



# FLASH METAL

Frank Marshall discovers the energy and style of a bold subculture in Botswana

BY JACK CRAGER



FRANK MARSHALL

Sometimes opposites make strong bedfellows. Frank Marshall, a South African photographer and winner of the 2011 Sony World Photography Awards Student Focus competition, brings a formalistic approach to portraiture in the anarchic world of metal music. And he's focused his artistry on a cadre of fans—he calls them “Renegades”—who blend hardcore hubris with cowboy chic.

Marshall first met his improbable muses in 2008, when he was hired to shoot a South African metal band at a gig in Gaborone, capital of the neighboring Republic of Botswana. There he encountered a small but devoted gang of leather-clad “metalheads” who added a bit of western flair to their garb. “It was like entering the twilight zone, to be honest,” recalls Marshall, now 27. “I photographed some of the local fans briefly at first, using the minimal time afforded in the single night. After getting back home and making a few prints, I realized there was a lot more depth to go back and explore.”

A year later, Marshall decided to concentrate on this Botswana subculture in his undergraduate photography thesis at Tshwane University of Technology. “It was just too undeniable for me to ignore—too honest and too real for one to not admire and smile at,” says Marshall, himself a metal fan of Irish and South African ancestry. “I wanted to honor them and do them justice as best I could. I wanted people to see them, to revel in their glory, like I did.”

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“Mr. Rock,” shows off his metal accoutrement. He is one of the subjects Marshall discovered when working on a series about the metal subculture of Botswana.

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Marshall was drawn to the energy of a unique brew: a faction of Botswana's predominantly black populace charged by the (typically) white culture of metal music; a youth rebellion against the post-colonial society that's taken root since the small nation acquired independence from Britain in 1966. "Heavy Metal is a divergent subculture, and its quasi-nihilist tenets seem to have developed into an uprising in sub-Saharan Africa," writes Shane de Lange in his introduction to the catalog for Marshall's "Renegades" at Johannesburg's Rooke Gallery—an exhibit that's traveled to San Francisco and other cities. "These 'Renegades' are almost thespian in their unconscious re-reading of post-colonial hauteur. This 'performative' aspect is a dominant theme in Marshall's photographs."

Marshall points to other stylistic factors. "Botswana is a cattle-dependent country with a low-ranging landscape and open fields, and I guess that's where the cowboy and biker influences in their attire come

from," he says. One of Botswana's few white metal performers, Giuseppe Sbrana of the band Skinflint, adds a telling note: "A good example of where we get the style from is Motörhead's *Ace Of Spades* cover," he reveals to *Vice.com*, citing the 1980 album featuring the metal pioneers in leather and cowboy hats.

As a photographic artist, Marshall lists a pair of key influences. "I discovered the work of two photographers: Anton Corbijn and Edward S. Curtis," he says, referring to the frequent lensman for U2, and the legendary portraitist of Native Americans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, respectively. "They both inspired me a great deal and shaped my outlook going forward with the series. The U2 portraits made by Corbijn in Joshua Tree, Death Valley, are burned into my mind forever."

In this series, Marshall uses a rather old-school approach, shooting with medium-format Hasselblad 500CM and EL/M cameras and Fujichrome Provia 100F film. "Without question, I learned the most from

**TOP RIGHT:** "Pantera," an image of a woman who calls herself "Steel Panther." **MIDDLE RIGHT:** "Bound by the Moon," an image of a man who goes by the moniker, "Metal." **BELOW:** A group of metalheads who call themselves, "Dethguard."



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long hours spent in the darkroom," he says, "learning the hard way by trial and error. The time and effort demanded by the analog process taught me restraint, I think."

For their part, Marshall's "Renegades" bring a mix of iconoclasm and friendliness to the portrait sessions. "Most of them have larger-than-life personalities, but a few are very quiet and restrained. Overall they are magnanimous in character," Marshall says. "I've never felt like an outsider. On the contrary, I've never felt such a kinship with a group of people. I've been welcomed as one of them."

Marshall does note his subjects' defiance toward their surrounding society. "It's not rebellion against the mainstream as much as it is the embracing of the old-school, core ideologies of the metal subculture," he opines. "Sure, the style is explosive, but the ethos is there in equal—if not greater—measure. That is, the ethos of freedom, of power, and of unity. There is also definitely a pure, *Kill Em All* [Metallica] or 'Leather Rebel' [Judas Priest] feeling there."

Plus a dose of showmanship. "One must take African culture and ways of expression into account: boldness and candidness," Marshall says. "You only need to observe a Zulu war dance to appreciate these pervasive aspects of African culture. This is like a modern version of that tradition."

To see more work by Frank Marshall, visit [www.ironwarlock.com](http://www.ironwarlock.com).