

Godsmack's 'IV' offers a few new tricks, a lot of hard rock

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Godsmack has come a long way since the early days, when the Boston-based quartet recorded its debut for less than the cost of most used cars. Released in 1998, that self-titled album sold 3½ million copies and established the band as a serious hard-rock contender. The band's next two albums of heavy metal-flavored modern rock also went platinum. With its fan base established, the quartet seemed poised to effortlessly churn out best-selling records, land plum opening slots for bands like Metallica, and sell out shows worldwide.

Instead, the rockers decided to



dig deeper for their fourth studio album, "IV." This time out, they took more time and space in the studio, rather than rushing to accommodate tour demands or label deadlines. They wrote 35 songs and picked the best 17 to record. For the first time, singer Sully Er-

na took greater control and stepped up as the album's producer. At the same time, he included his bandmates, guitarist Tony Rombola, bassist Robbie Merrill, and drummer Shannon Larkin, in songwriting more than ever before. And while the 11 tracks that finally made it onto the album don't stray from the band's hard-rock roots, they do show off a broader range of influences and moments of greater subtlety.

Album opener "Livin' in Sin" is a bluesy rock ballad on which Erna's desperate wail brings to mind grunge-era howlers like Layne Staley of Alice in Chains. There's plenty of fist-pumping, head-banging hard rock as well, like the first single, "Speak," with its sinuous bass

line and snarling vocals, and the raw, righteous swagger of "No Rest for the Wicked."

Erna has described the making of the album as a cathartic experience that led him to finally speak honestly about his own shortcomings and his thoughts on the world. Some of the album's bombastic rockers, like "The Enemy" and "Temptation," sound too much like reread versions of the

past decade's radio-friendly hard rock to be convincing as fresh confessions. But the band does successfully shake things up with "Hollow," which recalls Led Zeppelin with its delicate mandolin and acoustic guitar, and the psychedelic menace of "Voodoo Too." Godsmack shows off a few new tricks while delivering more of the epic hard rock its fans have come to know and love.