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# Heavy Metal Gettysburg and the Allure of Emotive History

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## **Abstract**

*In July 1863*

*A Nation Torn In Tragedy*

*A Trick Of Fate, Two Great Armies Merge*

*Gods Of War At Gettysburg*

*Devastation Lies Ahead*

*50,000 Bodies Litter The Land*

*Hell Rages Three Full Days*

*The Reaper Sows, There's The Devil To Pay.*

Thus begins the first song in Iced Earth's three-part ballad inspired by the Battle of Gettysburg. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | United States History

## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### Heavy Metal Gettysburg and the Allure of Emotive History



*December 26, 2014*

*by Kevin Lavery '16*

*In July 1863*

*A Nation Torn In Tragedy*

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Thus begins the first song in [Iced Earth's three-part ballad inspired by the Battle of Gettysburg.](#)

The heavy metal epic is intense, dramatic, brutal, tragic, and romantic. Released in 2004 on their album *The Glorious Burden* – which, incidentally, also features songs inspired by Attila the Hun, the Red Baron, Waterloo, and Valley Forge – Iced Earth's "Gettysburg (1863)" trilogy offers listeners a vivid musical interpretation of the memory of Gettysburg popularized by Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels*. Beginning with the "The Devil to Pay"

and continuing in "Hold at All Costs" and "High Water Mark," each song in the trilogy is devoted to the events of a single day of the battle. Encapsulating some of Gettysburg's best-known moments, the songs each convey a sense of the battle's epic scale and its powerful legacy. In consequence, however, the ballad reinforces an exclusively emotional interpretation of the Civil War that can obscure a more meaningful understanding of the battle and its larger implications.

Emotionally, the trilogy is potent. The sound of cannon fire thunders throughout the ballad. Classic melodies such as the "Star-Spangled Banner" and "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" are appropriated to evoke patriotic sentiment. The lyrics are filled with elevated, dramatized diction to complement the songs' bold melodies: the battle is a meeting of "gods of

war at Gettysburg” and Pickett’s Charge is a “slaughter” in which “bodies fall like rain.” Iced Earth’s imagined 20<sup>th</sup> Maine Regiment heroically echoes that “We’ll know what we’re made of / when up against all odds we hold our line / for the cause that we so love.” The ballad’s portrayal of the battle is at once tragic and glorious, brutal and sacred.

In general, the songs are far more concerned with depicting the *drama* of Gettysburg than with offering a fair representation of what happened there. In “High Water Mark,” Iced Earth’s Lewis Armistead screams for his men to “bayonet the Yankee Tyrants” as they converge upon the Copse of Trees. Although this may well have been the sentiment felt by the men who fought that day, in the song the line is played for dramatic effect rather than for historical veracity. It is meant to demonstrate the fatal resolve of the Confederate soldiers in the face of Union opposition, not to reflect the actual conviction of the soldiers in the charge. Later, in the ballad’s final verse, Iced Earth’s Robert E. Lee reflects on his army’s defeat; his lament projects an image of him as the tragic hero of Gettysburg who finally recognizes his hubris in the aftermath of the bloody catharsis of the ill-fated charge.

The resulting product is a musical trilogy that, though layered with emotionally-stimulating language and motifs, does little more than play on a listener’s emotional relationship with history. Its narrative is too vague for listeners without much exposure to Gettysburg to comprehend, and is too egregiously oversimplified to satisfy most Gettysburg aficionados. For all of their allusions to various facets of the battle, the songs fail to adequately place them within their larger context. Even more tellingly, no officer is named from either army who is not a point-of-view character in *The Killer Angels*, with the singular exception of John Reynolds. Not even George Meade, Winfield Scott Hancock, or George Pickett receive a nod for their involvement in the battle. Essentially, the trilogy lacks any historical value; its power is entirely emotive.

Certainly, the musical trilogy was not composed to educate the public about Gettysburg. Why, then, am I making such a stink about it?

I confess, I rather like the songs, for the same reason that I enjoy reading novels like *The Killer Angels* and watching films like *Gettysburg*—the simple and dramatic narrative of “Gettysburg (1863)” resonates with me. Its songs tell a story that appeals to our emotions, offering an easy and entertaining way to interact with the past – one that seemingly permits us to feel emotionally closer to the characters and the action. But this sense is deceptive, for emotive connections to history can subvert a nuanced understanding of the past.

Simply put, Iced Earth’s interpretation of the Battle of Gettysburg offers too narrow, too sanitized, and too romantic a narrative to illustrate anything meaningful about history. It does not force either side into the role of the antagonist. It does not make claims about who was right and who was wrong. It does not ask why the war was fought, nor why the outcomes mattered. When we invest ourselves emotionally in a dramatized historical narrative, even one well written, we can become so satisfied by an appealing story that we lose sight of the actual event’s inherent complexities.

For all of these shortcomings, Iced Earth’s “Gettysburg (1863)” is an impressive piece of music. How many bands have written an epic half-hour heavy metal ballad inspired by an event of such historical magnitude? And, indeed, the songwriters’ expert use of pathos is frighteningly evocative. However, unless the listener takes the initiative to seek a broader understanding of what they have heard, the emotions the songs elicit do nothing more than reinforce a

comfortable and twisted caricature of the battle. Emotion is useful for creating a thirst for knowledge. However, without thoughtful analysis, it can too easily distort our past and make it even more remote and inconceivable.

[Go listen to the songs](#). Feel the emotional rush from this powerful depiction of the Battle of Gettysburg. Then put that emotional rush to use by sitting down with a good book – and remember that history is so much more than a dramatic story played out for our entertainment.

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