

Kristin

In 1996, Levi Ostermann was 17 years old, a senior in high school, and the frontman of the heavy metal band, Illusory Redemption. Though young, the band's demo set the world of metal afire and it was played on college radio stations nationwide. The attention they received almost overnight had record labels clamoring for the chance to sign them. And then, two days before the band was going to make the deal that could have changed the world, Levi was the victim of vehicular manslaughter.

The killing was even more shocking because the death wasn't a drunk driver, or a stranger. Levi's killer was Rommel Malkin, Illusory Redemption's 19 year old bassist. Within days, the murder gained national attention and the band's infamy only raised their profile in their subculture, reminiscent of the church burnings and murders in the Norwegian Black Metal scene years before.

Rommel's defense team claimed that the death was an accident, brought about after Levi assaulted Rommel in the parking lot of a Friendly's parking lot. The reason for the fight? Rommel had demanded Levi be fired from the band. The two began a bloody brawl that Rommel attempted to flee in his car, which Levi attacked with a branch.

After a week long trial, the jury found Rommel guilty of vehicular manslaughter and sentenced him to twenty-three years in prison. The surviving members of the band, rocked by the loss of their friend's death, disbanded, walking away from a lucrative deal with Slaughterhouse Records.

Was Rommel Malkin defending himself from an irate bandmate, or had he premeditated the death of Levi in order to fuel the legend of their band, only to have it backfire?

I'm Krisin McAllister, and this is Thought Crimes.

[music]

Kristin

Welcome back, friends.

While researching this episode, we reached out to the members of Illusory Redemption, and members of the families. Levi's family declined to comment and one of the members of the band did agree, but only after I had let them know that Rommel Malkin had wanted to come on to our show and set the record straight about that incident and his hope that coming forward may cause some sort of healing.

Before we start, I thought it best to note that we here at Thought Crimes are not attempting to glorify or canonize the killers that appear in these stories. Even more important, we don't believe in giving a platform to the unrepentant.

That said, I met with Rommel Malkin to talk about his life, the sentence, and it provides us with the unique experience to see why a man, from his perspective, would kill one of his best friends. So, here is our interview.

[music]

Kristin

We're going to just start right off, Mr. Malkin.

Rommel

Rommel, please.

Kristin

Okay, Rommel. Let's just start. You were just released from prison after being incarcerated for twenty-four years... how does it feel?

Rommel

[surprised, quick laugh]

You weren't kidding. How do I feel?

[slight pause, then happy]

I feel like Rip Van Winkle.

[pause]

There's a lot of things that have changed on the outside that have made the world so unfamiliar, and yet, inside, we got glimpses of a lot of these changes. But I'm out, and ready to restart my life, and also figure out what that means, given I'm an ex-convict, who has to live in the same small state where my offense was well-publicized, at least until my probation ends. I'd much rather move far away, but here I am, in Manchester, New Hampshire, thankfully supported by friends until I get back on my feet.

Kristin

You mentioned living in the same state as your crime.

I was wondering if you could talk a little about your past.

I did see you corresponded with several metal fanzines when you were in lockup, but that seemed to taper off about ten years ago. Would you be comfortable in going over the details and maybe how time might have changed your perception.

Rommel

Sure.

[calm]

First, I want it to be clear, Levi and I were friends. There's been other stories about incidents like this where people make up bizarre stories about record contracts, or plots to kill one another.

But Levi was one of the nicest, most genuine people I had ever met. Way nicer than I was at that time period. In fact, that's something that always makes me look back at the days leading up to our fight, and his... passing, all the more unfortunate.

Kristin

[a bit confused by his compassionate demeanor]

You talk about how he was nice and genuine. But in your defense, you claim the reason why the two of you fought was because he was being kicked out of the band.

Why would you be kicking him out of the band if you cared about him that much?

Rommel

Caring about someone and knowing they're a nice person doesn't make them cut out for the job they're in, or make them talented. Levi was a cool kid. He was game for mostly everything we wanted to do. He was inconsistent as a singer, and we needed consistency.

Kristin

Your former bandmates disputed your claims, one of them even under oath.

Rommel

He died, and the rest of them were angry at me for him dying.

They're lying, which is pretty human, when you think about it. People don't often speak ill of the dead, and to them, I'm responsible. I'm also the person they all decided should tell Levi he was out, because I wasn't sentimental. So, I was the perfect foil if he got mad, and when it went the way it did, I assume it was just easier for them to put all of this on my shoulders. And in the end, I went to prison, Levi was dead, and they all stopped making music.

Mira, whom you mentioned, witnessed our fight. In her version, she pulls up to the Friendly's parking lot to see me punching Levi from behind, which is inaccurate. Levi attacked me in the parking lot after we had just been inside where I had fired him. I was going back to my car in the parking lot and he said my name. I turned and was immediately hit in the face. To attempt to erase that fact is a cowardly attempt to rewrite history. I blame Mira for that, really.

Hagbard doesn't speak to the press about it at all. But really, I wouldn't expect him to.

Kristin

Why?

Rommel

Hagbard is a genius. He knows that sensationalism and lies are easier to sell than the truth. He never respected corporate news, or what the mainstream wanted. So his silence should be taken as a disdain for the whole affair.

I wanted to sit with you because you're outside of the traditional, fake news, conglomerate media. It's my belief that the truth, the one that so many Americans know is out there, has found avenues like yours to reach the people after mainstream society failed them. I wouldn't be surprised if Hagbard would wind up talking to you,
[with humor]
depending on how this goes.

Kristin

You don't mention how your other bandmate, Hector Navarro, who actually wrote most of the music for Illusory Redemption. Where does he fit in?

Rommel

[annoyed]

It's unfair to say that he wrote most of the music. We were young and inexperienced. Some riffs, lyrics, a bridge, that's not writing an entire song. We all had a hand in it. Giving him too much credit in our sound after the fact is just political correctness run amok.

Kristin

[surprised by the answer]

I'm sorry?

Rommel

[calm, but definitely having to brace himself to not appear too angry]

Hector played well. And the novelty of a Mexican American playing music inspired by Nordic originators really captured people's imaginations after the fact, but it's not like we had a virtuoso who basically had us each fill a slot in his master plan. The look of the band, our image, most of this came from Hagbard and I. Levi, too. Hector in corpse paint was a little odd, to be honest.

Kristin

Are you saying that his reputation as the band's main songwriter and visionary is only because of how uncommon it was for a Latinx performer to be making heavy metal music at the time?

Rommel

I am saying that as the child of hispanic immigrants, Hector was exceptionally good at assimilation because he was raised in one of the last generations that valued that idea, rather than going out of his way to stick out. But he did still stick out. And that I think got him more attention than someone of the same ability who was of European heritage.

Kristin

So, the fact he's of Mexican American descent is a sticking point for you?

Rommel

[annoyed, trying to sound amused]

Not at all, he was a founding member of the first band I was ever involved in. And we were able to influence scores of others. But do I think our band would have continued to excel with all of its original members? Not a chance.

We were beginning to move into the darker territory that Illusory Redemption fans love. Levi didn't have what it took, and Hector, well... I'm sorry. Before I go on, I want to state for the record that Hector *is* talented. He had vision, drive, and he definitely knew what he was doing.

Do I think that tension between him and I was because of our cultural differences? Yes.

Certainly.

But with the way this conversation started to turn, and where it could go, I want to publicly say that racial hatred is a waste of everyone's time. That's what you're seeing in America today. The divisions between all of us, they're so pronounced because we are witnessing the death of the ancient, Judeo Christian way of life.

Kristin

Some would say the secularism of today's world is what is leading to these conflicts.

Rommel

I think that's just the dog whistle of the children of Abraham.

Those who believe the monotheistic lies that only stoked wars, forced conversions of peoples with the lie that they could all be equal in the eyes of one god, provided you submitted to their doctrine. But the thing is, their faith, their belief, in order to make it work for everyone, it had to adapt to each region.. And it's like a lycra body suit. One size does not fit all.

Kristin

But you said diversity was a problem.

Rommel

No, multiculturalism is a problem.

America was founded more on the Western and Northern European ideals, and where I think many people go wrong in defending that is that they think it's totally exclusive.

Here's the part where we went wrong: Constantine.

Kristin

[trying to follow]

The Emperor Constantine?

Rommel

[amazed]

I have to be honest: I knew you'd know about Rome, but the way you said that, the tone? I need to apologize to you. I'm going off on a rant. We can talk about what I call Loki's lie later if you want. You want to talk about the band, the crime, and yet here I am talking about my philosophy and worldview. But to me, how I survived in my incarceration, how I got here, it's all one and the same to me. Most of America never had a moment in their lives where they were forced to reckon with the darkness in our society, disguised as light, and how their actions are important.

Kristin

Okay, so let's talk about the fight. You claim that Levi was lying in wait, and then attacks you from behind. You start fighting and then.

Rommel

I was able to throw Levi off of me, he was a smaller person. I had been taught by my father to not attack a man after he's on the ground, unless you're intending to... The point is a fight is a fight. I won, but I could tell that it wasn't over. So, I got in my car to get away. But Levi gave chase and ran in front of my car in order to get me out. It was happening too fast and I tried to swerve around him, but he fell, and

[pause]

It was not intentional.

[sound slightly different]

Kristin

[addressing the audience]

It's important that I pause here and let you know that the coroner's report doesn't support the claim that Rommel makes that Levi ran forward and was clipped by the vehicle. The impact of the car, and how Levi was run over showed he was hit by Rommel's car from behind.

Also, eye witnesses outside of Mira also saw the fight. In the other accounts, Rommel threw the first punch and Levi was able to fight him off. Rommel went back to his car and Levi started walking back into the restaurant. This is where police claim that Rommel ran Levi down.

Let's get back to the interview

Rommel

I spent over two decades carrying Levi with me.

And though it's an accident, I did kill him.

So now that I'm out, I feel the best way to honor Levi is to return to the music, to put out an album that was worthy of the band he wanted to be in.

There are people who have been writing to me while I was inside who have been interested in signing the band as it was. I think that it would be unlikely, for the reasons I mentioned previously, but I do think getting our tracks out there in an official album would be good. We can give the metal community what they have been clamoring for, and then move on.

Kristin

So, even with everything you said about Mira and Hector, you'd want them back in the band?

Rommel

It's easy for me to say, but I ultimately bear them no ill will.
And what happens after that particular album would be we'd likely go our separate ways.
Who knows?

Kristin

Thank you.

Kristin

[to the audience]

Rommel Malkin, even after all of these years, maintains his innocence even in the face of evidence, witness accounts, and his conviction.

But he's not the only member of Illusory Redemption we spoke to.

Tune in next week for part two.

[music begins]

It's a weird world out there.

Take care of each other.