



Ozzy Osbourne, left, and guitarist Chris Holmes of Wasp, smashed in a pool, in Penelope Spheeris' *"The Metal Years."*

MOVIE REVIEW

Spheeris' 'The Metal Years' Peeks at Decadent Subculture

By MICHAEL WILMINGTON

Guitars throb, drums pound, larynxes roar, and the devil gets his due and his sympathy in Penelope Spheeris' *"The Decline of Western Civilization, Part 2: The Metal Years"* (selected theaters).

It's a wickedly straight-on peek into the rock 'n' roll subculture of heavy metal: that teen-age wasteland in which outlandishly garbed, swathed, watched and studied rockers—opulent hair shaking frenziedly, instruments flailing with wild abandon—bawl out their anthems of defiance and lust, carnage, conquest and partying all night to shrieking, hedonistic crowds of teen-age headbangers.

The devil's music, it is said. And during the course of the film, a probation officer patiently explains the Luciferian significance of a familiar heavy-metal hand signaling and little finger extended like the horns of a goat, thumb pressing the other fingers down in a convoluted spiral of three sixes—the biblical Number of the Beast. As we shiver over this revelation, Spheeris presents us with two of the more flamboyantly pseudo-Satanic rockers: Ozzy Osbourne, once of Black Sabbath, and the infamous skinny, sunken-eyed androgen, Alice Cooper—both, as it were, with their hair down.

Cooper is an excitable chap who sounds as if he might collect Biedermeier china on the side. Old Oz,

looking like a middle-aged Dutch-

boy ad, is puttering around in a sunny L.A. kitchen, trying to make bacon and eggs and pour some orange juice, a task so complex it seems to baffle him. Neither of these gentlemen looks as if he could hurt a fly, a chicken or a dove, or would ever want to. Such is hell's fate in the age of electronics. Even the devil needs Tele-Prompters to live up to his image.

Spheeris is a talented director and interviewer, and most of her subjects—which include Gene Simmons and Paul Stanley of Kiss, and the entire dram of Poison—seem to be trying to flirt with her. They roll their eyes, tell smutty jokes, giggle and, in general, act like they're about to lean over the third beer, recall their childhood and grab her knee. Eventually, all these lewdly smiling honchos of heavy tell Spheeris everything—and, cool cookie and crafty film maker, she passes it on, undiluted.

The interviews range in quality,

On the upper hand, there's Aerosmith's Steve Tyler and Joe Perry, who come on like salty old electronic cowboys who have lived through the great cocaine blizzard of '78, and Motorhead's Lemmy, looming over a hillside, cracking jokes like a semi driver over the third coffee with a hundred miles to go.

On the lower hand, there's Paul Stanley, who in a fit of narcissistic whimsy, has persuaded Spheeris to film him overhead, in a satiny

boudoir, lying languorously amid a troika of smiling but silent lingerie-wearing lovelies—all shot through such a rosy haze that you expect to see Penthouse's Bob Guccione in the lights.

As in the first *"Decline,"* Spheeris is more concerned with exposing the scene than the music. She films groupies, fans, would-be superstars ("I'm going to make it," they usually say, with the indomitable

faith of young sales executives).

She also films the self-proclaimed Godfather of Rock 'n' Roll, Bill Gazzarri: a Sunset Boulevard entrepreneur who usually has a teen-age girl on either arm and the toothsome, vague-eyed smile of a clothier who's just left his wife and bought an MG with a telephone and portable bar.

Unfortunately, the music is mostly not worth exposing. We don't hear past metal exemplars like Led Zeppelin, the Who or the Rolling Stones. We don't even hear Aerosmith or Alice Cooper. Instead, we hear Megadeth and Faster Pussycat and, at the opposite extreme, Odin, a new band whose lead singer has copied David Lee Roth's convertible pants style, without an Eddie Van Halen on guitar to cover him from behind.

"Decline's" redempting grace is its jocular, damn-the-proprietaries air, and, for the first half, its staccato editing rhythm. It's damnation is most of the music and its relative avoidance of heavy metal's darker corners: the pith and point

that Alex Cox gave punk in *"Sid and Nancy."* Only in one scene, does *"Decline"* (MPAA-rated R, obviously) really dance on the edge: a sobering interview with guitarist Chris Holmes of Wasp—floating in a pool, smashed beyond recovery, slobbering up cascades of vodka that he sends raining down while he proclaims his life worthless, his music forgettable and himself a piece of excrement. Sitting poolside is Holmes' silent mother. "He's my boy," her eyes seem to be saying. "Wallowing, drunk, self-hating, wrecked in this wretched excess and idiot smile, destruction ready to pounce... but my boy all the same." It's a spooky, spiky moment, and the movie could use more of them.

THE DECLINE OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION: PART 2: THE METAL YEARS

A New Line Cinema presentation of an L.R.S. World Media production. Producers Jonathan Dayton, Valerie Paris. Director Penelope Spheeris. Executive producers Miles Copeland III, Paul Glickman. Camera Jeff Zimmerman. Music Supervisor Seth Kaplan. Editor Karl Ghaffari.

Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes. MPAA rating: R (under 17 requires an accompanying parent or adult guardian).