

## MUSIC

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# So, is Tool 'grotesque' or 'beautiful'?

By CHRIS GARCIA  
Staff Writer

**W**e're not out to disturb." To anyone who's taken the time — and stomach — to get acquainted with Tool's first full-length album "Undertow," lead singer Maynard James Keenan's words may come as a jolt.

Keenan alone is a disturbing figure. If he didn't have his band, "I'd certainly be in jail for killing someone," he said in a well-publicized quote.

"That's probably true," he confirms from his North Hollywood home. "I know that I have flashes, moments where if I had a gun in my hand, I would've used it."

An intense and laconic 29-year-old, Keenan sports a mohawk and wields a mean vocal dexterity that goes from a vulnerable whisper to a menacing growl in a flash. In high school he won Most Artistic, Most Talented — and Most Pessimistic.

And now he fronts Tool.

Formed in 1991 in Los Angeles by four art and film types, Tool arrives at the intersection where grunge and the sublime meet. Grime. The resulting blood-shot view of the morbid and sordid is nothing new. Dyspeptic dirt rockers Alice In Chains, Soundgarden, Stone Temple Pilots and Helmet have made wads off their griping.

Gushing critical and fan response to their opening slots on last summer's Lollapalooza tour vaulted Tool to the front ranks of alternative rock's most exciting bands. "Undertow," released in April as a follow-up to last year's debut seven-song EP "Opiate," just hit gold.

Tool — Keenan, guitarist Adam Jones, bassist Paul D'Amour and drummer Danny Carey (who's beat skins for everyone from Green Jello to Carole King) — isn't about to be the next Pearl Jam. As an edgy metal band fixated on the underbelly, the id, of waking life, cracking the Top 10 will be twice as hard.

Songs titled "Flood," "Prison Sex" and "Disgustipated" grace their albums, as do lyrics like, "I've been far too sympathetic/No one told you to come/I hope it sucks you down." No Mariah Carey, this.

The band's focus on the seedy and seamy is infamously evident in the album sleeve photos: A prostrate, fleshy nude blob of a woman embraces a naked man; a tiny pig with "Undertow" shaved in its fur stands calmly on a bed of upright forks; a real human X-ray reveals an unspeakable injury; Keenan mouth is unpinned open by some medieval vice.

"I don't think it's that ugly," says Keenan of the cringe-inducing images. "I really don't. Grotesque to some people, beautiful to others. I just don't like being sold as an image. So rather than give people the image that's being sold, we decided to be more creative. I think the resulting images kind of go along with the album's sounds and words."

Tool, it could be said, musically rivals Peter Greenaway's gross-out art film "The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover," a beautiful, unflinching and darkly comical exploration of degrada-



The rulers of a charred musical landscape: Tool band members Danny Carey, left, Maynard James Keenan, Paul D'Amour, Adam Jones.

## Dirty and sober

The event: Tool  
Dates and times: 9 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 12  
Location: Trocadero, 520 4th St., San Francisco  
Admission: \$10  
Phone: 546-BASS

tion, self-loathing and twisted love.

"Undertow" pulls you into the murky cesspool of unspoken human behavior. Catchy musical hooks, stingily sprinkled about each epic song, are sounds for sore ears; small island oases in the muddy sea of filth that you latch on to — just to find out it's floating excrement.

Listeners may feel dirty after a spin of "Undertow." No problem, shrugs Keenan. It all depends on what you do with that feeling.

"It's more important to me about what happens next," he says. "It's more important that someone heard the music and went home and wrote a really cool book, or painted a really cool painting, or went to their grocery store and thought up this really cool display, or found a different way to deal with their co-workers, or went home and just souped up their car. That's good."

Much has been said about Tool being inspired by the philosophy contained in the book "A Joyful Guide to Lachrymology" by cult author Ronald R. Vincent. The obscure tome instructs the reader how to feed off life's pain (lachrymology

means "the study of crying").

Keenan, who now claims his grandfather is its co-author, says the book — and hence what he sings about — is "definitely life-affirming. Once you've removed all life's garbage, there's that one point of light that's left over. There's got to be a way to bounce back from the agony."

So while mainstream metal acts paint broad graffiti of reckless anomie, Tool performs an introspective enema. The book and their music, says Keenan, is "a purging. It's not about locking yourself in a closet and eating pigeons. But it is for people who pretty much hate everyone."

Tool is known mostly for "Sober," a single that gets almost no radio play, but is receiving urgent flavor of the month treatment on MTV. The song's soft commercial impact is no mystery. It's a martyr's cry, a moody, plodding dirge.

"I don't want to be hostile," Keenan warbles over a steady beat. "I don't want to be dismal. And I don't want to roughen up my pathetic existence." Relentlessly bleak, "Sober's" only commercial salve is that it rocks.

As is their wont with the new wave of brooders, the PC police are sniffing for redeeming social qualities in Tool's music ("punk with PC lyrics," wrote Entertainment Weekly about "Sober").

Keenan replies: "Do not even put that on us... See how (critics) are? Weren't listening, were they?"

"There's a million things that have to do with that song," continues Keenan. "It's partly a struggle with ego, partly regret, partly a confession, partly a struggle with having to be awake through all of this. There's a million pieces to it

"Once you've removed all life's garbage, there's that one point of light that's left over."

MAYNARD JAMES KEENAN

wrapped up into one emotion."

The video for "Sober" has single-handedly made Tool the alt-metal band du jour. Rendered solely with stop-action animation — the band nowhere to be seen — it depicts an industrial Kafkaesque nightmare dappled in muted blacks, greys and browns.

The group, with the aid of a film-making buddy, hand-made the clip in a garage in two months time. Last month it snatched the Billboard Music Video Awards for Best New Artist and Best Clip in the hard rock/metal category.

Thanks to the deal they cut with their label Zoo Entertainment, Tool's been promised uncommon creative freedom like this. The band designs its album covers, has full control of its videos. It's a setup band members are adamant about not relinquishing.

And what if Zoo doesn't stay out of Tool's artistic affairs? "If they don't," warns Keenan, "we're out of here."