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# **Heavy Metal Justice? : Calibrating the economic and aesthetic accreditation of the heavy metal genre in the pages of *Rolling Stone*, 1980-1991: Part One 1980-85<sup>1</sup>**

**Andy R. Brown**

**Abstract:** Given the genre name heavy metal can be traced to a negative adjective that emerges out of 70s rock journalism and which reflects a widespread *dissensus* among rock critics about its value and impact on North American rock music, how are we to explain the gradual or cumulative shift away from this majority aesthetic disapprobation, in the 1980-85 period, towards a widespread economic accreditation, particularly in the pages of leading rock magazine, *Rolling Stone*? Is it simply a belated recognition of the longevity of the genre and its resurgent popularity with majority audiences? If so, how are we to explain the subsequent shift, clearly evident in *Stone* coverage in the 1986-91 period, from economic to aesthetic approbation of selective bands, particularly those identified with a thrash metal underground, which is nevertheless seen to emerge from within the genre or to be an aesthetic development of some of its key musical features, while rejecting others. Drawing on a comprehensive survey, composed of album reviews, lead or feature articles and interviews, drawn from the *RS* archive, my research reports a definite shift in the critical reception of heavy metal, first to economic accreditation in the 1980-85 period, based not only on the genre's persistence and sustained economic success but also its ability to appeal beyond its core audience and therefore challenge the dominant rock and pop aesthetic. Secondly, in the period 1986-91, heavy metal acquires a notable level of critical or aesthetic legitimization which is conferred on particular bands and album releases, particularly those emerging from the thrash underground, such as Metallica and Megadeth. However, this aesthetic approbation is drawn from *within* the wider genre, distinguishing between the newly emergent avant-garde 'artists' and more popular styles. (284 wds)

**Keywords:** economic accreditation, rock criticism, heavy metal, aesthetic approbation, critical consensus, thrash metal underground, Metallica.

When does the genre of heavy metal achieve some measure of critical legitimacy in rock writing? That is, when do rock critics, particularly those at *Rolling Stone*, not only recognize heavy metal as a distinct genre *in-its-own-right* but also begin to afford it some degree of praise or measure of worth? This is an important question, not least because many key writers argue that the genre has been the most critically maligned of all rock-styles (Straw 1984; 1990; Weinstein 2004; Walser 2014), only latterly achieving genre-recognition and aesthetic-approration with the rise of the 'metal press' itself. However, Lauren (2013) has argued that this view is overstated and that overtime heavy metal has achieved a notable degree of critical legitimation from rock critics; although the evidence base for this claim is disputed (Brown 2015: 239).

While the criteria that constitutes legitimacy in rock writing is debatable, in terms of the degree of distance that may lie between praise and worthiness, for example, what is not disputable is the role that rock criticism has played historically in constructing a hierarchy of legitimacy that favors certain bands, albums and artists more than others; indeed the value of such critical legitimation depends on such a hierarchy and how it functions to praise and reward according to achieved rank and position, as reflective of a critic's consensus of value (Christgau 1976; Marsh 1976a; 1976b; Regev 2006; Jones 2008). At the same time, such a functioning is supported institutionally by a hierarchy of music publications, and the editors and writers who have worked for particular titles at particular times, each of which contributes to an overall aggregation of value according to their relative position and accumulated status within a commercial but highly symbolic field (Bourdieu 1996; 1993; 1984; Christgau 1973;1998; 2003; Bangs 1990; 2002; Regev 1994; Jones and Featherley 2002; Kramer 2002; Forde 2003; Lindberg et al 2005; Gendron 2005; Appen and Doehring 2006; Jones 2008; McLeese 2010; Powers 2010; Weisethaunet and Lindberg 2010; Shepherd 2011; Brown 2012; Brown and Fellezs 2012: x-xvii; Brown and Griffin 2014; Schulenberg 2017; Weber 2017; Flippo 2018/1974).

This is particularly the case with titles, such as *Creem* and *Rolling Stone*, where the former often championed a rock music avant-garde (Marsh 1985; Bangs 1990; Kramer 2002), where praise and sales figures do not always coincide, whereas the latter has played a key role in conferring a selective legitimacy or critical 'consecration' upon key rock artists and genres that are seen to be both artistically significant but also widely popular (Jones and Featherley 2002: 20). For any band or artist, being in a position to receive such critical legitimation therefore depends upon progress through this network of titles, in terms of degree of praise and therefore critical support, especially in early career, which then may result in a favorable outcome when album sales begin to coincide with some measure of status and worth, resulting in exposure in the most prestigious titles, such as *Rolling Stone* (Flippo 1974/2018; Powers 2011). However, such an outcome is far from guaranteed, since sales may be seen to outweigh artistic value or to be achieved at its expense.

One of the issues that bedevils the question of whether the long-lived genre of heavy metal has acquired a measure of legitimacy in rock writing is that the

naming of the genre is seen to be founded in a negative adjective or employed to denote a pejorative musical comparison, both of which can be traced to the rock press itself (Weinstein 2013; Brown 2015). While Lena and Peterson suggest a 'chosen name is sometimes an onomatopoeic representation of a genre's sound, such as bebop and doowop' (2008: 704), these examples do not carry the same degree of aesthetic disapprobation as that of "heavy metal".<sup>2</sup> For Deena Weinstein, the earliest noted uses of the terms, 'metal', 'heavy' and 'heavy metal rock' are employed as adjectives to describe 'a sound' but not yet 'a style that transcends this album or this band—that is, not as a genre' (2013: 43). This suggests that the process of genre codification requires a level of theorization that is able to account for either the moment of genre definition (when its meaning becomes clear or is no longer contested) or the discursive process that produces this outcome (Brown 2012). For Bashe, such a process must involve a shift from adjective to noun:

the rock press began using *heavy metal* as a descriptive adjective in the late Sixties, and by the early Seventies it was being used as a noun [...] Today heavy metal is used to describe not only a particular type of music, but the music's philosophy and values (1985: 4–5 *original emphasis*).

The suggestion here is that although there is clear evidence of a shift from a descriptive adjective to noun by the early 1970s, definitional solidity is not fully achieved until the mid-1980s. There are a number of reasons why this might be the case, which we will go on to consider, however a crucial one is likely to be a reduction in the frequency of *comparative* adjectives (Brown 2015: 247), thereby indicating an overriding sense that the genre achieves a level of recognition, even grudging acceptance, by rock critics, in that decade.

A central reason for this is not only that the genre appears to have survived a period of controversy, one that indelibly marked its commercial success in the early to mid 1970s, but also to have staged something of a musical resurgence (a 'come back') in the 1980s, gaining a new, even younger set of fans while retaining older ones. It is during this period that heavy metal achieves a recognizable level of economic accreditation and it is on this basis that it is able to accrue a level of legitimacy in this decade that it was substantially denied in the previous one. However, by the end of the decade there is growing evidence to suggest that critical opinion has significantly shifted, to the extent that some metal bands not only begin to achieve a degree of critical recognition on the basis of album releases that are only moderately successful, but then go on to receive a significant level of consecration, once they breakthrough to wider chart success, rather than that success being seen as an indicator of their overall lack of artistic integrity. In other words, the critical reception of the genre, or at least selected examples of it, noticeably shifts from modes of largely economic accreditation to modes of cultural legitimation.

### **Debating the Naming: Exploring the *dissensus* within 70s rock criticism**

Important investigative work by Deena Weinstein, into the coining of the term heavy metal to denote a set of bands and therefore a genre category, traced its

origin to the rock critics Lester Bangs and Mike 'Metal' Saunders, arguing it was Bangs and not Saunders who first used the term in a *Rolling Stone* album review in February 1972 (2013). This research offered an important corrective to previous, widely circulated but erroneous claims concerning the origins of the genre name, attributing it to William Burroughs, Lars Bonfire and an earlier Bangs' piece, ironically perpetuated by music journalists themselves (Weinstein 2000: 19; Walser 2014: 8). However, while Weinstein acknowledged that Bang's phrase 'heavy metal robots' was hardly praise for the emergent genre (or for that matter, the terms 'heavy metal-leadens shit-rock' and '27<sup>th</sup> rate heavy metal crap', coined by Saunders, in November of the same year) her sustained etymological enquiry (cf. Foucault 1984) into its origins largely failed to address why 'both critics deployed it in a negative sense in the first reviews in which they used it' (Weinstein 2013: 9); or more significantly, why the majority of the coverage of the genre that followed this moment of naming was widely negative, with the partial exception of Saunders and some writers at *Creem* (cf. Straw 1984; 1990; Laurin 2013).

Brown's (2015) study, written in dialogue with Weinstein's work, but drawing on a wider research sample of archived rock writing, argued that the answer to this conundrum lay in a more developed theorization of the role that *dissensus* – that is, 'disagreement that causes conflict within a group' or 'disagreement that leads to discord' – plays in the critical response to heavy metal among a coterie of rock journalists writing for key publications in this period. This work suggests that it was the rapid rise to prominence and popularity of heavy metal in North America in the early 1970s that is the key to understanding the cause of *dissensus* within the critical rock-writing field. In other words,

the negative or conflicted treatment of heavy metal speaks of a 'field dispute' (to coin a *Bourdieuian* term) within the maturing cultural field of rock music criticism emerging from the 1960s, which is provoked by the unprecedented popularity of the genre – with a new generation of 'kids' but also some 'rebels and incipient groovies' (to cite Christgau 2003)– which poses a challenge to 'the ascension of critical discourse on rock music to respectability and the importance to it of a rock populist reading' (Straw 1990: 109). Or as Gendron puts it, the 'remarkable overlap between what the critics liked and what sold on the market' (2002: 324) was now seemingly under challenge from *within* rock culture itself (Brown 2015: 237).

Saunders' view, penned in early 1973, clearly articulates this perception: 'For the first time, a risible chasm had opened in the previously monolithic rock audience [...] a gap between, if you will, what was Good Music and what the kids were actually listening to' (cited in Brown 2015: 244).

The importance of the seminal 'naming' review cited by Weinstein then is not that it unequivocally defines the genre of heavy metal but rather that its deployment of a negative adjective alerts us to an emergent *dissensus* within the wider rock critic's consensus; a consensus that coheres around the issue of the future direction of American rock music as a legitimate heir and authentic interpreter of its rhythm and/or blues and folk roots. Central to this consensus is

the view that the emergence of rock, out of the largely disreputable teen music of rock 'n' roll, announces a newfound critical respectability that the terminological shift from rock 'n' roll to rock announces. 'Rock', as Bernard Gendron argues, connotes 'a certain added maturity, seriousness, depth, aesthetic self-consciousness, craftsmanship, and transgressive power, in contrast to the connotations of adolescence – innocent and silly fun, dancing and shrieking – evoked by the term "rock 'n' roll" (2002: 186); with the latter now signifying an 'originary and innocent period' (ibid,) that rock had moved beyond.

The problem then that the deployment of the negative adjective heavy metal denotes is the sense that the genre is not a new development in rock but a 'throwback' to an earlier time of musical crudity and teenage fandom characterized, above all, by a distinct lack of aesthetic sophistication that critics roundly and widely deplored: 'Heavy metal, with its deafening volume and proud hostility to cultural and aesthetic niceties', as Tucker observes 'is the primary music of teenage rebellion and, almost by definition, something a listener outgrows' (1986: 486). What is striking here is how the heavy metal teen audience is viewed *not* as a generation in the sense of the Woodstock generation or the youth counter-culture. It is rather a *throwback* to the type of audiences that characterized the late 1950s. Or as Bashe puts it, 'among rock journalists [heavy metal] has been scorned for its musical primitivism [...] and its participants, both musicians and fans, have been ridiculed as living contradictions to the theory of evolution' (1985: 6).

This aesthetic disapprobation is clearly evident in Jim Miller's two-page *Rolling Stone* retrospective, 'Up Against the Wah-Wah', where he notes: 'Like early rock 'n' roll, [heavy metal] music hardly seems respectable enough to write about' (4 July 1974: 72), chiefly because of the dynamics of its sound 'a droning glop of distorted guitar oozing from countless amplifiers [...] metal employs a piledriver approach more expressive of an assembly line gone berserk than traditional musical felicities' (ibid). While rock 'n' rollers like Little Richard and Bo Diddley were 'loud', heavy metal's loudness is 'deafening', resulting in an 'amplified pandemonium' that takes rock to places articulate lyrics simply can't follow and when conjoined with 'the weighty sonics of fuzz-toned guitar' creates 'a wall of distorted sound' that can 'flatten its audience without even trying' (pp. 72–73). As Brown (2015) argues, Miller's piece is very much a survey conducted *on behalf* of the 'rock critic's [anti-establishment] establishment' (in Christgau's (1973) knowing phrase), but one that acknowledges the popularity and impact of heavy metal, 'despite its lack of conventional aesthetic virtues', as a challenge to that establishment and its hitherto 'intelligent' relationship or perceived *critical alliance* with its audience (p. 256).

### **Heavy Metal and Proto-punk: Defining the *punkoid* noise aesthetic**

However, it was Mike 'Metal' Saunders, who set out to claim that heavy metal was a *legitimate* evolution from hard rock – particularly in its musical language – that of a 'punkoid' or unsophisticated noise rock, attributed to the origins of rock 'n' roll itself (from Little Richard to the Stones to the Stooges). That is, the 'best'

heavy metal bands shared a similar musical aesthetic to early U.S. punk or 1960s garage rock, that of 'crude unrefined street clatter' (Saunders quoted in Laurin 2013: 60). For Laurin, such evidence of early critical approval, attributed not only to Saunders, but also Lester Bangs and Dave Marsh, suggests that the genre was never universally disliked, as many claim, and gradually acquired critical acceptance, crucially signaled by a shift from economic to *aesthetic* accreditation.

But the evidence base for this claim is far from straightforward. While there is certainly a critical momentum, as we shall see, in the wake of punk and new wave to afford heavy metal not only economic accreditation but also a degree of aesthetic approbation, the earlier attempts to legitimate heavy metal attributed to Bangs and Saunders by Weinstein, and as a type of punk or unsophisticated garage rock - attributed to Saunders, Bangs and Marsh, by Lauren - need to be *differentiated*. While Lauren is correct to identify punk and garage rock metaphors in Saunders writing, these do not outweigh his concerted attempt to consistently articulate a case for the rock legitimacy of heavy metal music. For example, ten of the sixteen heavy metal album reviews published in 1972 are penned by Saunders, writing for *Rolling Stone*, *Phonograph Record*, *Circular*, *New Haven Rock Press* and *Fusion* (Brown 2015). Indeed, if we re-deploy Weinstein's criteria for the genre categorization of heavy metal, then this group of reviews meets its requirements in giving us a class of bands (who will be retrospectively canonized as 'classic heavy metal') but also in describing the musical characteristics they all share. For example, Deep Purple's *In Rock* is 'blistering hard rock [...] a landmark of the early heavy metal offense', whereas *Machine Head* is 'is much more metallic than their other records' and is just the sort of 'energetic street-clatter heavy metal fans have come to love so much' (quoted in Brown 2015: 242). Grand Funk's album has 'a snarling riff that is self-explanatory as to where the term heavy metal came from,' with the bass and drum work carry 'the song along like a belching steel mill', while Black Sabbath, the 'reigning kings of Heavy Metal rock', make music that 'is louder than anything ever created' (ibid.).

However, as early as 1973, we begin to see the adjective heavy metal being selectively applied to what we would now term proto-punk bands (like the Stooges), tracing its origins to the US garage-bands of 1967–1968, by writers identified with *Creem* magazine (and the fanzine *Who Put the Bomp!*),<sup>3</sup> such as Bangs, Dave Marsh, Greg Shaw, Gary Sperrazza!, Robot A. Hull and Mark Shipper, claiming such bands played "heavy metal before such a thing existed". But, unlike Saunders, these writers very quickly subsumed heavy metal or rather a very selective take on it under the nomenclature of punk and, in so doing, defined the aesthetic philosophy that would later be central to the punk and new wave movements (Gendron 2002: 232). Or as Straw has argued, it was writers at *Creem* magazine who were able 'for a limited time, to construct a relatively coherent discourse which allowed for a qualifiedly positive response to *certain types* of Heavy Metal, primarily by placing these within a genealogy of bad-boy or punk-ish current within rock history' (1984: 114; *emphasis mine*). But not only did this selection exclude many of the popular (and now 'classic') heavy metal bands, it tended to focus on bands, such as Hawkwind, the Flamin' Groovies, Blue Oyster Cult and the New York Dolls, that exemplified the qualities of grunginess,

lack of musical sophistication or adherence to a 'noise' aesthetic, one that eschewed technique, especially the display of virtuosity, which fundamentally *contrasts* with the musical aesthetic of the majority of 70s heavy metal bands.

### **Into the Void: Calculating the Distinction Between Economic and Aesthetic Accreditation**

In the archive research that follows, I aim to distinguish between two types of accreditation: economic accreditation and critical or aesthetic legitimation (Gendron 2002). The first type, economic accreditation, can be said to occur when heavy metal bands and the genre they are identified with receive some degree of praise or recognition based on sheer longevity or musical persistence that is reflected in a measure of economic or commercial success, but which is nevertheless viewed favorably or considered legitimate in these terms:

there is a constant tension in the sphere of cultural production between the achievement of financial success and the reception of aesthetic approbation, this tension seems to work irrevocably only in the face of *perceived* short-term financial success, where the work is almost universally dismissed. But as popularity and robust sales maintain themselves in the *perceived* long run, the evaluation of critics often noticeably improve and stabilize (Gendron 2002: 175; *original emphasis*).

This leads Gendron to assert that: 'Longevity in economic accreditation pays dividends in aesthetic accreditation' (ibid.). But how might this axiom apply to the critical reception of heavy metal, which has not only demonstrated prolonged commercial success but also a notable history of critical dismissal and controversy at the hands of rock critics, especially those writing for *Rolling Stone*. At what point is there a discernible shift from economic to aesthetic accreditation and to what extent is this fully or only partially achieved? In other words, is the type of aesthetic accreditation that is seen to acknowledge longevity in economic success a lesser kind of cultural legitimacy; a qualified kind of legitimation that may be reluctantly afforded certain persistent, because popular, kinds of cultural forms within rock.

Here we might suggest that the distance between economic and aesthetic accreditation is greater or lesser depending on the direction travelled, especially where economic success is seen as a reflection of artistic authenticity and integrity, a just reward for it so to speak, rather than its primary claim to critical recognition. What follows from this is that there are a number of possible stages or points of intermediation that occur between economic accreditation and concomitant aesthetic approbation, which depend on the weighting of critical judgments that combine the two and, crucially, in what ways.

This second kind of accreditation, critical or aesthetic legitimation or what Gendron terms 'cultural accreditation' ('the acquisition of aesthetic distinction as conferred or recognized by leading cultural authorities, which, in the case of performers, means the acquisition of the status of 'artist' as opposed to



'entertainer' (2002: 161), can be said to occur when a genre is not only recognized as musically legitimate but certain bands, album releases and artists are considered to be especially significant on the grounds of musical integrity or stylistic innovation, to the extent to which they are seen to reflect artistic and critical, perhaps even *political*, intelligence. This latter measure of worth is not simply gauged in aesthetic terms, since *art-for-arts-sake* is not valued in rock criticism (Gendron, op cit, p.137), rather an album or an artist must achieve a level of artistry within the confines or aesthetic parameters of a popular genre form or are able to transcend that form through stylistic innovation or a perceived sense of sheer *political* urgency; this latter aspect is often viewed as a marker of authenticity, where an artist or band is seen to clearly address or speak to their audiences and 'about the times', in their songs and performances, in ways that are widely credible but still intelligible as rock (Sanjeck and Sanjek 1996; Jones and Featherly 2002; Lindberg et al 2005: 45; Gudmundsson et al 2002: 47-48).

### **Methodology: Reading into Rock Writing**

The sample period, 1980-1991, represents a substantial volume of journalistic writing, of over forty-six thousand words, consisting of 195 items, of which 132 (67.6%) are album reviews and 34 (16.9%) lead or feature articles (band profile and interviews, typically following a successful album release; tour and festival reports; occasionally a genre-focused overview piece), with the remainder 29 (14.8%), Year-end reviews, Random Notes and News items (most notably on the growing controversy surrounding the PMRC and 'rock lyrics', which politically circumscribes heavy metal's chart success in this period (Martin and Seagrave 1988: 291-314).

This large sample of *Rolling Stone* rock journalism<sup>4</sup> was important in providing a database, organized chronologically by year, month and date, that could be said to offer comprehensive evidence of coverage, from key reviews and interviews, to items that offered comparative adjectives to news items and commentary concerned with the impact and relative success of heavy metal bands and artists. In order to qualify for inclusion the items selected had to contain the term 'heavy metal' or 'heavy-metal'. This initial sample was then cross-checked by searches of particular band names, artists and issues (such as the PMRC), as well as key terms that appeared to have a high frequency, such as 'lyrics', the stand alone term 'metal' and key writers that appeared to be significant in the coverage (e.g. David Fricke).

Given that existing work into rock writing and rock journalism tends to be overwhelmingly interpretive, focusing on particular writers and themes as exemplifiers of a period, style, critical influence or wider impact, such work is open to criticism over the method of gathering a representative sample of rock writing itself, in terms of the criteria that explicitly or implicitly informs its selection, and whether this follows from or precedes such claims of significance.

Arguably the analysis of rock writing, especially the extent to which it is informed by literary or New Journalism qualities (Pauly 1990; Wolfe 1994), in addition to typical journalistic conventions, is best appreciated via a qualitative 'interpretive' method. However, a range of media communications methodologies, including content analysis, framing and thematic analysis, as well as various types of discourse analysis, allow the analysis of text metrics or measures of frequency of occurrence of key terms or patterns that are useful, especially when combined with qualitative approaches, in indicating significant features of the sample which may challenge initial thematic interpretations or, in turn, support them with quantitative evidence (Brown and Griffin 2014; Brown 2015).

My analysis employs a variant of critical discourse analysis (CDA), which seeks to identify the thematic structure of the *Rolling Stone* coverage of heavy metal and its discourse schema (Deacon *et al.*, 2007: 176).

The former isolates for analysis the narrative conventions for combining, ordering and hierarchically assigning the different category units of the text into a structured whole, while the latter distinguishes the central *interpretive thread* that makes all the rest relevant and 'fixes' their value as evidence or comment (*ibid*; *emphasis mine*).

The methodological claim here is that a close examination of the narrative structure of the dominant items in the sample, the album review and the lead feature article, will reveal its 'interfunctional relationship' with an underlying textual or 'discourse schema' that informs the magazines' thematic treatment of heavy metal across the sample period, linking the items together within a consistent 'interpretive thread'. While the analysis of a range of metrics, including key writers, distribution of album reviews over the period and per year, as well as key recurring terms (such as 'male teens', 'kids', 'lyrics', 'riff', guitar-style adjectives, metaphors linked to 'power', etc.), in their patterning can help to reveal this underlying discursive schema, the formal structuring of *Rolling Stone*, in terms of its journalistic *conventions*, is also important. This is so in terms of the commercial logic of coverage and how this is mediated by the response of the editorial team. For example, 'hype' (Powers 2011) surrounding a band or claims for the emergence of a new style in other publications and/or some evidence of chart success, may lead to a small feature and an album review. Typically, new bands tend to gain a follow-up feature if an initial album release is reviewed favorably, whereas established bands will receive a large feature prior to an album release or shortly after it (indeed this cycle of coverage reflects the inter-functional commercial relationship between the music industry and the music press) (Toynbee 1992; Forde 2003).

However, the critical issue is how this mode of analysis is able to track the shift in the journalistic treatment of heavy metal from economic to aesthetic accreditation, not as a dramatic change from dissensus to critical *consensus*, but rather as an incremental shift that is not wholly uncontested, since the recognition involved in economic accreditation is not ultimately the same as, or equivalent to aesthetic accreditation, but also because the eventual outcome of

this process is one that offers a selective accreditation or cultural consecration of bands that are seen to reconfigure their relationship to the heavy metal genre, by emphasizing their artistic rather than commercial ambitions, which, in turn, allows the economic and aesthetic distinction that organizes the symbolic capital of the field of music criticism to be reestablished; albeit in reaction to the undeniable success of a *disreputable* but very 'popular' genre that - in the sheer scale of its 'grass roots' support and the claims for 'authenticity' that accompany it - appeared in this time period to threaten the dominant critical authority of the journalistic field of music criticism and, at various key junctures, its entire *raison d'être*.

## The Study

Drawing on the evidence gathered from a comprehensive search of the *Rolling Stone* archive, in the period 1980-1991, this study argues that:

Heavy metal achieves critical recognition as a genre in-its-own-right in the period between 1980-1985, irrespective of whether such recognition is afforded in the context of a positive or negative evaluation of its value. The evidence for this can be gauged by the higher frequency of the use of the term heavy metal as a noun (55.8%), as opposed to an adjective (17.4%), in album reviews, which represents the majority (67.6%) of the coverage; although the usage of the hyphenated term *heavy-metal* persists (as both). In other words, the frequency of matches to the term in the period leading up to 1985 and thereafter, in the majority of cases, relates to a bona-fide heavy metal album, band feature or live review, as opposed to an adjectival use of the term as a comparative measure for describing or evaluating musical artists or works that are *not* heavy metal (see Brown 2015: 244-248).

However, it is the chart success of heavy metal as a resurgent, once-more commercially dominant genre that is accorded economic accreditation by the majority of *Rolling Stone* critics over the period, 1980-1985; although this doesn't initially appear to be the case. For some writers, this resurgence suggests that the genre and its popularity had never really gone away, with newer fans clearly loyal to its genre pioneers. But there is also the sense that such a resurgence underpins the sheer consistency of the musical template of heavy metal as a genre form, which this 'new wave' has further refined and consolidated, with some album releases viewed as definite statements of its sonic 'art' (Fricke, *Rolling Stone*, Nov 27 1980: 69; Christopher Connolly, *Rolling Stone*, April 12 1984: 58).

This judgment is also underpinned by a recognition of the key role played by a new wave of creative and collaborative record producers, working with new and established bands, who are able to refine the core musical features of the genre, producing state-of-the-art recordings that showcase the sheer power, technical virtuosity and audio-dynamics of heavy metal bands, but in a more consistent way with an emphasis on song-writing and studio-craft (J.D. Considine, *Rolling Stone*, June 24 1982: 41; David Fricke, *Rolling Stone*, March 31 1983: 51; Kurt

Loder, *Rolling Stone*, April 26 1984: 48; David Fricke, *Rolling Stone*, Dec 17 1987: 186).

Along with this there is also a recognition, among key writers, that this resurgence involves a new wave of young British bands, such as Def Leppard, Iron Maiden and Motörhead, who are redefining the genre form in ways that suggest not only a reaction to the challenge of punk and new wave but also the development of stylistic elements that have absorbed some of its characteristics (J.D. Considine, *Rolling Stone*, June 24 1982: 41). Most notably an increase in speed and tempo but also a perceived sense of youthful 'intelligence' which further refines the genre form, even rejecting some of its more outdated or clichéd characteristics, in favor of a more modern, street-wise sensibility and image (John Swenson, *Rolling Stone*, Oct 2 1980; Bruce D. Rhodewalt, *Rolling Stone*, July 7 1983: 43). For some, this development lends these newer bands a greater sense of youth address and musical relevance, especially to the extent that they are seen to offer a viable alternative, even a welcomed challenge, to a 'new wave' movement that - *for all its promise* - has ended up becoming a rather safe and unchallenging pop mainstream (David Fricke, *Rolling Stone*, March 31 1983: 51).

However, it is the breakthrough to significant chart success, from 1986 onwards, of formerly underground U.S. bands, variously described as speed or thrash metal,<sup>5</sup> of which Metallica are seen to be the key musical pioneers, who, along with Megadeth and Anthrax, are viewed as a genuinely new and innovative heavy metal avant-garde or underground that are not only seen to refine the heavy metal music template, with increased speed and ensemble precision, but also to reject the perceived clichéd elements of the 'traditional' lyrical themes of the genre with longer, more complex songs that pointedly address contemporary issues and political themes. Although there are growing clues to this shift in critical opinion to be found in the discursive structure of commentary, review asides and news reports from 1985 onwards, it is Tim Holmes' review of Metallica's *Master of Puppets* album (*Rolling Stone*, Jun 05 1986), that formally announces this shift:

Metallica has taken the raw material of heavy metal and refined all the shit – the swaggering cock-rock braggadocio and the medieval dungeons and dragons imagery – right out of it. Instead of the usual star-struttin' ejaculatory gestures and hokey showbiz razzmatazz, the members of Metallica pour out pure apocalyptic dread. Their version of heavy metal is the sound of global paranoia (p.52).

The newly conferred rock legitimacy and aesthetic approbation that is afforded these bands is symbolically signaled by the intervention of established rock critics, most notably veteran jazz, blues and Americana expert Robert Palmer, joining with the newer rock writers, such as David Fricke, J.D. Considine, Kurt Loder, Deborah Frost and Tim Holmes, and future grunge and alternative rock champions, such as Michael Azzerrad and Kim Neely, in penning key album reviews of Metallica and Megadeth, that clearly differentiate their success from

the *perceived* musically formulaic, commercially successful hard rock and pop-metal bands, such as Van Halen, Mötley Crüe and Bon Jovi.

Indeed, although the economic accreditation of the heavy metal genre is clearly reflected in the quantity and prominence of largely positive (sometimes strongly rated) album reviews and key features in this period, gathering momentum from 1980 to the end of the decade, it is the overwhelmingly positive reception of the perceived breakthrough of formerly underground thrash and speed metal bands to chart success, from 1986 onwards, that signals a critical shift in register from economic to aesthetic accreditation; that is, bands such as Megadeth and Metallica, especially the latter, acquire an aesthetic distinction conferred on them by leading critics at *Rolling Stone*, affording them in Gendron's terms, 'the status of "artist[s]" as opposed to "entertainer[s]"' (2002: 161). But significantly this distinction is drawn – with the partial exception of Def Leppard and Guns N' Roses<sup>6</sup> – *within* the genre of heavy metal as a whole and in contradistinction to its overwhelming commercial success in this period. This is no more clearly signaled than in Michael Azzerrad's joint album review 'When things get heavy' of Bon Jovi's *New Jersey* and Metallica's *...And Justice For All* (Nov 03 1988), wherein Bon Jovi's album is judged 'so purely commercial that it's practically beyond criticism (it would be more appropriate to evaluate its sales potential)', whereas Metallica, by contrast, make 'challenging music worthy of considered analysis' (pp.111-112).

Significantly, as I will show, in Part Two of this article, this critical consecration is signalled by Metallica making the cover of *Rolling Stone* in January 1989, under the strap-line: 'The Top Ten Band You Won't Hear on the Radio' and as the subject of David Fricke's four-thousand-word feature, 'Heavy Metal Justice' wherein the band are said to have *made-it-to-the-top* 'with their integrity intact' (p. 46). This period of critical consecration can be said to reach a symbolic plateau with Robert Palmer's \*\*\*\* reviews of Megadeth's *Rust In Peace* (Nov 15 1990) and Metallica's 'black album' ('Metallic K.O.') in September 1991.<sup>7</sup> But first, in Part One, I turn to a detailed examination of the coverage of the genre in the early to mid 1980s in order to demonstrate the shift to economic accreditation and the reasons for this *volte-face* among the majority of critics, as well as the issue of the emerging tendency to offer a degree of aesthetic approbation to bands that are seen to translate the heavy metal genre into a popular art form or to go on to address the *Great Metal Question*, of being able to attract an audience beyond the boundaries of the genre style hitherto.

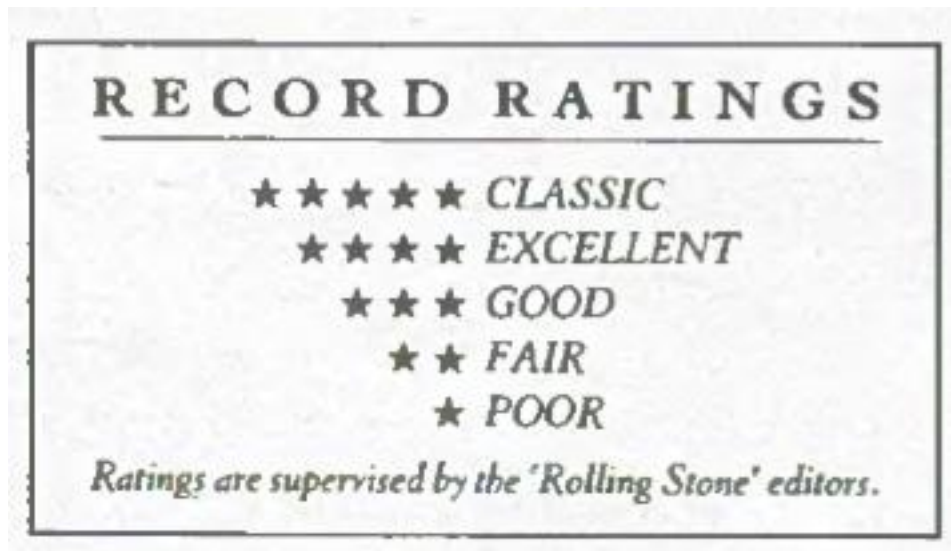


Fig. 1 *Rolling Stone's* 'Record Ratings'

### **Part One (1980-85):**

#### **Back in Black: 'Heavy Metal Rears It's Ugly Head Again'**

The 'return' of the heavy metal genre from *across the Atlantic*, is first picked-up by Kurt Loder in *Rolling Stone's* 'Random Notes':

Now that New Wave's becoming big business, there's a grass-roots resurgence of classic heavy-metal rock, spearheaded in Europe by such veteran groups as the Scorpions and Judas Priest, along with newcomers Def Leppard and Iron Maiden. American head bangers like Rush and Van Halen are also cleaning up, and while most critics may hate the music, the little boys (metal's core audience is largely teenage males) definitely understand (June 12 1980:28).

On first reading, this resurgence and its Billboard chart success appears to be viewed broadly negatively, especially in comparison to the perceived progress, in terms of gender diversity and youth politics, identified as a key achievement of punk and new wave. This impression is also heightened by the strategy the *Rolling Stone* editorial team employ in relation to this burgeoning trend in penning multi-album reviews, which either open with a clear recognition of the popular resurgence of the genre or which aim to contextualize it for their rock readers. For example, Deborah Frost's eight-album lead review, entitled: 'Heavy metal rears its ugly head again: A new generation of bands is dominating the charts':

It's back, just when the world was safe for New Wave, ready at last for *smart* music, what should rear its leather-clad, lipstick-smear image on the nation's TV tubes but that bete noire of rock progressivism, heavy metal. Yes, rising up from the smoking remains of a million shredded speaker cones,

nastier, noisier and more popular than ever, heavy metal is with us once again. But why? (Sept 27 1984: 83; *original emphasis*).

Tim Holmes' six-album review, 'Heavy-metal mania' (*Rolling Stone*, Sep 12 1985: 74-77), is even more damning:

Heavy metal is the idiot-bastard spawn of rock, the eternal embarrassment that will not die. It's music that doesn't care what you think. Like some mythical beast that's part tyrannosaur – slow moving and pea brained – and part Hydra – multiheaded and malevolent – heavy metal just keeps forging on, flattening everything in its path. Radio, by and large, won't play it, but so what? These bands sell millions of records and fill stadiums. Critics scratch their flaccid quills against the hide of the beast, but even if a head should fall off, there are ninety more ready to spring up in its place (p. 74).

This perception of the 'eternal recurrence' of the heavy metal genre is echoed in J.D. Considine's view that '...few styles in rock have endured like heavy metal'. So that, long after 'such progenitors as Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple and Grand Funk Railroad have passed into history', a new generation of 'young longhairs' crowd into arenas clamouring for 'yet another dose of high-decibel distortion, fretboard virtuosity and vocal belligerence' (*Rolling Stone*, June 24 1982: 41) and David Fricke's three-album review, of Kiss, Humble Pie and Judas Priest: 'Heavy-metal monsters rarely die but eventually collapse under the accumulated weight of their own leaden riffing, Tarzan-like singing and boorish macho arrogance' (*Rolling Stone*, Oct 2 1980:95). Thus each album offers different ways of trying to avoid this inevitability.

According to these reviews, which 'bookend' the 1980 to 1985 period, the resurgence in popularity of heavy metal represents a backward-looking trend, a reactionary development that offers little that can be viewed as progressive. However, it is significant that the resurgence of heavy metal is once again identified with a 'new wave' of British bands as well as the revival in fortunes of an older set of genre stalwarts, such as AC/DC, Ozzy Osbourne, Judas Priest, the Scorpions, Deep Purple and Black Sabbath. However, if we look more closely what is revealed is that - while some older bands, either caught up in the resurgence or making a comeback because of it, are given short shrift - such as J.D. Considine's review of Black Sabbath's 'Mob Rules':

After 1980s harder and faster *Heaven and Hell*, there was reason to believe that singer Ronnie James Dio might pull Black Sabbath off the heavy-metal scrapheap. Didn't happen. *Mob Rules* finds the band as dull-witted and flatulent as ever [...] The reason *Mob Rules* is terrible is teamwork – not just thinking up lame riffs and dumb lyrics but also performing them as poorly as possible' (*Rolling Stone*, Feb 18 1982: 53).

Or David Fricke's judgement of Grand Funk Railroad's 'Grand Funk Lives': 'History will remember *Grand Funk Lives* as one of the most embarrassing reunion albums ever' (*Rolling Stone*, Mar 18 1982: 70); both of which receive a single \*.<sup>8</sup> Then there is Deborah Frost's review of Deep Purple's 'Perfect

Strangers': 'For a moment, you almost wonder why Purple ever faded away in the first place. Until, that is, you hear the rest of the album [...] So why are they doing this? To cash in on the current heavy-metal craze' (*Rolling Stone*, Feb 28 1985: 58), and Jimmy Guttermann's scathing review of Aerosmith's 'Done with Mirrors', wherein the band's 'un-awaited reunion LP' is adjudged 'the work of burned-out lugheads whose lack of musical imagination rivals their repugnant lyrics' (*Rolling Stone*, Dec 05 1985: 60).

However, this is not the case with the majority of reviews of the established, older bands and certainly not true of the critical response to the newer bands, which is largely favourable. In fact, of the fifty-seven reviews penned in the 1980-85 period, only ten are entirely negative. This is not to suggest that these album releases receive \*\*\*\* or \*\*\*\*\* star reviews or high critical praise (although a few do). Rather it is that they are increasingly assessed in terms of their contribution to the genre-form and the musical skills that define it, which in turn reflects an acceptance of the genre as *long-lived*, as well as an acknowledgement of its continued popularity. This shift in critical register or *rapprochement* with the heavy metal genre can be attributed most specifically to the role of David Fricke, who is responsible for fifty-six (42.4%) of the one-hundred and thirty-two album reviews penned in the 1980-91 period and, more specifically, thirty-four (52.3%) of the sixty-five album reviews penned in the 1980-85 period (including all of the fourteen published in 1980). [See Table 1]

A good example of Fricke's approach is the three-album review, entitled 'Heavy bevy', which opens thus:

Fans insist that it never went away. Critics wish it would. But heavy metal, that belligerent bastard son of American blues and macho English rock-star attitudes, is back. It's also bigger, louder and – hard as-this-maybe-to-believe – better than ever, rising to punk-rock's challenge by adding some new risks to the old riffs (*Rolling Stone*, June 26 1980: 74).

What distinguishes Fricke's approach is the way in which he acknowledges, up front, the genre conventions of heavy metal as a legitimate, albeit *controversial* rock style and, on this basis, is prepared to praise those bands that are able to meet these standards, even exceed them if they are exceptional players, while looking for signs of musical and lyrical development that might take the genre forwards into areas that will find more favour with rock critics. Along with this there is an underlying sense of the 'grass roots' popularity of the genre and the sense that said rock critics may be 'out of touch' with a large segment of the rock audience. For example, his review of Van Halen states:

Van Halen toss melody – along with subtlety and good manners – straight out the bar-room door. Specializing in decibels and cock-strutting bravado, they put forth the proposition that Might Is Always Right, and the proof on their third LP, *Women and Children First*, is pretty convincing (op cit, p.75; *emphasis mine*).



<i>Year</i>	<i>Fricke</i>	<i>Considine</i>	<i>Loder</i>	<i>Frost</i>	<i>Holmes</i>	<i>Neely</i>	<i>Goldberg</i>	<i>Pond</i>	<i>Gilmore</i>	<i>Palmer</i>	<i>Connelly</i>	<i>Azzerrad</i>
<b>1980</b>	14	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
<b>1981</b>	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
<b>1982</b>	4	8	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>1983</b>	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>1984</b>	0	0	2	9	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0
<b>1985</b>	4	1	0	0	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>1986</b>	6	0	5	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>1987</b>	3	2	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
<b>1988</b>	4	0	0	1	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	1
<b>1989</b>	7	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>1990</b>	0	1	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	1	0	0
<b>1991</b>	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>%</b>	<b>42.4</b>	<b>9.8</b>	<b>8.3</b>	<b>8.3</b>	<b>6.8</b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>0.75</b>	<b>0.75</b>

Table 1. *Number of Metal Album Reviews by Journalist, 1980-91*

The reason for this is that ‘underneath the noisy chutzpah’ the band ‘are exceptionally good players’, especially guitarist Eddie Van Halen, ‘who harnesses feedback almost as well as Jimi Hendrix did and displays smarts plus speed in his solos’ (ibid). But Fricke goes further, in suggesting that tracks like, “Romeo Delight,” “Everybody Wants Some!!” and ‘the mad, triple-time dash’ “Loss of Control”, ‘are works of high-volume art’, concluding with the observation: ‘Megalomania of this kind is an acquired taste, yet the haste with which *Women and Children First* bullied its way into the Top Ten suggests that there’s a little Van Halen in everybody’ (p.75).

This recognition of - and ability to describe - the sonic features of heavy metal in ways that allow readers to ‘hear it’ is a consistent, alliterative feature of Fricke’s writing. For example, his review of The Joe Perry Project:

*Let the Music Do the Talking* overflows with molten riffs and the kind of smoking guitar solos that made *Get Your Wings* and *Toys in the Attic* such head-banger delights [...] Perry trots out his entire bag of tricks – feedback, fuzz tone harmonics, vibrato wails, hammer-on-anvil power chords – but with a practiced musicianly class that further fuels the guitar-star cool with which he slams on his strings (*Rolling Stone*, May 29 1980: 56).

At the same time, Fricke is aware that the virtuosity of the ‘show-off’ guitar in heavy metal must always be ‘anchored’ in the riff and rhythm power that defines the genre’s template. Although this ‘deafening instrumental thunder’ is often

described by others critics as 'leaden', 'clubfooted', 'sledgehammer' or simply dismissed as audio 'sludge', Fricke seeks a more appreciative description, such as how the twin-guitarists of AC/DC hammer out 'one Herculean riff after another on the rhythm-section anvil of bassist Cliff Williams and drummer Phil Rudd', while Malcolm Young's 'ham-fisted, almost percussive rhythm-guitar' provides the perfect foil to allow brother Angus to run 'riotously up and down the neck of his axe, peeling off banzai solos' (*Rolling Stone*, Nov 27 1980: 69). As a result, AC/DC's *Back in Black* 'is not only the best of [their] six American albums, it's the apex of heavy metal art: the first LP since *Led Zeppelin II* that captures all the blood, sweat and arrogance of the genre. In other words, *Back in Black* kicks like a mutha' (*Rolling Stone*, Nov 27 1980: 69). Unfortunately, as Fricke concludes, most critics 'can't recognise the talent because of the noise' and although the band 'may not be everybody's cup of joy [...] they're not rock & roll's village idiots either' (ibid). Rather, what the band has done is utilize many of the elements of early Stones - 'catchy hooks, a Greek chorus of guitars, a singer who does everything but *sing*' - and 'cranked them up to a plutonium-strength power' (ibid).

This tone of appreciation is further echoed in Kurt Loder's \*\*\*\* review of the follow-up, *For Those About to Rock We Salute You*:

AC/DC are the real thing, perhaps the purest major practitioners of hot and snotty rock since Led Zeppelin lumbered off the boards. Other groups, from Van Halen to REO Speedwagon, may base their music on similar elements, but they inevitably emerge from the studio sounding cleaned up and rather too eager for AOR airplay. AC/DC, from the start, have always left the rough edges in. The rough edges are the *point*, much as they were part of the point of, say, Little Richard in the Fifties or the Rolling Stones in the mid-Sixties (*Rolling Stone*, Jan 21 1982: 52; *original emphasis*).

Similarly, Loder argues, 'this bare-knuckles approach has tended to obscure the fact that, beneath all those enormous guitar riffs and gut-wrangling rhythms, AC/DC is an unusually expert songwriting band' (ibid). However, with this release, their 'best album' to date, 'the case for the band's talents is finally made with undeniable force and clarity' (ibid). He concludes by reminding readers that their 'last LP sold 5 million copies, and this one gives every indication of eclipsing it. Be the first in your circle of sophisticates to find out why' (p.52).

This invitation to *Rolling Stone* readers to imbibe some heavy metal as part of their rock diet, is also echoed in Christopher Connelly's \*\*\* review<sup>9</sup> of Judas Priest's *Defenders of the Faith*: 'If you only buy a couple of heavy-metal records this year, *Defenders of the Faith* should be one of them [because tracks like] "Jawbreaker" and "Freewheel Burning" bristle with the amps-on-ten ammo that any rock fan should be able to appreciate' (*Rolling Stone*, April 12 1984: 58). One of the reasons for this is that the 'British boomers [...] have tampered as little as possible with the formula that blasted [their previous album] *Screaming for Vengeance* to the band's loftiest U.S. chart position ever' (ibid).

What is going on in these largely positive reviews, I would argue, is a critical realignment of *Rolling Stone* rock critics and heavy metal, one that is grounded in a clear-eyed recognition of the genre's chart impact as well as its enduring appeal to a teen-male constituency, but one that no longer exclusively seeks to explain the *former* in terms of the *latter*. Indeed, the most significant shift in register is that concerned to offer a critical appreciation of the musical dynamics of the genre, one which implicitly acknowledges its enduring appeal to the teenage male 'headbanger', but which also seeks to identify its growing appeal beyond this group and, in some higher rated reviews, to actively promote this development. This is not to suggest that there are no longer areas of criticism, such as a tendency to macho excess in image and performance, residual sexism and lyrical ineptitude, as well as an over-reliance on a formulaic sound and song-writing palette. But rather to suggest that the increasing evidence of critical appreciation is one afforded to those bands that best exemplify the 'art' of the genre formula; by doing it better than others or by refining the best aspects while reducing the worst.

This critical realignment is neatly encapsulated by Kurt Loder when he argues:

Metal is by now a kind of folk music, as familiar in its forms as bluegrass or Appalachian balladry. Like folk (and especially like the blues, from which it is distantly derived), metal endlessly reshuffles a legacy of lyrical and instrumental phrases to create a music distinguished, when at all, by the particulars of individual performance – a killer guitar solo, a cleverly rejuvenated riff, some singer's new twist on the traditional banshee wail. And nowadays, there's also the possibility of an occasional great song cropping up (*Rolling Stone*, Sep 24 1987:127).

One of the reasons for this is the role of producers, working creatively with the bands to refine their sound and their song-writing craft, a factor that is consistently noted by reviewers over the period. For example, experienced sound engineer turned producer, Tom Allom, is credited with forging Judas Priest's 'gutbucket sound' on their increasingly successful US album releases. In the case of the Stateside success of the German band, the Scorpions, part of the credit goes to producer Dieter Dierks (who is frequently referred to as the "Sixth Scorp"). Take, for example, Kurt Loder, accounting for the chart impact of the Scorpions' *Love at First Sting* album (which he awards \*\*\*): 'Under the tutelage of sonic maestro Dieter Dierks, who may be the best heavy-metal producer-in the world, Germany's Scorpions have evolved into one of the most powerful bands in the genre, right up there with England's Judas Priest' (*Rolling Stone*, April 26 1984). Or J.D. Considine's review of the Scorpions' breakthrough *Blackout* album:

Guitarist Matthias Jabs may borrow liberally from Eddie Van Halen's arsenal of guitar tricks, and singer Klaus Meine does bellow like Judas Priest's Rob Halford, but the overall effect is so audaciously over-the-top that it works anyway. Part of the credit goes to producer Dieter Dierks, who provides the band with a dense but meticulously detailed sound [But mostly] it's just a matter of good ensemble playing fronted by a singer who knows how to

wring the last ounce of impact from each song (*Rolling Stone*, June 24 1982:41).

But it is the creative and collaborative work of veteran producer Robert John “Mutt” Lange, co-writing and producing Def Leppard, that receives the most consistent critical approbation, as the young British band, over successive releases, develop into a chart-topping major stadium act. It is David Fricke who first notes the potential of the band in his ‘Heavy bevy’ review: ‘Displaying a wisdom beyond their years, Def Leppard take the timeworn basics of heavy metal, give them a punky Eighties overhaul and come up with, uh, heavy melody. *On Through the Night* is awfully impressive for a band making its vinyl debut’ (*Rolling Stone*, June 26 1980:75). This largely positive review leads to a follow-up feature by John Swenson, ‘Def Leppard breaks the heavy-metal mould’, wherein the ‘five British kids’ who are a part of a “New Wave” of bands sweeping Britain, sign a major label deal, and with their first album climbing up the British and American charts, secure a support slot Stateside with veteran rocker Ted Nugent (*Rolling Stone*, Oct 2 1980: 27). But, argues Swenson, the young band ‘transcend [their] heavy-metal peers in songwriting and musicianship’, more in the mould of ‘imaginative hard rockers’ like ‘Mott the Hoople’ and, as a result, are more fittingly described as part of a ‘post-punk generation’ of bands that are changing both the look and the youth address of the genre.

But it is Fricke’s \*\*\*½ review of Def Leppard’s *Pyromania* that sets out the promise of the band, with Mutt Lange producing them: ‘Just when it seemed like synthesizers had taken over the airwaves, along comes Def Leppard with [...] a heavy-metal album full of brawling guitars and boasting state-of-the-radio production’ (p.51). Guitarists Steve Clark and Phil Collen’s ‘fat fuzz riffs and power chords’ are ‘more emotionally charged than most of the synthesized disco that passes for “modern music” (ibid). And Robert John ‘Mutt’ Lange’s work behind the board brings singer Joe Elliot’s ‘screaming vocals into focus’ (*Rolling Stone*, March 31 1983: 51).

In the end of year round-up, Fricke goes further in his appreciation: ‘For state-of-the-art slam [...] Def Leppard’s *Hysteria* was the only platter that mattered [featuring] a feast of drop-dead hooks (“Animal,” “Pour Some Sugar On Me,” “Excitable”) revved up with vintage metallic drive and produced by “Mutt” Lange, the Phil Spector of hard rock, with a cinematic wallop sure to turn CD players and car radios into mere lumps of molten circuitry’ (*Rolling Stone*, Dec 17 1987:186).

This combination of commercial and artistic approbation is further enhanced when the album, after selling more than 9 million copies, is accorded a 62 placing in the *Rolling Stone Top 100 Albums of the Decade*. Described as a ‘chart torcher’ with its ‘radio-ready blend of melodic savvy and stadium wallop’, the album’s sound and production, achieved by ‘hard-rock auteur’ Lange, ‘set precedents for commercially astute songwriting and sheer studio ambition’, such as ‘the massive yet airy vocal harmonies, philharmonic layers of guitar’ which ‘for better or worse’ helped to define the ‘mainstream metal sound of the Eighties’ without ‘compromising the basic thump’ (*Rolling Stone*, Nov 16 1989: 116).

**[Image of the first page of Kurt Loder's album review for *Hysteria*, Def Leppard.]**

Fig. 2 *Rolling Stone*, Sep 24 1987:127

The long-awaited follow up, *Hysteria*, is given a lengthy-lead review ('Deffer Than Ever' See Fig. 2) by Kurt Loder: 'This album sounds terrific. Every track sparkles and burns. There is no filler' (*Rolling Stone*, Sep 24 1987:128). The reasons for this are not that 'the Leppards' are 'great songwriters (as opposed to consummate riff-smiths) (ibid), but rather that producer Mutt Lange gets full credit as co-composer (as he did on *Pyromania*).

He is, in fact, the sixth Leppard – the one who takes their riffs and choruses and assembles them into spectacular tracks. A veteran producer of such metal susperstars as AC/DC and Foreigner, Lange is a genre master, and this LP is thick with his trademarks: the deep, meaty bass sound; the fat, relentless drums; the dazzling guitar montages; the impeccable sense of structure and separation; the preternatural clarity (ibid,).

However, towards the end of the review, Loder seeks to raise the Great Metal Question: 'Can the [band] *enlarge* their audience beyond the testosterone-addled male adolescents who are its traditional core?' On recent evidence, the band seem 'primed to burst out of the metal ghetto' in that they have 'shed most of the genre's more irritating stylistic tics' and 'can rock with the best of today's young bands, categories be damned' (p.128: *emphasis mine*). However, in terms of songwriting 'which is the key to any future growth', the band appear 'trapped within metal's tired old socio-sexual paradigm' especially in their portrayal of women 'as mere lifestyle accessories'. When they attempt to 'communicate more subtle emotion', as for example on 'Love and Affection' and the title track ['Hysteria'], 'they inevitably fumble it'. So the question remains of whether this is all they 'want to say?' or all 'they're capable of saying?' (p.128). But Loder concludes by reminding himself that nobody in their 'right mind' should assess a metal album on the basis of its 'poetic integrity' especially 'headbanging music of a very high sonic order', which is 'executed with great élan' by arguably the most 'exciting metal-pop band on the scene' (p. 128).

In posing the 'Great Metal Question' in the way that he does, Loder not only reinforces the logic of economic accreditation that informs the patterning of coverage of successful heavy metal bands by *Rolling Stone* writers, but also indicates quite clearly the further distance a band must travel beyond this logic to begin to acquire some measure of aesthetic approbation. By focusing on their lyrical inadequacies, despite the marked improvement in the band's song-writing craft, Loder perhaps gestures too far back to earlier judgements of a lack of aesthetic niceties in the sound of heavy metal, which the work of producer-collaborators, like Lange, Dierks and others, in streamlining and sharpening the sonic dynamics of the most successful bands, clearly contradicts. So while Def Leppard, and other bands, can be praised for challenging the rock/pop mainstream with polished production that allows an expansion of the heavy metal audience, the role of the rock critic is still about discerning that which transcends the heavy metal genre template rather than refining it in the pursuit of a popular art aesthetic.

## Conclusion

What has been argued in part one of this two-part article, is that the critical and aesthetic approbation that is eventually afforded the work of the thrash metal band Metallica and others, emerges out of a decade long process, from 1980-1991, that I have traced through the pages of the leading rock publication *Rolling Stone*, via album reviews, news commentary and lead features. This process, as I have argued, can be usefully divided into two halves, from 1980-85 and then from 1986-91. The earlier period, which has been examined in this article, records a cumulative but decisive critical shift amongst rock writers towards the once most derided of genres of the 1970s, heavy metal, affording it a growing economic accreditation in the wake of its commercial 'return' or resurgence in the period from 1980 to 1985, which not only acknowledges its phenomenal chart success but also the longevity of the genre style and its musical template; a success which is attributed not only to its sheer longevity but also the emergence of a new wave of bands who are able, in collaboration with a number of notably skilled record producers, to forge a more chart-friendly style of hard rock and heavy metal that is widely popular among the key North American youth demographic, while still retaining its signature guitar style, controversial song themes and rebellious imagery.

While the axiom that 'longevity in economic accreditation pays dividends in aesthetic accreditation', is surely applicable here, the evidence of a shift to a full-blown aesthetic accreditation in the wake of widespread economic success, is still partial and selective, reflecting the best aspects and features of work that is able to emerge from such a widespread success, while tacitly acknowledging that such features would not necessarily be discerned or appreciated prior to that success. This suggests that the distance between economic and aesthetic accreditation is greater or lesser depending on the direction travelled, especially where economic success is seen as a reflection of artistic authenticity and

integrity, a just reward for it so to speak, rather than its primary claim to critical recognition.

As I will go on to show in Part Two of this article, it is this logic that clearly underpins the second half of the decade and how it is marked by a growing critical support for and eventual aesthetic accreditation of a group of bands, most notably Metallica, who arise from a musical underground which is broadly within the parameters of the metal genre, but which is characterized above all by the centrality of musical integrity and stylistic innovation, which are seen to reflect artistic, critical and above all a *political* intelligence. The fact that this widespread critical approval is not more clearly prominent earlier on in the coverage of *Rolling Stone*, is due to its own overriding economic rationale in reporting and reviewing the most successful rock bands and performers, which means that mention of the thrash and speed metal underground from which Metallica emerge is largely confined to occasional notes and commentary, only becoming fully emergent once the band and the best of their contemporaries, achieve a breakthrough touring and chart impact. It is this process, of the shift from economic to a clearly articulated aesthetic accreditation conferred on selected bands within the heavy metal genre, that will form the focus of Part Two of this article, focusing in detail on the coverage from 1986 to 1991.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Because of the large historical sweep of this investigation and the quantity of evidence amassed from the pages of the *Rolling Stone* archive, it was agreed with the editor of MMS, that once the article had passed successfully through the peer review process, because of its length it could be published in two parts, which are signalled here by the time periods, 1980-85 (Part One) and 1986-91 (Part Two).

<sup>2</sup> The view that the genre name does derive from the 'sound of heavy metal crashing' is a favored one by many fans, scene participants and metal musicians themselves, such as Geezer Butler (Quoted in Weinstein 2000: 19). But others trace this phrase to an unspecified Jimi Hendrix Experience concert, rather than Black Sabbath and to a review of Hendrix's *Axis: Bold as Love* album by Jim Miller in *Rolling Stone* in 1968. However, the phrase employed there is 'very heavy and metallic loud' (Weinstein 2013: 43).

<sup>3</sup> *Who Put the Bomp* (later Bomp!) was a fanzine started by Greg Shaw in 1970 which formed an alliance with Bangs and Marsh at *Creem* in the pursuit of an older and originary type of 'garage rock' style that would later be defined as the *punk aesthetic* (Gendron 2002: 230-231).

<sup>4</sup> The sample was drawn from, *Rolling Stone: Cover to Cover, Nov 1967 – May 2007*, a searchable digital archive consisting of 'over 98, 000 pages' contained on three DVDs accessed via a magazine browser CD, produced by Bondi Digital Publishing (2007). The value of this archive is that it reproduces every page of the publication exactly as it looked as a print publication.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that neither of these terms are coined by *Rolling Stone*. A key reason for this is the governing commercial logic of their coverage which means they are precluded from featuring scene-based or underground bands until they make some kind of impact on the Billboard charts, although there is evidence of interest in these bands to be found in RS News, Notes and Commentary items, which I examine in Part Two of this article.

<sup>6</sup> See below for a more detailed discussion of the key role of Def Leppard in the critical shift to a more nuanced appreciation of the aesthetics of the newer metal bands making a dramatic chart impact. For the band Guns N' Roses, it is the combination of a punk and metal aesthetic, which is widely popular with a perceived new generation of disenfranchised youth, which lends the band an aura of authenticity for many rock critics. See Part Two for a fuller discussion of this.

<sup>7</sup> A [4 star] \*\*\*\* rating is defined as 'Excellent' (See Fig. 1). *Rolling Stone* introduced their Star Rating review criteria in February 1981.

<sup>8</sup> A [1 star] \* rating is defined as 'Poor' (See Fig. 1)

<sup>9</sup> A [3 star] \*\*\* rating is defined as 'Good' (See Fig. 1)