

Introduction

Doing Cultural Studies with Earplugs

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When confronted with heavy metal music, few people who are not already fans of the genre would think of the potential interest to cultural studies, whose focus on subversive responses to power has long since discovered other art forms. Heavy metal, for the most part, has not received much attention. And yet, heavy metal has been one of the great success stories of popular culture, finding fans in the millions across the world who often remain dedicated listeners to their favourite musical style throughout their lives. Born and bred in the United Kingdom by bands like Black Sabbath and Deep Purple, heavy metal has also become a hugely successful export item, finding admirers not only on the European continent and in the Western world, but also in distant places like Brazil, home to Sepultura, or Japan.

The various chapters in this book, all described briefly at the end of this introduction, set out to contribute to the growing academic discourse about heavy metal. Whereas other popular music genres, such as punk or hip hop, have been the object of much critical writing, heavy metal has not yet been rewarded the attention that its breadth of styles, its musical legacies and its ideological message warrant. In order to give the various chapters more coherency, certain historical and geographical limitations were set at the beginning of this project. The regional focus is clearly on the British Isles, the birthplace of heavy metal. Even though the United States soon became a huge market for this music, the developments there started later and moved in different directions from the British tradition. This is not to say that the arguments presented in this book are not relevant for the US situation: but at times the specifically American realities of production, marketing, politics or even religion may have to be taken into account when arguments presented in this volume are transferred from the UK to the USA. The developments of such heavy metal subgenres as glam metal or grunge are more specifically American developments that would deserve their own in-depth analysis. The breaking up of heavy metal into numerous special subgroups such as speed metal, gothic, doom or thrash metal already points to another possible area for future research.

The second self-imposed limitation shortens the historical period under consideration in the subsequent chapters. The focus of this book is based on the assumption that with the massive success of heavy metal in the early 1990s, the phenomenon had somehow moved not only into a new phase, but also onto a stage where national borders were increasingly becoming redundant, a move that was further accelerated by the role that MTV – which Simon Frith describes as a ‘gatekeeper’ of popular music (‘Popular Music Industry’ 44) – increasingly played

in forming and spreading taste cultures amongst listeners of popular music: MTV's institution of the all heavy metal Headbangers Ball in 1987 clearly indicates both the popularity of heavy metal at that time and the increasing infiltration of this music genre by the interest of large corporations.

Once this global network and other major entertainment corporations had discovered the potential of heavy metal as a commercial commodity (the Grammy award won by Metallica in 1990 probably marking a turning point in this development), heavy metal somehow stopped being a particularly British tradition. Heavy metal has now spawned numerous offspring who, according to Barney Hoskyns, can all look back to Black Sabbath and singer Ozzy Osbourne as having started the phenomenon:

the endurance of hard rock, the evolution and mutation of nu metal, the alternative to 'alternative' and the codified hipness of Generation Y. And all of it starting with a working-class boy from Birmingham – heavy metal's sad madman, the godfather of the tattooed tribes. (3)

It is hardly necessary to bemoan this development from a British fringe art form to a global success since it shows that the message of heavy metal speaks to an audience across the world. Just what this message might be, which aspects contribute to it, how they relate to larger social and political developments, and to what their discursive practices might be indebted are some of the questions to which the essays collected here set out to provide answers.

Part of the motivation for creating this book was to address two groups of readers, maybe even to bring them closer together: on the one hand, the budding scene of academics working in the area of heavy metal studies and, on the other hand, the wide field of cultural studies adherents who, it is hoped, may find here a new sphere of popular culture to which they can apply their various techniques of critical analysis. Brought into the classroom, the chapters below could be used to introduce a range of cultural theories through a medium that quite a few students might find interesting. If the essays collected here lead to a greater presence of heavy metal in cultural studies, then that would certainly be a welcome result.

Heavy Metal Scholarship

While the contributors draw from a wide range of theoretical concepts popular among practitioners of cultural studies, they also benefit from the existing research about heavy metal.¹ Scholarly interest in heavy metal dates back to the publication of two books: Deena Weinstein's *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology*, first published in 1991 and revised in 2000 as *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture*, and

¹ See also the bibliography at the end of this introduction, which includes a range of publications not discussed here.

Robert Walser's *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (1993). In the disciplinary backgrounds of Weinstein, a sociologist, and Walser, a musicologist, the rich potential of heavy metal for trans-disciplinary analyses already becomes obvious.

Weinstein's groundbreaking sociological monograph brings to the fore both the historical development of this music genre and the social climate in which it not only first developed but also later thrived. Weinstein describes heavy metal as 'a compound of different elements' (5) based in social groups and expressed as a genre that derives its unique features from sonic, visual and verbal aspects that combine to create common features (22–35). At the same time, Weinstein points out that heavy metal music, like any serious subcultural phenomenon, resists clear classification and instead is marked by rich heterogeneity.

Robert Walser, in *Running with the Devil*, devotes individual chapters to the three topics mentioned in his subtitle (power, gender and madness), keeping the musical features of heavy metal at the centre of his analysis. Walser's musical expertise brings out heavy metal's relationship to earlier genres, in particular to classical music. For instance, he argues that guitarists like Deep Purple's Ritchie Blackmore engaged in 'experimentation with fusion of rock and classical music' while others were more strongly influenced by blues and rock (65).

Voices critical of heavy metal music are not difficult to find. In *Hole in Our Soul* (1994), Martha Bayles argues that the genre 'emerged from the decadent pseudoliterary sensibilities of certain performers' (246). To blame heavy metal on decadence when the social reality of many of the early practitioners, like Black Sabbath, was anything but privileged seems strange: it would have had to be a rare moment of decadence that sprung from the working-class poverty of the English midlands. Ozzy Osbourne, for example, describes his childhood in terms that seem to preclude any risk of decadence (which has of course not prevented him from reaching his present state). Hoskyns writes that Osbourne was 'the fourth of six children, with three older sisters and two younger brothers. He remembers his toolmaker dad; remembers his mother testing car horns in a factory' (4). To accuse somebody from such a background of lacking literary sensibilities seems hardly fair. On the contrary, it is rather impressive to learn how many of the early heavy metal bands managed to organize themselves sufficiently to succeed in an environment that they had to create for their music in the first place. That Bayles's criticism hardly stems from a serious understanding of the musical tradition that lives on in heavy metal, a tradition that Robert Walser so aptly describes in *Running with the Devil*, is probably due to the bias against an art form that disagrees with her sensibilities. The fact that Bayles also sounds sorry that she cannot 'pin heavy metal on the Germans – or the British, who first bludgeoned the blues' (247), reveals much about her fear of cultural alienation.

Following Weinstein and Walser, more specialized studies of aspects of heavy metal music have concentrated on subgenres or regional scenes. A strong focus on adolescence characterizes Jeffrey Jensen Arnett's book *Metalheads: Heavy Metal Music and Adolescent Alienation* (1996), one of a small number of empirical

studies devoted to heavy metal music (in the USA), based on personal interviews conducted with heavy metal fans. Arnett provides less information about the music, but his book is highly revealing about the fan culture surrounding it. Trying to summarize his findings, Arnett states about his interviewees that he was 'struck again and again by the depth and pervasiveness of their alienation. Most of them held high hopes for their own lives, but they were deeply cynical about the adult world they were preparing to enter' (ix). Arnett, who clearly states his dislike of heavy metal music, follows the theme of alienation through various chapters, focusing on manhood rituals, women in heavy metal, family and religion. His study is really 'a book about adolescence in contemporary America' (23) and thus – with the exception of his brief history of heavy metal music in chapter three, which also includes comments on musical and lyrical themes – of only limited use to cultural readings of (British) heavy metal.

Even though it describes the heavy metal scene in Scandinavia in the 1990s and thus falls outside the geographical frame of British heavy metal, Michael Moynihan and Didrik Söderlind's *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground* (1998) offers fascinating insights into a subgenre of heavy metal that has garnered a great amount of criticism, and not, as the two authors show, without a certain justification. The destructive behaviour of a number of musicians, leading to a series of church burnings and murders, as well as the affiliation of some parts of the Scandinavian metal underground with neo-Nazi ideology shows that at least some practitioners of this music take the Satanistic tendencies of black metal very seriously. However, one should not generalize too quickly from the findings of Moynihan and Söderlind. As Sam Dunn and Scot McFadyen's important documentary film *Metal: A Headbanger's Journey* (2006) shows, much of the shocking behaviour is little more than entertainment. Confronted with the Scandinavian Satanism in Dunn's film, Alice Cooper, a musician who has attracted a large amount of criticism for his own morbid stage shows, seems amused and alienated by the seriousness with which some musicians transfer a stage posture to reality, turning a music style into a lifestyle.

In *Metal, Rock, and Jazz* (1999), Harris Berger provides an in-depth reading of the musical and social cultures of different music genres in Ohio. Based on extensive interviews, Berger, a musicologist, adds musical analysis to his ethnographic approach. The various sections on jazz and heavy metal, though based on American regional scenes, aim to bring out the 'meaning of the music for the people who participate in it' (15). In following this approach, Berger presents a prism of heavy metal existence that connects the musical praxis to a social and political reality, thereby emphasizing the mutual influences between art and reality.

In the early twenty-first century, the interest in heavy metal as a topic for academic and also for popular books has further increased. In his comprehensive musicological study *Rock: The Primary Text* (2001), Allan F. Moore provides an outline of various genres of rock music, including sections on punk and progressive rock. In his discussion of hard rock and heavy metal, which he sees as 'points on a style continuum' (148), Moore emphasizes the joint background in blues structures

and suggests high speed, the traditional instrumentation consisting of guitar, bass and drums, and predictable formal arrangements as characteristic features. Moore argues that 'heavy metal is perhaps the most formulaic of rock styles (and hence, the rock style that permits the subtlest play of significances)' (150).

Ian Christie has provided the first substantial description of the development of the genre. His book, *Sound of the Beast: The Complete Headbanging History of Heavy Metal* (2003), quickly moves from the British birthplace of heavy metal to the USA and the rest of the world. It does, however, provide detailed background information about the musicians, subgenres and current tendencies within the field.

Natalie Purcell's *Death Metal Music* (2003), a carefully designed sociological study, questions some of the most blatant clichés directed at death metal audiences. Alongside a short history of the genre, comments about censorship, and sections on violence, lyrics and religion, the book offers particularly interesting statistical information, some of which contradicts existing research. In Part IV of her study, Purcell debunks some of the popularly held views about the fans of death metal music. In particular she takes issue with some of the findings of Peter Christenson and Donald Roberts, published as *It's Not Only Rock & Roll* (1998), who question both the intelligence and racial tolerance of the heavy metal scene, and with Bayles, whose *Hole in Our Sole* Purcell accuses of not being based on proper knowledge of the heavy metal scene, criticizing in particular her views on the perceived masculinity of this music genre (102). In *It's not Only Rock & Roll*, Christenson and Roberts analyse the social behaviour of adolescents in different Anglophone societies, looking at music styles, media consumption, deviant behaviour and other factors. While they emphasize that most of the adolescent listeners of heavy metal 'are not on drugs, not in jail, not failing in school, not depressed, perhaps not even particularly at odds with their parents (except maybe when it comes to music)' (109), they do note that the odds of a troubled teenager listening to heavy metal are disproportionately high. Whether their findings, which combine research conducted on highly diverse groups of teenagers in a number of countries, can be applied to understanding British listeners of heavy metal remains somewhat unclear. Nevertheless, their comprehensive use of the available sociological research on music behaviour amongst adolescents provides a valuable starting point for much further research in heavy metal studies. Keith Kahn-Harris, in *Extreme Metal* (2007), advances sociological research on heavy metal substantially by taking seriously the aesthetic complexity of this subgenre of heavy metal and by focusing on the complex infrastructure of the scene's network of booking, distribution and exchange. His book also stresses the need to study heavy metal music of the 1990s and since then as an increasingly global phenomenon.

The majority of books about individual bands is not written from the point of view of academic criticism, so most of them provide at best background information and sound bites from the people involved in the industry; the bibliography below lists a fair number of such publications. However, some books also offer critical insight into the discourse on heavy metal music, such as Susan Fast's fascinating

study of Led Zeppelin, *In the Houses of the Holy* (2001), or Glenn Pillsbury's *Damage Incorporated: Metallica and the Production of Musical Identity* (2006).

Chapter Survey

Part I deals with heavy metal as an industry driven by concepts indebted to commercial and ideological interests. In Chapter 1, Deena Weinstein explores the meanings that masculinity carries in British heavy metal music in the stage of its crystallization as a genre in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Weinstein goes against the contemporary discourses about pop music 'masculinity' and shows how the case of British heavy metal challenges their over-simplified interpretations of that concept. In the wake of feminist theory's rearticulation of the male–female gender binary, the concept of masculinity has undergone intensive and detailed criticism, with the result that it is no longer credible to regard 'masculinity' as a unitary concept with a clear definition. Disagreeing with the frequently heard critical assumption that metal is 'cock-rock', Weinstein shows how British heavy metal is not an expression of phallogentric masculinity; rather, masculinity in British heavy metal is an expression of power in a positive sense that does not depend for its meaning on an invidious distinction with a binary opposite.

Benjamin Earl, in Chapter 2, presents the relationship between heavy metal and the commercial mainstream as always unstable. He argues that heavy metal music has repeatedly crossed the boundary from the subcultural to the commercial. Earl utilizes Pierre Bourdieu's theories on cultural fields to show how certain subgenres of metal have sought to define themselves in terms of incorporation into the mainstream but were at the same time redefining the field of heavy metal from within. Although heavy metal music in Britain disintegrated into extreme subcultures during the 1980s, some bands at this time found themselves moving towards a commodified form, melodic rock, seeking to appropriate generic conventions from both metal and mainstream pop music to create a hybrid form of 'popular' metal. By analysing the trajectory of metal bands like Magnum and Rainbow, Earl shows how the development of the field has impacted on the music texts released and how the textual strategies employed by bands sought to straddle this new-found mainstream position. One of the consequences of the commercialization of heavy metal is that commercial criteria of success became increasingly important.

Liam Dee's chapter focuses on the grindcore subgenre of 1980s British heavy metal. Centred around the independent record label Earache Records, grindcore was a concatenation of punk and heavy metal best represented by Napalm Death and its spin-offs, bands like Godflesh and Carcass. These bands were still in the tradition of earlier heavy metal acts like Black Sabbath but they largely eschewed the self-indulgent displays of virtuosity in this tradition in favour of punk minimalism. Following Frankfurt School claims about the field of cultural production, Dee argues that grindcore represented an attempt to take to an

extreme the aggressive protest of heavy metal against music industry fakery, social conformism and humanist faith in progress. Utilizing Julia Kristeva's notion of the transgressive abject and Theodor Adorno's analysis of avant-garde negation, Dee shows that grindcore represented a negative dialectics of 'extreme realism'. Grindcore took this 'will-to-authenticity' beyond the limitations of traditional heavy metal, which had become stuck in a caricature of macho posturing. In response, grindcore re-injected the original critical realist heavy metal impulse with the more rigorous, inclusive and anti-elitist punk philosophy of authenticity. Though grindcore was still a predominantly white male affair, there was more acceptance of diversity in appearance, not to mention an absence of homophobia and misogyny. The lyrical concerns of Napalm Death were based in a progressive left-wing politics that spoke to the immediate causes of social decay in Thatcher's Britain rather than a displaced evocation of teen-fantasy resistance.

The chapters in Part II address the relationship between heavy metal music in Britain and its literary and mythological pretexts. In Chapter 4, Helen Farley presents a history of the relationship between heavy metal and the occult, following it back to the genre's evolution from blues music. Heavy metal adopted not only the musical virtuosity of British blues but also maintained the occult themes that had been carried over from American blues. The themes and, hence, the music found a ready market with fans feeling dislocated and dispossessed by the social and political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. Heavy metal, with its rejection of Christian norms, expressed the fears and longings of these people. The New Wave of British Heavy Metal in the 1970s continued this development, with the occult themes becoming more culturally specific. In the second part of her chapter, Farley follows the theme of the occult in heavy metal music into more recent subgenres of heavy metal music in Britain.

In Chapter 5, Laura Wiebe Taylor provides an analysis of apocalyptic and dystopian narratives from several heavy metal bands, examining the sounds, lyrics and imagery of specific songs and albums to uncover the potential for social critique in a musical style that seems, at surface level, to glorify destruction and despair. Taylor suggests that the dark and disaster-focused science fiction imagery of British metal belongs to a broader British tradition of dystopian writing. Echoes of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *1984* (1949), or the early scientific romances of H.G. Wells resonate in metal's later soundscapes. While a preoccupation with the armies of hell has often cast metal as anti-religious or even Satanic, Taylor demonstrates that this is not always the case. Rather, she shows that works by Black Sabbath, Judas Priest, Bolt Thrower and Cathedral reveal a concern for the fate of the planet and the human species in the face of unchecked industrialization, political oppression and high-tech warfare. Placing heavy metal music's apocalyptic and dystopian narratives in the context of broader traditions in literature, cinema, popular music and heavy metal music, her article demonstrates that beneath metal's harsh sounds, words and visual displays lies the potential for social consciousness, and for an intelligent critique of human behaviour and contemporary civilization.

In Chapter 6, Iain Campbell investigates how heavy metal has been influenced by the classical world, primarily through its literature and mythology. A cursory survey of metal band names alone reveals a vast range of classical allusions, from Aeon to Thanatos, via Charon, Elysium and Satyricon. The extent of this influence rivals that of Norse mythology and Tolkien as an apparent source of inspiration. Much of the allusion is to the classical underworld and to ecclesiastical Latin, supporting the macabre religiosity of the black metal subgenre. Campbell also identifies and explains allusions to, and even quotations from, classical authors as diverse as Horace and Boethius. His main focus, however, is on the more widely disseminated (and hence culturally significant) work of major bands such as Iron Maiden. Classical influences in their lyrics range from the stock mythology of the Icarus story ('Flight of Icarus') and the Odyssey's sirens ('Ghost of the Navigator'), to a more historiographical approach in 1986's 'Alexander the Great'. Campbell questions whether the traditionalism inherent in adopting classical paradigms undermines the ostensibly radical ideology adopted by some bands, or whether for others it simply underlines what is a surprisingly conservative standpoint.

Bryan Bardine, in Chapter 7, shows how elements of Gothic fiction have pervaded the lyrics of British heavy metal. Many bands included a variety of Gothic elements in their lyrics, and by doing so not only helped to strengthen their messages, but also, in some respects, revealed the connections between heavy metal music and the works of many authors whose work – at least in part – can be considered Gothic, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Edgar Allan Poe. In his chapter, Bardine first introduces the tradition of Gothic literature and then brings out those particular Gothic elements that have worked their way into heavy metal music, including the supernatural, the occult, insanity, criticism of religion, female powerlessness and settings outside of this world. He presents heavy metal as a textual form in the tradition of Romanticism's critical dialogue with the Enlightenment. In his conclusion, Bardine speculates about whether heavy metal music indirectly exposes its listeners to Gothic literature, bringing together two art forms that have been shunned by critics since their inceptions.

The contributions to Part III deal with the social realm of heavy metal, asking questions about the role that issues such as class and nationality play in the lyrics and performances of heavy metal bands from Britain. In Chapter 8, Ryan Moore discusses the music and iconography of heavy metal music in Britain, especially that of Black Sabbath, Iron Maiden and Judas Priest, in terms of Georg Lukács's notion of the reification of class consciousness. Reification refers to the process in which the social products of human labour appear to take on a life of their own which is independent of human control and therefore timeless and immutable. Capital and the so-called invisible hand of the market remake the world 'like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells', in the words of Marx and Engels that resemble the lyrics of many heavy metal songs (and echo Goethe's famous poem). Heavy metal's reification of power is evident in the way it puts mystical and mythological sources of devastation in the place of human ones. This suggests that heavy metal was

never as politically disengaged as most intellectuals and activists have believed. However, it does raise the same problem that the reification of class consciousness posed for Lukács: if capital and social power are represented as unstoppable forces with a life of their own, how is resistance, much less social change, possible?

In Chapter 9, Magnus Nilsson analyses Motörhead's lyrics as an attempt to handle a dominant discourse about the working class within the framework of a 'heavy metal sub-culture', and to investigate the political implications of this attempt. Song statements such as 'We are Motörhead' can be seen as an attempt to change class value in the public sphere. But, as Nilsson shows, such songs have to be seen as an investment in a capital that, regardless of its value in a larger public sphere, already has a relatively high value in the heavy metal sub-culture where signs connoting working-class identity are used to create a strong sense of collective identity. However, this construction of identity is seldom politicized in Motörhead songs. What is constructed instead is a 'cultural otherness' that has almost no links whatsoever to questions concerning oppression, material injustice and so on. Even in songs that explicitly deal with class issues, the argument is limited to questions of identity. What is at stake is social class, but this is articulated as bearing a mark of cultural distinction.

In the concluding chapter, Chapter 10, Gerd Bayer describes how the British tradition of heavy metal music has started to become a global phenomenon, related to the waning global importance of Britain after the end of empire. This tendency already finds its roots in the early days of heavy metal, with bands at the same time celebrating and criticizing their British heritage and cultural environment. As a consequence, the relationship of British heavy metal to its national narrative is one of critical intervention, a position that also includes criticism of the notion of nationalism itself. As the century comes to its close, heavy metal is shown to have become a global phenomenon that, however, remains indebted to its early British roots.

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