Back to the Culture: 80s Heavy Metal as a Community of Creativity, Resistance and Difference

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Panel Proposal:

This panel seeks to *go back* to the eighties in order to re-examine and re-evaluate heavy metal music and its sub-culture. During this decade heavy metal was claimed as the 'dominant genre of American music', with *Rolling Stone* pronouncing it the new 'mainstream of rock and roll'. But, as a national survey found, while 10 million 'liked or strongly liked' heavy metal – 19 million 'strongly disliked' it. A possible reason for this majority-perception is that, unlike other youth cultures, the relationship between the music of heavy metal and its fandom has been central to its coherence as a youth-formation, meaning that when it experienced a period of commercial success it retained a subversive edge. Also, despite (or maybe *because* of) its popularity in this period, heavy metal was subjected to a sustained elite-initiated campaign of mass-mediated 'moral panic' that resulted in Senate hearings and legal-suits calling for *de facto* censorship of the music and institutional repression of its youth culture. It was in response to these initiatives– and notable political and academic support for them – that scholars, such as Weinstein and Walser, sought to defend *and* explicate the music culture as part of a complex musical genre, made up of many sub-genres, that had its roots in the early 1970s. It is somewhat surprising then to find that Metal Studies has not only largely ignored this period but has also sought to exclude it from the metal 'canon' on both musical and stylistic grounds. Indeed, the more or less exclusive focus on extreme metal to be found in Metal studies is often justified by a negative comparison to 80s heavy metal, accompanied by a selective genealogy of 70s originator-bands, that ignores the musical evidence of continuity and kinship that connect the metal musical continuum.

Paper Abstracts:

(1) Songs in the Key of Depression, Suicide and Death: *How Metal Musicians Sustained a Dialogue of Community with their Fans in a Period of Moral Panic about Heavy Metal Music, 1984-1991*

Andy R. Brown, Bath Spa University

With the partial exception of 'Suicide Solution' (1980), none of the songs cited in the US Senate Hearings (1985) on the 'Labelling of Rock Music' and in legal proceedings thereafter, concerned to link the popularity of heavy metal with an increase in youth suicide rates, are *actually* about suicide. Yet heavy metal, despite the fact that politicians/academic 'experts' failed to identify them, *did* feature songs about depression, mental illness and suicide, such as 'Fade To Black' (1984), 'In My Darkest Hour' (1988) and 'How Will I Ever Laugh Tomorrow' (1988). Not only this but 'suicide' songs by thrash bands in this period, perhaps surprisingly, took the form of a ballad concerned with a troubled 'interior' contemplation on mortality; or offer, in effect, a 'suicide note' contemplating a future-death or past failed-attempts. Such songs not only reflect the impact of a 'moral panic' on heavy metal fans they also reference the development of local institutions, such as the Fullerton, CA 'Back in Control Centre', that

had a vested (financial) interest in labelling youth as depressed, unstable and in need of psychiatric assessment and 30 day detentions ('Institutionalized', 'Sanitarium'). Yet rather than confirming the claims of politicians and academic-advocates of the negative impact of metal on youth, such songs offer a 'dialogic' conversation between metal musicians and fans that is concerned to address the experience of trying to 'live through' this difficult economic and politically *distorted* period, and in the process cohere a sense of community, collective identity and feelings of empathy/anger (250 wds).

(2) "Wake up the Sleeping Giant": Re-examining Glam Metal: Origin, Reception and Style

Kevin Ebert, Xavier University

Although the 1980s are characterized as a period 'when Metal ruled the world,' it's not actually true. For most of the decade heavy metal sat on the edge of popular culture, not it's center. Rather than a separate form of heavy metal, glam metal permeated 80s metal styles as a more subcultural phenomenon than current memory allows. When metal faded from prominence in the early 90s, the few bands left standing were of thrash origins, such as Metallica; as a consequence history was 'written' by the victors. In the following decades, glam metal was reduced to a caricature of 'big hair' and *wannabe* musicians who valued image over musical integrity. The fact that many 1980s heavy metal bands, including Ozzy Osbourne and Judas Priest, passed through a glam phase is often forgotten; even Celtic Frost experimented with glam. The borders between subgenres were clearly more fluid in the 80s than is now believed. This paper explores the origins and continuation of glam metal's denigration. It separates fact from fiction in our collective memory of who actually created this music and also examines the musical properties of glam metal. Analysis of songs by Dokken, Tesla, Ratt, White Lion and Winger reveals a sophistication that contradicts the stereotyping of these bands as 'all hair and no substance.' A comparative analysis of Metal Church's 'Gods of Wrath' and Bon Jovi's 'Wanted Dead or Alive' demonstrates potentially uncomfortable similarities between two supposedly antithetical metal subgenres, thrash metal and glam metal, within a power-ballad format (250 wds).

(3)'Every Thorn Has Its Rose?': Vocal Melody, Love Songs, and the Problem of Pop Music in Glam Metal

Ross Hagen, Utah Valley University

In this paper I examine the comparative dearth of attention paid to vocal-driven melody as opposed to instrumental complexity in Metal Studies, and how this has worked to marginalize more mainstream genres of metal, such as hard rock and glam metal. I relate this to the tendency of music scholars to equate formal and technical complexity with philosophical profundity and aesthetic value. Within much 80s glam metal, the 'clean' sung vocals, big choruses, romantic and even heartbroken lyrics, and dramatic climaxes in music by bands like Dokken and Whitesnake also perhaps comes dangerously close to rendering metal's emotionality as *schmaltz* in leather. It may be good, but it's the wrong kind of good because its effectiveness relies on 'simplistic' pop and power-ballad formulae rather than more obviously 'metal' idioms. In most other endeavors of retrospective canon expansion, interested scholars often have to 'use the

Boundaries and Ties: The Place of Metal Music in Communities
The Biannual International Society for Metal Music Studies Conference at the University
of Victoria, June 9-11, 2017

master's tools' to bring marginalized works into the fold by proving those works'
aesthetic worth according to the discipline's accepted benchmarks. In our case, popular
metal genres and bands are generally rehabilitated by highlighting skillful and complex
instrumental performances, finding a connection to a style with more underground
credibility, or by uncovering a hidden subversive or resistant agenda. This should not
surprise, as popular music studies generally has historically focused on genres that map
onto the musical and political proclivities of its scholars. For Metal Studies, however,
this tendency may mean that reckoning with more broadly popular metal genres
requires an altered toolkit (247 wds).

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