

## Hellfighter - Damnation's wings 4/5

Reviewed: 7-1-11



Tracklist:

1. Tower of sin
2. A lesser god
3. Legacy of hate
4. Faith in lies
5. Damnation's wings
6. Revolution within
7. Epitaph
8. Bring only pain
9. Descent
10. Firewalker

Anybody remember Xentrix? I sure do. In the late 80s, the U.K. quartet burst onto the thrash scene sounding very much like a British iteration of Metallica, all the way down to singer/guitarist Chris Astley's decidedly Hetfieldish voice and stage appearance. In terms of musical development, Xentrix followed a similar trajectory to Metallica too, evolving from the somewhat raw melodic thrash of 'Shattered existence' to the more sophisticated thoughtful thrash of 'To whose advantage?' to a polished 'Black-album' type offering called 'Kin' before finally losing the thread altogether in the mid-90s. Unlike Metallica, who decided to try their hand at more "alternative realms in the grunge era, Xentrix chose the heavier Pantera-ish path on their final studio CD, 1996's 'Scourge', which featured replacement singer Simon Gordon filling the departed Astley's shoes. Given the drastic stylistic change, 'Scourge' was a bitter pill to swallow, indeed, as only minor vestiges of that classic Xentrix sound remained. 'Twas a sad epitaph for a fine British thrash act that never received its proper due.

Fast-forward to 2011, when 80s thrash bands have reunited in droves. We were not blessed with a full-blown Xentrix reunion; alas, Astley, who evidently resides in New Zealand now, remains AWOL. So does Xentrix bassist Paul Mackenzie, although he receives songwriting credit on one track on this new CD. But we did get the next best thing: Original Xentrix guitarist Kristian Havard and original Xentrix drummer Dennis Gasser formed a new band with vocalist Simon Gordon (yep, same guy from the 'Scourge' CD) and Gasser's brother Mel (who apparently played in Xentrix in the band's formative days) on the bass, plus a new guitarist named Pete Smith. Tellingly, this unit opted not to work under the Xentrix moniker, even though its lineage traces directly back to that band and it would have been an easy cash-grab thing to do so. Perhaps they were trying to signal to fans that they are looking ahead, not behind. Perhaps it was out of respect to Astley (who was, after all, a crucial component to the Xentrix sound). Who knows? The fact remains that this outfit goes by the name Hellfighter, and is the closest thing we'll likely ever see to a reformed incarnation of Xentrix today.

Hellfighter's debut CD, 'Damnation's wings', does not sound like Metallica. It does, however, bear more than a passing resemblance to Xentrix. At this point, Havard probably could not pick up a guitar and have it not sound like classic Xentrix, so it is no surprise that the spirit of his former band lives on in some of the riffs. Likewise, Gordon's voice is instantly recognizable from the 'Scourge' days, but he's much stronger here because he sings in a clear, slightly acrid/raspy, distinctive timbre rather than simply aping Phil Anselmo. Honestly, Gordon sounds really good on 'Damnation's wings'. Oh, and Hellfighter cannot accurately be classified as a thrash band, at least not to these ears, as they stick almost exclusively to mid-paced tempos. (Okay, track 9, "Descent", sounds like old-school melodic thrash metal, but it's the exception, not the rule.) The 10 songs on display are built around piledriving riffs supported by the Gasser brothers' pulverizing rhythm section, all cloaked in a monstrous Andy Sneap production that sounds like a damn bulldozer crashing through your living room. This is heavy, heavy stuff. But Hellfighters unquestionably have not forgotten the melody either. Even as your neck is being wrecked into oblivion, the Havard/Smith tandem makes the riffs interesting and melodic, not just heavy, and Gordon superbly melds aggression and melody into his delivery. And memorable songwriting abounds, with every track sporting enough hooks to reel you in and lock you down.

I suppose the highest compliment I can pay to 'Damnation's wings' is that it doesn't sound exactly like anybody else but that it does have a certain timelessness to it. If you look, you'll find elements of contemporary heavy metal, old-school thrash, and even NWOBHM (albeit in a much more in-your-face presentation). With impassioned performances and killer songwriting, Hellfighter are absolutely not just going through the motions here in hopes of an easy paycheck. No, these British metal stalwarts came back not to raid their legacy for a buck, but because they had something left to say. I applaud the band for following their hearts and playing what they want, rather than pandering to the retro-thrash craze, taking the safe route, calling themselves Xentrix and releasing 'Shattered existence II'. And best of all, 'Damnation's wings' has excellent distribution in the USA, and is cheaply available at mainstream vendors like Amazon, CD Universe, and so on. So what are you waiting for? As Xentrix once wrote (and their members apparently still believe), "If you wanna do it go ahead/Life ain't too long you can't hang around/If you conform you might as well be dead/Be sure of what you are and what you've found... No Compromise!"