

Critics' Forum
Film and Music
Separate but Equal
By Sam Ekizian



Six months after the hostilities opened with the long awaited release of *Mezmerize*, Armenian rockers System of a Down have launched a second and equally powerful salvo with *Hypnotize*. Produced by Rick Rubin and the album's chief songwriter, singer-guitarist Daron Malakian, *Hypnotize* is not a sequel. Instead, it is a counterpart and extension of its predecessor. "Soldier Side Intro," which opens the *Mezmerize* album is completed by "Soldier Side," the final track on *Hypnotize*. This connecting effect is further reinforced by the discs, which are designed to interlock, forming a double album.

Hypnotize maintains the ferocious yet elegant pace of its counterpart while carving out its own distinct identity. The twelve-song album features System's characteristic use of diverging musical styles and influences to create a unique vehicle for roaring rebellion. The band concocts its menacing brew by blending its sociopolitical message with "nu" and alternative metal, classic rock, tight Middle Eastern arrangements, as well as the band's surprising pop sensibility.

These unexpected twists and shifts in style are not relegated to different tracks on the album but are ever-present within the individual cuts. System does not concern itself with traditional musical boundaries but reaches further with each release while managing to retain a unique and unbridled sonic signature. The Lyrics share the music's chaotic nature, ranging from the solemn—"They were crying when their sons left/God is wearing black/They've gone so far to find no hope/They're never coming back"—to the irreverent—"Banana Banana Banana Banana Terra Cotta/Banana Terra Cotta Terra Cotta Pie."

“Attack,” the blistering opening track immediately reassures that this is vintage System. Setting the tone for *Hypnotize*, it is layered with corrosive and menacing guitar riffs and intense percussions. The track also features effective vocal harmonizing between lead vocalist Serj Tankian and Malakian. “Attack’s” deliberate tempo changes merely allow for a momentary glimpse of its scorched musical landscape. “Dreaming” maintains this caustic formula, incorporating strafing guitars, shifty rhythms, layered vocals and harmonies all anchored by trudging drums, as Tankian and Malakian croon: “Dreaming not screaming/Someone kick me out of my mind/I hate these thoughts I can't deny.”

“Hypnotize,” the title track, has an Eastern-influenced, almost Doors-like feel. The song includes a classic rock foundation on which system builds its characteristic nu-metal sound, supported by accelerated Middle-Eastern beats. In stark contrast, “U-Fig” is a sonically and lyrically schizophrenic track featuring jarring shifts in rhythm and precise staccato guitars. Mockingly suggesting the consumption of conformists, Malakian and Tankian together blare, in almost biblical fashion: “You and me/Should go outside and beat 'em beat 'em beat 'em beat 'em beat 'em beat 'em/All pathetic flag-waving ignorant geeks/And we'll eat 'em eat 'em eat 'em eat 'em eat 'em eat 'em.”

The album’s emotional apex is reached with “Holy Mountains,” System’s latest monument to Armenian victims of Turkish atrocities. Fittingly, this is the most polished and synchronized track. “Holy Mountains” includes undulating, jangly guitar chords that eerily echo church bells. Tankian’s personal and heartfelt vocals further elevate the song’s poignant grief and deep contempt.

The rampage that is *Hypnotize* comes to a fitting end with “Soldier Side,” which slides effortlessly into its counterpart, “Soldier Side Intro,” which opens *Mesmerize*. The funeral procession that is “Soldier Side” finds pole bearers Tankian and Malakian exchanging: “They were crying when their sons left/All your men must go/He's come so far to find no truth/He's never going home.”

System of a Down has been graced with credibility, given their past commercial and critical success. Much of this is well-deserved, and the band remains one of the most original and compelling of their generation. This lofty status is for the most part reaffirmed by *Hypnotize*. The album does feature some less memorable tracks such as the all too deliberate “She's Like Heroin” and the lyrically shallow “Lonely Day.” And in some places, although to a lesser extent than on *Mesmerize*, Malakian’s vocals are too high-pitched and lack the presence necessary to complement System’s robust and complex sound. However, *Hypnotize* ultimately succeeds, because it blends the visceral power of previous albums with the taut and densely layered style of “Mesmerize.” It is at once ordered and chaotic, ambling and ferocious. The record evokes the primal simplicity of the barefoot shaman, carefully and rhythmically performing a healing dance, alongside the frenzied mania of a meth-crazed whirling dervish. System of a Down has produced an album that's undeniably its own, yet one that adds layers of texture, subtlety, and meaning that continue to push its sound forward.

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Sam Ekizian has been involved with the Armenian cultural and music scene for over two decades and has helped introduce artists to West Coast audiences.

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