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# T O O L

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# VANGUARD

TOOL, 2023

REBELS, INNOVATORS AND ICONOCLASTS



KRISTIN BURNS





× × × For three decades, they've been alt-metal's ultimate outsiders. But at Power Trip, they officially joined the metal pantheon – and proved they belong.

TEXT **Steve Appleford**  
PHOTOGRAPHY **Kristin Burns**







# THE CALIFORNIA DESERT

## DELIVERS ITS OWN SPECIAL EFFECTS. THE

first thing that hits you is the heat, which peaked at a molten 100 degrees in Indio, during the three days in October that a cross section of leading names in heavy music descended on a massive festival called Power Trip. Then there are the visuals at sundown. So when the four members of TOOL stepped onstage for their 6:55 p.m. set time, they faced not just a roaring crowd of at least 60,000 hard-boiled metal fanatics, but also an epic horizon of mountains and palm trees in silhouette against a fading sky of blue, purple and orange.

TOOL were there as part of an historic metal and hard-rock summit, sharing the festival stage with an unprecedented lineup of name-brand headliners: AC/DC, Metallica, Guns N' Roses, Judas Priest and Iron Maiden. Power Trip was a show of force by some of the genre's most influential names over a three-day weekend, October 6th through 8th, unfolding on the grassy fields of the Empire Polo Club, site of the annual Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival.

TOOL and Metallica shared the bill on the festival's closing night. But the alternative-metal quartet — singer Maynard James Keenan, guitarist Adam Jones, and the superpowered rhythm section of bassist Justin Chancellor and drummer Danny Carey — already had a deeper history in Indio than the others,

going all the way back to the very first Coachella in 1999. TOOL co-headlined the final day of that inaugural fest with Rage Against the Machine for an especially heavy conclusion to what was then mostly an alternative-rock and EDM gathering. The barricades in front of the stage came down that night.

"That was a pretty heavy, heavy deal for me," Chancellor remembers of their first performance at the desert venue. "It gave us a lot of confidence to be able to be in that position in a big festival next to that kind of company."

In 2011, Metallica brought its monumental Big 4 gathering of thrash originators — including Slayer, Megadeth and Anthrax — to these same polo fields. Guns N' Roses and AC/DC each played Coachella as classic hard-rock outliers at the top of the bill. But TOOL were there from day one, then back for a second round at Coachella in 2006. Keenan has also played the festival with both A Perfect Circle and Puscifer. That makes Indio very familiar territory. But Power Trip was much more than just another tour stop for TOOL.

Four years ago, in the leadup to the August 2019 release of *Fear Inoculum*, no one — including the band themselves — could be sure how the epic-length album might land in the singles-dominated age of

streaming and playlists. It was, after all, their first offering in 13 years. They had changed. The world had changed. TOOL were, to paraphrase *Fear Inoculum*'s "Invincible," warriors struggling to remain relevant and consequential, "long in tooth and soul/Longing for another win."

But win they did. *Fear Inoculum* debuted at No. 1 on the *Billboard* chart, and went on to win a Grammy for Best Metal Performance ("7empest") and become the biggest-selling rock album of 2019 by a large margin. The years since have served as something of a victory lap, each sold-out show confirming their relevance and consequence. Maybe none more than Power Trip, however. TOOL aren't just relevant in 2023; they've cemented their place in the pantheon.

Talking ahead of the concert, Chancellor suggested TOOL were approaching Power Trip as both a calling and a challenge. "A lot of these are bands I grew up with as a teenager," he tells *Revolver* over the phone from the road, days before arriving in Indio. "It's an honor and a privilege to share the stage with them — I mean, pretty much *every single one of them*. At the moment, it's my sole focus. Everything else is a warm-up for that."

As the band does for every tour stop, TOOL created a poster to commemorate their concert date in the



TOOL, (from left) Adam Jones, Justin Chancellor, Danny Carey and Maynard James Keenan









desert. For Power Trip, they repurposed a classic 1965 painting by Frank Frazetta: *Winged Terror*, which depicts a moment of barbarian struggle, as a man with a bloodied sword battles three large batlike creatures. Intentional or not, the image was a possible hint at the battle of the bands to come.

Since TOOL and Metallica both have some of the most intense and demanding fans in rock, their combined audience that night could have been a volatile mix. Expectations would be high, so TOOL prepared their heaviest rhythms and riffs, and crafted an especially heavy set that left most of their quieter, contemplative pieces for another day. “We were talking about our setlist the other day, because we didn’t want to come off as fluffy or something,” Carey tells *Revolver* a few days before Power Trip. “The heavy-metal kingpins are going to be sharing the stage with us. That influences it a little bit for sure. We want to bring the big guns and make an impact on the crowd.”

Offstage, there is nothing but brotherly love between the acts. While TOOL is the “youngest” act on the festival bill, having formed merely 30 years ago, most of the band is essentially in the same age group as Metallica and Guns N’ Roses. They’ve all crossed paths at one time or another over the decades. Metallica guitarist Kirk Hammett joined TOOL onstage to jam on songs in 2006 and 2011, and he shares Jones’ obsession with dark, surreal art. Carey has played golf with Maiden drummer Nicko McBrain.

“The drumming community is pretty tight-knit,” says Carey. “The drums are such a communal instrument, so it lends itself to that. Drummers seem to hang out a lot more than guitar players and keyboard players.”

That said, Carey embraced heavy metal relatively late in his musical evolution. While Black Sabbath and AC/DC landed early on his playlist, he grew up more as a prog-rock devotee, and chose to study the complex sounds of Genesis, Yes, King Crimson and Emerson, Lake & Palmer. (Carey has even played with The Crimson ProjeKt, a touring tribute with King Crimson guitarist Adrian Belew.) For Carey, metal came later, but TOOL now sits comfortably at a nexus of metal, prog and alternative rock.

Memories of playing the first Coachella in the desert remain vivid for all of them. “I remember it just being incredibly hot,” Carey says with a laugh. “It was one of the biggest crowds we had played for at that point in our band’s history. So that was a big deal. It was a great vibe out there in the desert.” Like the artists onstage, fans new to Indio faced the elements. “They had to water ’em down like cattle,” he recalls.

Chancellor is just happy when an outdoor gig isn’t cold. “It never seems to be a problem in Indio,” he says. “It’s that nice warm air and it just feels very relaxing on your body. It’s an easier environment to play in, for sure, physically.”

TOOL were already booked to play Aftershock in Sacramento on October 6th, so they had to miss Power Trip’s opening night with Guns N’ Roses and Iron Maiden. They arrived in time for night two — and AC/DC’s first performance in seven years.

“I got to stand right in the corner of the runway and the stage and look up and watch Angus Young just rip it up,” Chancellor says of the guitarist, while marveling at the explosive vocals of Brian Johnson. “The noise coming out of that man was just mind-boggling.”

It also gave him a chance to take in the scope of the event, and the size of the stage, the big screens and the crowd stretched back to the horizon. “I mean, it was just ginormous,” the bassist says. “I would turn around and there were fans right there behind us, and they were definitely fully involved [in the show]. It felt good being down there on the ground with it, you know?”

#### ON THE DAY OF THEIR POWER TRIP SHOW,

TOOL eased into the tasks at hand and didn’t arrive at the venue until 90 minutes ahead of showtime. Chancellor, for one, spent his downtime poolside with his older brother, Jim Chancellor, a London-based music exec (and onetime CBGB bouncer). “I actually got to sit and swim at the pool for about three hours that afternoon,” Chancellor says later. “It was quite glorious and relaxing, to be honest, compared to sitting in a room and thinking about [the show].” Other band members also had their families on-site.

From there, TOOL and their entourage rolled up to the festival in a VIP convoy with police escort, slicing through traffic, “which always makes me feel like a little kid,” Chancellor adds with a laugh. His brother rode along. “I was going, ‘Look, Jim! Look at it!’ We were all just enjoying it.”

Backstage, TOOL were visited in their compound by Metallica’s Kirk Hammett and Rob Trujillo. In a picture posted online later, the Metallica dudes are all smiles posing by a trailer with Keenan, Jones and Chancellor. The friendly battle of the heavy-metal titans was about to begin.

At dusk, TOOL quickly erupted beneath the seven-pointed heptagram star hanging overhead with two songs from 2006’s *10,000 Days*, at first layering a thundering beat with the scraping of guitar strings on a hard-hitting “Jambi,” as Keenan crouched from a shadowy perch, pacing anxiously in a circle, like

a fighter ready to throw down. He was a feral creature up there, in a black leather jacket zipped to his throat, the horned Queen B Puscifer logo painted across his chest. The big screens above him roiled with red lava-like intensity. Then came “The Pot,” built from crisp, growling guitar and a talk-box vocal from Adam Jones, with moving pictures of otherworldly architecture and mysterious life-forms splashed across the screens.

“Good evening, Power Trip,” said Keenan, barely lit but still visible with his spiky mohawk wig visible in silhouette. “You all look great, and smell delicious.”

If most of the weekend’s other acts performed beneath the usual bright stage lights, with an abundance of close-ups of band members shown on the massive screen, TOOL made a very different creative choice, as usual. Befitting their role as a band of mystery, the attention was directed mostly to the visuals, and less often on the players, with a serious effort put into the large-scale, unsettling images that would make an impact even to the back rows.

“We try and take the attention off our own egos and off our individual personalities and try to elevate the music in a more creative way with the visuals,” Chancellor explains later, noting that the band means to create “a sensory experience — which I don’t think looking at my face really adds to.”

Carey had big flaming eyeballs on each of his two kickdrums. And after the second song, Keenan peeled off his leather jacket to reveal a Devo T-shirt. Laid out in front of them was the circular catwalk prepared for Metallica’s coming set. Chancellor was tempted to wander out there during songs but was held in place at stage left by his bass cable.

“Rosetta Stoned” was a rarely played deep cut recently reintroduced into the touring setlist, and at Power Trip it was built up in layers of relentless beats and deep rhythm from Carey and Chancellor, and guitar from Jones that was as noisy and wild-eyed as an Ornette Coleman jazz solo. Carey considers the song especially challenging: “That’s probably one of the hardest songs we have drumming-wise to execute. I’m happy to have that challenge and it keeps me interested.”

Keenan’s wounded voice soared to the heavens, as he paced like a caged animal, and the big screen showed murky scenes of underwater horror and tortured life-forms. While the band offered a sample of their shorter MTV-era hits from the Nineties (“Ænema” and “Stinkfist”), even the later epics seemed to fly by quickly in a 12-song set.

“I like to think of them as kind of a journey,” Chancellor says later of the longer songs. “You get lost and you get carried away, and you’re not particularly concentrating on time, you know?” By the end, TOOL



**"It'll be different this time. Everyone's life is different. Time is precious now, so you look for ways to be more efficient with the process. We've had a lot of discussion about how we bring a new record to fruition in a slightly different way."  
— Justin Chancellor**

had delivered a set of songs to satisfy even the most demanding member of the TOOL Army.

There was no encore (the only band at the fest to skip one), but the guys still grabbed a few lingering moments to say goodbye. "Thank you all," Keenan announced to the desert-baked throngs. "This is fantastic. You still smell delicious." Jones and Carey each brought out one of their kids to the stage. Carey's long-haired son tossed out a small drumhead, a prize memento from a show to remember. And Chancellor finally unplugged himself for a quick jog out onto the catwalk.

Within days, Keenan sends *Revolver* a brief message about the summit they had just been a part of: "It was an honor trying to keep up with a lineup of legends. They have and will continue to inspire us."

Following the show, TOOL drove north overnight on their bus and woke up in rainy Bodega Bay, California, then headed to nearby Sebastopol to join a celebration of Les Claypool's 60th birthday. The little town (population 7,500) is the location of Claypool Cellars, where the Primus frontman makes a fermented juice that he lovingly calls Purple Pachyderm Pinot Noir, which no doubt has led to a meeting of the minds between Claypool and TOOL's in-house wine master Keenan. (In a radio interview last year, Claypool praised the *vino*-making expertise of Keenan and his Caduceus Cellars: "Maynard is the fucking real deal.")

In an interview days later, Chancellor is still feeling the effects of his time in the desert and occasionally coughs into the phone. "I still got a throat full of dust," he says cheerfully.

Power Trip was an early highlight in a fall season

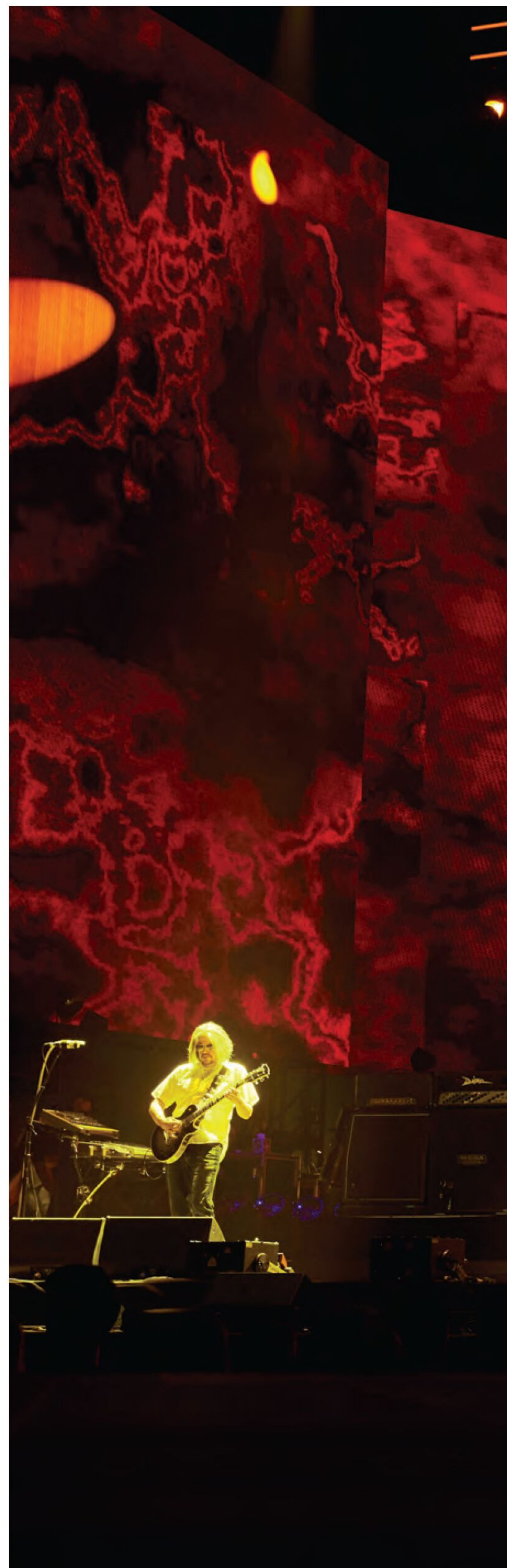
of touring that continued through most of November and is set to pick up again with an expanded round of dates beginning January 10th in Baltimore, Maryland, and featuring two back-to-back shows at Madison Square Garden.

"Right now, it's very exciting and we're just getting started," says the bassist. "The prospect of playing the set and getting better and better at it, that's a really cool thing. And besides that, each night there's a whole different group of people that are being entertained and giving you the feedback that they're having a great time."

The shows continue to lean into the achievement of *Fear Inoculum*, but some tracks from that album require extra attention before bringing them to the stage. While the Power Trip setlist included "Pneuma," the album's popular "7empest" needs more runway to pull off, and even now they have played it fewer than a dozen times. "We haven't played that one live too much, but I'm hoping we will soon," says Carey. "We usually have to wait to break that one out, just because it is kind of laborious for Adam and for me to pull that one off. But it's really satisfying too, and it's a crowd-pleaser."

As always on their headline dates, TOOL's band members take turns choosing their supporting acts, which tend to be based on genuine interest in the openers rather than any need to boost ticket sales. For the remaining fall run of dates, Keenan chose Steel Beans, a one-man garage-rock band helmed by quirky viral sensation Jeremy DeBardi. And for early 2024, Carey picked the four-piece stoner-rock outfit Elder.

Between TOOL dates, band members have also maintained side projects of various levels of intensity.

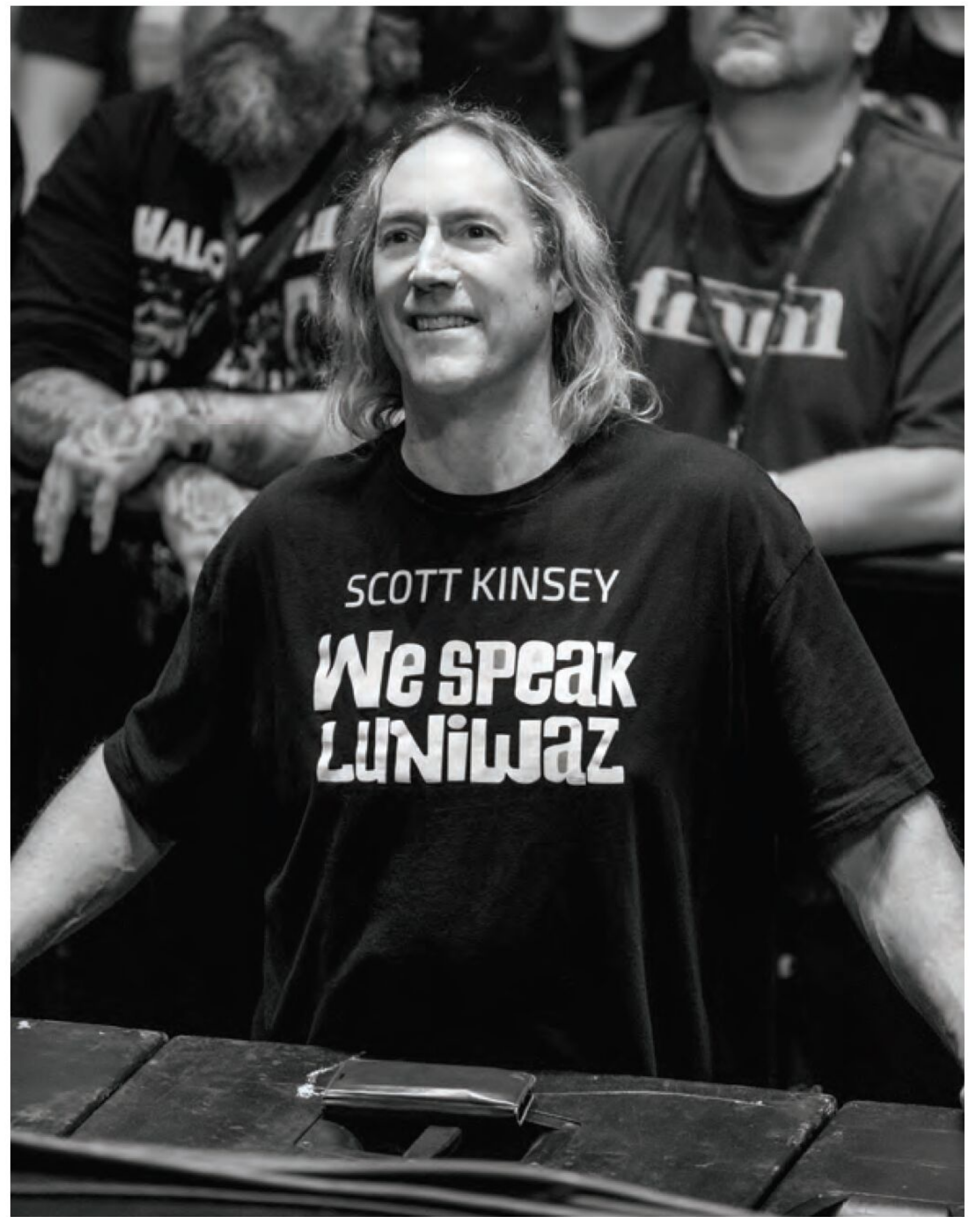






TOOL performing at Power Trip, Indio, California, October 8th, 2023





Beyond his ongoing winery duties, Keenan puts real energy into his work with A Perfect Circle and Puscifer when TOOL is off the road or inactive. In 2020, Jones released “The Witness,” an instrumental recorded with Chancellor and Carey, in connection with his first-ever signature guitar, a Gibson Les Paul Custom. Carey is still a part of Legend of the Seagullmen, a prog-metal supergroup with Mastodon’s Brent Hinds, and plays jazz “once or twice a month around Los Angeles when I’m not on the road, just to keep sharp. It’s good for my brain to play improvisational music.”

Chancellor has MTVoid, his project with Sweet Noise/Serce vocalist Peter Mohamed. In November, the duo released a second album, *Matter’s Knot, Pt. 1*. “When I collaborate with someone else, it creates a different flavor. I don’t try and change my style,” Chancellor says, explaining the lines between TOOL and other projects. “We have an agreement between the four of us that when we write something and share it with each other, it’s automatically the property of TOOL. So it’s really a question of creating something original that I haven’t shared with them. It becomes its own thing.”

**TOOL IS HOPEFUL THAT WRITING FOR THEIR NEXT RECORDING PROJECT** will accelerate this summer. The band has begun jamming out some new material in the same Hollywood space where they’ve gathered for 34 years. *Fear Inoculum* emerged only after an excruciating delay of 13 years, as band members worked and recorded over stretches of time, tossed everything out and started again, raised families and explored other interests. That experience will likely inform the future of TOOL, and their determination to continue creating.

“It’ll be different this time. Everyone’s life is different, and everyone’s expectations are different,” Chancellor says. “Time is precious now, so you try and look for ways to be more efficient with the process. We’ve had a lot of discussion about that and how we can bring a new record to fruition in a slightly different way.”

It’s already four years since *Fear Inoculum*, and its place in TOOL’s legacy is secure. Beyond its chart-topping, Grammy-winning status, it represents TOOL as a still-evolving entity, one that’s stretching far beyond its early hit-making days into something greater. How it was received was out of their control, but by the time those 13 years were over, TOOL were fully confident in what they had.

“Our filter system is pretty intense. If it gets by the four of us in the band, then we figure it’s going to work,” says Carey. “It’s a really painstaking process that we go through to finish [an album], and get it where we are all completely convicted. It pays off in the long run because we never really get tired of performing our songs. It gives rise to a vehicle that we can all believe in.”

That doesn’t mean the overall direction, or epic length, of *Fear Inoculum* offers any clues about the future. “Who knows? It could flip-flop and we could just go back to doing an *Undertow* [type of] record” of shorter songs, says Carey. “That’s kind of appealing to me. I always like change, whatever direction it goes.”

They are flirting with the idea of releasing an EP rather than a full album, putting 30 minutes of music into the world sooner than later, rather than *Fear Inoculum*’s long-delayed 90. Each one of them have contributed musical ideas, and Carey says, “it’s going well so far.”

“We’re free agents now,” he adds. “We aren’t signed to a label anymore. We are free to do whatever we want.” **18**



