentum, you know. But nonetheless we tried to come back strong with it and I hope that worked.

**Q: Yeah, well speaking of the album, the mighty *Gilgamesh*. You said before that you wrote *Rise* in 2009, so you had the idea about *Gilgamesh* already before or was it only just the music that was ready?**

**M:** The idea of *Gilgamesh* was in 2008 maybe, when we were in Istanbul, Turkey at the time when we had this discussion about it. I talked about the concept of *Gilgamesh* with my friend. I've been always into concept albums so I was thinking like, if we ever with *Acrassicauda* do album, we should do a concept album. I was kind of like swept away after that. I thought let's do *Gilgamesh* because doing album about Arabian Nights or stuff like that could be cheesy and a little bit gay. I think this story never has been really explored in that way, like in a metal sense. I mean, I know there's like some stuff that I looked up about *Gilgamesh* but just really wanted to give it the credit it deserves which is not only one song or two. Just make the whole album about this epic.

**Q: And to show your rich history. *Gilgamesh* is one of the first literature epic.**

**M:** Yep. I mean it's dated like 5000 years ago. The reason we called the EP *Only the Dead see the End of the War* is because 3000 years ago Plato said that. I'm trying to remind and to show people that who we were and where we're at now and did we ever learn. Because if somebody figured this thing out 3000 years ago, why are we still fighting? Why are we still at war? Why are people being killed, in the name of different stuff?

**Q: Yeah, nobody wants to be just a man.**

**M:** Exactly, yeah.

**Q: As you said before that you played with 10 different guitars on the album. The album feels exactly that way. It has so much different styles. It's like lots of different metal varieties, e.g., some *Lamb of God* or *Slayer* influences. It's pretty amazing. But still you guys, from *Acrassicauda* went through a lot of shit, you know, and you connected with other guys just with your experiences. But how was it to have a new guy in a band?**

**M:** It was difficult at the beginning, because I think we never talked about that Tony left the band. A lot of people asked about it sometimes and we never really addressed the situation with Tony. But I think Tony was just tired and beat up after all these years. He's much older than all of us, I think he's 38 or something like that. I think he got to the point when he was just frustrated and tired. It was really tough at the beginning not have him around, because we never played with any other in the band. And specially also Tony was force in playing and writing music, contributing in music. And then Moe came, he was just basically a fan of the band. He used to come and hang out at the practice, listen to us play and stuff like that. The dude knew all the songs by heart, we didn't even have to audition him. We just strapped on the guitar and played four songs note by note.

**Q: Awesome!**

**M:** When Tony left to Virginia, I asked Moe, do you wanna fill in? I think that made his dream come true. Afterwards we were joined by Mar2, because, we let Faisal to focus on singing. It didn't work out with Mar2, because he had other responsibilities and got married. So in the band stayed me, Moe, Faisal and Firas.

**Q: Mhm. And the whole campaign *Kickstarter* was probably a big surprise for you guys as well, that you raised 4000 more than you expected, right?**

**M:** Well, I was discussing about *Kickstarter* with a friend. After the contract with previous management ended, the band became 100% independent, the idea of album was still there. We have to make an album. What I was thinking, this is the last thing that I'll do with my life. I need to have an album out. Because we've been there out for years, yet people have heard only four songs from us that was recorded professionally. So with a help of friend, Jason, who's also a fan of the band and helped me out a lot working on this concept of *Kickstarter*. I quit my job and started working on this 24/7. I was tied up to my computer and doing researches and trying to build this whole momentum for *Kickstarter* and contacting people, contacting sponsors, contacting media and calling people and doing this and doing that. I think, probably for four or five months preparing and 40 days during *Kickstarter* I was slave to my computer. I was calling people around and I didn't have no life whatsoever. I had to keep working on it and finally, yeah, we made it. It was hard because I didn't know what we're gonna do if we don't make it. Not making it for the *Kickstarter* was not an option in my head. So there was no plan B, there was only this one plan and I'm glad that we pulled through.

**G: Mhm, yeah, but still the fans support is pretty huge and you have a pretty kick-ass fan base.**

**M:** We still call them, we picked this word, the diehard fans. I mean, to have such fans who consider the band as a family to them, as an extended family to them. Even when we go on tour, we stay at their houses. We try to maintain our relationship as strong as possible with our fans. We don't call them fans really, we call them friends and family to be honest because really they are not fans, they are friends and family.

**G: Well, the album was really something special for you, so it had to be (special for fans too). We, fans, had just to wait for 15 years, you know. Which is you favorite song from the album?**

**M:** My favorite song of the album?

**G: Or is it just the whole album?**

**M:** I think my favorite is the *Amongst Kings and Men*. It's a little more progressive, speaks more to me. Most of these songs like, I think *Quest for Eternity* me and Moe, we wrote it together, like back in 2011 on tour, all of them are special.

**G: Yeah, that's nice. So as I've read you can now easily travel to Europe, right? You finally got your visas. What plans do you have, well not for this summer but next summer?**

**M:** Trying to working on it right now. Started working on that last week, try to book us in Europe. So I'm just contacting people, because this is all new to me. Also booking, doing PR, doing a little this stuff. So it's really new to me like this area of booking and stuff like that. So hopefully I'll be able to book some shows in Europe and stuff like that.

**G: Mhm. What about touring in US?**

**M:** In US it's easier, because we toured in the US, so we have the promoters contacts. Soon we'll announce a show I think in New York and it's the first show since 2013 in October. So I think we'll play two shows. One in New York, but we still haven't announced it yet. We'll put up a show in New York because that's where we live and we'll play a show in Buffalo too. Hopefully for August and September. As the rest of the US we're still working on it right now so hopefully we'll be able to book some shows.

**G:** Speaking about global situation what happens in metal scene. Nowadays you get to hear about lot of different metal acts evolving in well, let's say distant to metal countries such as Iraq or as I recently read an interview with one guy from the Saudi Arabian band *AlNamrood* they play black metal and in this case, music is speaking about freedom of religion. They can be sentenced to death because of the lyrics. Similar things happen in Angola, there's this movie *Death Metal in Angola*, well the title speaks for itself. In this city Angola there is this one metal act as well evolving. And yeah, and I think of them and as for you as well I see you like some superheroes, you know. Just fighting against injustice and for freedom of speech, you know. It's like vigilantes, you know.

**M:** Thanks man!

**G:** And I saw in one photo your T-shirt - Politics divides, Metal unites. The music is the common language without any borders as I said it before. How's the metal scene in Baghdad right now?

**M:** Yeah. I mean, it's not that much now. I actually get a lot of e-mails from Iraq, from those kids who just now grew up, who didn't actually get to see the band or some of them get to see the latest shows of the band in 2005 and they were like, we will come to you when you guys are at shows or we're making a band here. We really like to support them and show that we actually care. The situation right now in Iraq is not really good. Situation is not very good so I'd imagine it's really hard to perform right now in Iraq. Still there are guys who practice and play music. I recently saw a couple covers, they covered couple of songs. That is amazing, you know, people just get sick and tired of the situation. For how long would it be like? 10 years? 20 years? 30 years? It's not getting any better so people start to speak up. If you're being sick and tired of the situation you want to change the situation not by violence, but just in artistic way and that may influence people. Because I think the word speaks much louder than a bullet.

**G:** Yeah, that's true. Well, as I said they're like superheroes that fight for justice and freedom.

**M:** I mean the whole thing just escalated. When we first started we were just like any of those kids, you know, we were sick and tired from being suppressed and, you know, being told what to do and stuff like that. And not because we wanted to do something crazy, you know, anything would be easier just the fight. I think this is the best way to influence people because music is very universal, it's common language even though you don't speak the lingo. In a lot interviews that we do, they ask us about the political situation and I tell them go listen to the album. I'm not gonna speak on behalf of the band, I would tell you to go and listen to songs. Because the message is in there. It's in the tracks, between the lines. So we're not here to tell people what to do, which path to take. We're just messengers speaking out of experience, trying to be as realistic but optimistic as possible. Yet to tell the story, and again the story speaks for itself, we're just putting the music, trying to deliver so it access every house, and people can listen to it. 'Cause if you tell people what to do I don't think they'll listen, but if you choose like the right way to tell people, your chances of getting heard is much higher.

**G:** It makes you think.

**M:** Exactly, we always think music unites people, transcends any borders, any identity, and on the other hand you have politics which are based on division, separating people, and music



just speaks in general for everyone. It's a bridge all of us need to cross it to see what's on the other side.

**G: Everyone know what's happening out there, but most of them don't have the courage to see the real situation. Are you thinking about going back to Baghdad?**

**M:** Well hopefully the situation will get at some point better. Even if it gets slightly better, so we're able to perform a show over there. That would be amazing! It has always been a dream that we could go back and have a concert. People from Iraq are contacting us and telling that they can't have the album, so we should send it to them! We've been in these shoes before. It would be a dream come true to be able to perform again in Iraq. Especially if you have slightly larger fan base there.

**G: Probably you've already became legends over there.**

**M:** I hope so! We just fucking want to hang out with these guys, and play music for them, watch them to release all this energy, it's all about peace and love, harmony, it doesn't matter how you express yourself as long as you have pure intention! I hope we could come to Latvia and to play over there.

**G: That would be awesome, because the album is great! You have to listen to it several times though until you catch all the riffs, but the album is slowly growing on me.**

**M:** That's great to hear. I hope lot of people in Latvia share the same emotions about the album.