

‘Metal is really inclusive’ – Let’s stop right there, my friend, and think: who are the most famous or influential metal bands you can think of? Chances are you have a list of men there. So, let’s reflect on the fact that the canon of metal is mostly white men from the UK and USA, with a few coming from Northern Europe and Australia. Heavy metal is a male-dominated genre, and it has long been reported to have issues with women, femininity and misogyny. What happens if we look at heavy metal and centre women in that history? Let us start by asserting that ‘woman’ is a socially constructed category rather than a stable or biologically rooted certainty.<sup>1</sup> That category, ‘woman’, is expansive and includes heterogeneous experiences of living in a gendered, classed and raced world. Let us, then, put women at the heart of our story about heavy metal and see what new aspects of the music and culture it reveals. Let us discover what new connections across musical and cultural contexts can be made. And let us glimpse the future for metal.

### Heavy Metal Origins

Who was the first heavy metal band? Jinx Dawson (USA) could make the claim that her band, Coven, were the first to blend the occult with hard rock.<sup>2</sup> Their first album, *Witchcraft Destroys Minds and Reaps Souls* (1969), features a Satanic Mass and other devilish themes. Musically, it is similar to Jefferson Airplane, and Black Sabbath were compared to Coven on the release of *Black Sabbath* (1970).<sup>3</sup> Dawson also arguably invented the devil horns sign now synonymous with metal.<sup>4</sup> The 1960s was a difficult time for women making rock music, with numerous barriers of sexism, including sexual assault, hindering women’s achievements.<sup>5</sup> A minority of women were able to break through into the mainstream, but Coven’s opportunities for success were further impeded by anti-Satan sentiment in the USA.

Coven are rarely given their place in the canon of metal,<sup>6</sup> an omission that contributes to the impression of metal (and rock) as a masculine genre.

That there were few women musicians who were successful in contributing to the early development of heavy metal does not mean that women were not present and important. In her fan autobiography, Pamela Des Barres<sup>7</sup> describes the late 1960s West Coast US rock and early metal scene as an environment in which women were ever-present. They supported men in financial, practical, domestic and sexual aspects of their lives, which enabled those men to concentrate on making music. She also argued that women acted as muses, inspiring great love songs. Furthermore, they *were* involved in the production of the music, supporting, cheerleading, giving feedback: Des Barres writes of sitting with Jimmy Page and Robert Plant of Led Zeppelin as they wrote songs. These roles are rarely regarded as being important in the history of metal, but in enabling great music to be made, they are as essential as the role of the producer.

However, this already raises questions about what 'counts' as metal and who is able to define the boundaries of the genre. As Laina Dawes<sup>8</sup> argues, the origins of metal are in rock and the blues and, therefore, to consider the origins of metal means we need to ask who is important in blues rock? The received history of rock and metal is not only typically a male history, but also a *white* history that omits to take the contribution of Black women into account. For example, Big Mama Thornton's hit song 'Hound Dog' (1952) pioneered the vocal style that was later similarly employed by Elvis Presley on his cover of the song. But Presley was white, and his song marketed to white audiences, so his version became *the* version, preventing Thornton from capitalising on *her* success, from which she never saw the profits. Sister Rosetta Tharpe's guitar technique and distortion were influential on British musicians such as Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page and John Paul Jones;<sup>9</sup> Odetta, Billie Holiday and Aretha Franklin, via Janis Joplin, influenced Robert Plant. Indeed, early reviews of Plant referred to him as 'the male Janis Joplin', raising the question of whether it is not Plant who is the authoritative look and sound of a (1970s) heavy metal vocalist, but Janis.<sup>10</sup>

These Black blues women can be considered as important to the evolution of metal as artists such as Chuck Berry, Muddy Waters and Screamin' Jay Hawkins. We should be mindful that histories of popular music have typically written out the contributions and influence of all but a few women and people of colour.<sup>11</sup> Such histories are never apolitical. They serve the ends of those who would seek to reinforce the white male hegemony of rock and metal, part of a tradition which saw Led Zeppelin famously attribute

authorship of songs written by Anne Bredon, Howlin' Wolf, Jake Holmes and Willie Dixon to themselves.

### Exclusion of Women from Music-Making

Despite the inclusion of a minority of women (for example, Maggie Bell of Stone the Crows), early heavy metal was regarded as a worryingly misogynistic genre, an extension of rock music. It came in for criticism from various feminist groups for articulating sexist and dangerous views about women. In the UK and USA, feminists set up their own alternatives to sexist rock in the form of Women's Liberation rock bands. These bands reclaimed rock music and took innovative approaches to their sounds, including, for example, using horn sections. Their lyrics were about things that were happening to them as women, such as too much bad sex with men. These innovative women's scenes did not really break into the mainstream or have much impact on metal; metal remained resolutely male-dominated and concerned with male issues as the New Wave of British Heavy Metal (NWOBHM) exploded in the late 1970s. But there was (and still is) Girlschool, the all-women NWOBHM band, who toured with Motörhead and released a joint single under the moniker 'Headgirl' (1980). However, for women, being in a rock band in the 1970s and 1980s was very challenging for a number of reasons.

Mavis Bayton's<sup>12</sup> interviews with rock musicians, including members of Girlschool, identified issues such as a lack of disposable income to purchase instruments, equipment or lessons, or difficulties accessing rehearsal spaces and transport. A lack of personal space and time were also barriers caused by expectations of increased domestic workload for young women. Furthermore, women's time and leisure activities were regulated by family members, boyfriends and husbands, problems compounded for the budding female metal musician due to sexist ideas about what kinds of music and instruments are suitable for women, and proscriptions on making *loud noises*. Not to mention the fact that men often did not want to play with women, that they did not value women's contributions, that they hogged equipment and networked with other men to the exclusion of women. This suggests the significant value of finding other women to play with, a situation that enabled Girlschool to sidestep some of the issues that arose in mixed-gender groups. On top of all that, the music industry was (and remains) full of gatekeepers with sexist attitudes about what sells, attitudes that push women down

particular musical routes, into the role of singer rather than instrumentalist, or which leave them out in the cold altogether. As Girlschool were told more recently when being turned down for a festival slot, 'Oh no, we've already got our female band'.<sup>13</sup> For women of colour, these constraints on music-making are compounded by racist sexual objectification and the idea that Black women should not play rock music.<sup>14</sup>

## The Myth of Equality

Some argue that things have improved for women in rock music<sup>15</sup> and that metal is somehow magically immune to the sexism present throughout most societies.<sup>16</sup> The presence of artists such as Tatiana Shmailyuk of Jinjer or Rob Halford of Judas Priest is often rolled out as an argument in favour of metal's equality and inclusivity. But the presence of exceptions does not prove the rule: as Pauwke Berkers and Julian Schaap's<sup>17</sup> analysis of the *Encyclopædia Metallum* shows, since the late 1970s, 97 per cent of metal musicians have been men, a figure which blows the 'myth of equality'<sup>18</sup> in metal out of the water. The 'myth of equality' is the persuasive idea that metal is a culture that sits outside of general societal problems such as sexism, racism, classism, ablism: all that matters is the music. If you like heavy metal, you are *in*, regardless of your gender, sexuality, race etc. (ignoring obvious exceptions such as National Socialist Black Metal here). Such a myth serves to reassure metalheads that they are already on the right team and that they do not have to do anything to challenge misogyny, racism, homophobia etc. However, this kind of magical thinking hinders feminist and anti-racist work and obstructs attempts to improve the conditions for making and enjoying metal. Speaking out means risking one's place with the 'in crowd' of metal.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, although there may be only a minority of women making metal, they do exist. And we might want to ask if they are represented adequately in the *Encyclopædia Metallum*: maybe there are more than the 3 per cent identified by Berkers and Schaap? We should ask questions of *Encyclopædia Metallum*'s criteria for inclusion when a very successful mainstream all-male metal band like Avenged Sevenfold are excluded. What are we to make of this exclusion? One answer to this may lie in the perception of the fans of metal, and in particular those bands or subgenres that have a predominantly female audience. Girls and women who love rock music are typically not taken seriously, perceived as girlfriends of male metal fans, only interested in sexual relationships with musicians rather than the music – the 'myth of the groupie'.<sup>20</sup> They are considered to be unable to move beyond

the dailiness of their lives in order to understand the transcendent qualities of the music.<sup>21</sup> These myths and discourses interact with broader societal sexism that besmirches the culture of girls and women. The result is that not only are the girls and women regarded as second-class fans, but the music they love is disparaged and excluded from the definition of 'metal'.<sup>22</sup> Thus, what 'counts' as metal is not just an entertaining conversation, but a serious political debate about gender and race, with serious implications.<sup>23</sup>

## Gendering Genre

As a genre, heavy metal has long been theorised as 'masculine' or even hypermasculine, as it has built on the existing gendering of rock music. Writing in 1978, Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie's feminist-informed article 'Rock and Sexuality' set the tone for discussions about heavy metal and hard rock. They examine what they call 'cock rock', as exemplified by Robert Plant, Phil Lynott, Mick Jagger, Roger Daltrey:

Cock rock performers are aggressive, dominating, and boastful, and they constantly seek to remind the audience of their prowess, their control. Their stance is obvious in live shows; male bodies on display, plunging shirts and tight trousers, a visual emphasis on chest hair and genitals.<sup>24</sup>

This characterisation continued in the 1980s when glam metal became a staple of MTV (although thrash and death metal bands sought to distance themselves from such imagery). The emphasis on lustful male heterosexuality was one of the reasons that heavy metal was the focus of a moral panic in the 1980s, led by the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC). The PMRC was founded by influential women whose husbands were US politicians. They were concerned that metal (and some other popular music) was a bad influence on children and that it encouraged them to take part in sexual behaviour, drinking, drug-taking, Satanism and violence, including sexual violence. W.A.S.P.'s 'Animal (F\*\*k Like A Beast)' (1984) and AC/DC's 'Let Me Put My Love Into You' (1980) were two of the 'Filthy Fifteen' songs particularly identified for censure. The PMRC sought to put labels on records to warn parents of the content of the lyrics and were successfully granted a Senate hearing in 1985. The PMRC have been widely traduced by the metal media, fans and even pro-metal academics,<sup>25</sup> to the point that the idea that the PMRC were entirely wrong and completely humourless has become an unquestioned orthodoxy. But in many ways the PMRC made a good point about the sexism

and sexual violence in heavy metal.<sup>26</sup> The moral panic funded a number of psychological studies to show the impact of metal, which concluded that listening to it did not encourage children to commit crimes.<sup>27</sup> But studies do not stretch to understanding the impact on girls and women listening to the music, how the sexual violence and oppressive relationships in a number of the songs may make them feel, nor how such themes may normalise sexual violence.<sup>28</sup>

## Queering Metal

Whilst these are important considerations, heavy metal is a broad church, and in its many subgenres can be found songs that do not glamourise sexual violence. Indeed mainstream rock and metal songs tend to be much less likely to depict 'degrading sex' than rap,<sup>29</sup> although the moral panic around rap has an additional nasty layer of racism.<sup>30</sup> Robert Walser argued that heavy metal tried to create a fantasy world where women were literally written out, or 'exscripted'.<sup>31</sup> This form of 'exscription', if it exists, is a different kind of musical sexism, but the contradiction between Walser's appraisal of heavy metal and that of the PMRC reveals that something more complex is going on with metal.

Sheila Whiteley<sup>32</sup> and Susan Fast<sup>33</sup> argue that heavy metal and rock are more complex in terms of their gender significations than Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie claim. Signifiers of long hair, high voices and makeup (especially in glam metal) challenge the idea that 'cock rock' is all about masculine performance. Amber Clifford-Napoleone<sup>34</sup> goes further, arguing that whilst previous work on metal has understood it as masculine and heterosexist, it is better understood as a many-layered scene in which different marginalised identities – including that of 'metal' – can be layered together. Within these layers, there is a space in which queerness exists through BDSM, leather and the style-setting fashions of Rob Halford, Susie Quatro and Joan Jett.

In a further upset of the gender binary, Arch Enemy's first female singer Angela Gossow sprang into the metal limelight in 2001 and shocked many metalheads by *being able to growl*. The growl is created by the vibration of the false folds above the larynx. It is low-pitched with a rough timbre. The shock was that a woman was physically capable of performing the growl, which was perceived to be too low for women's biology. But, since there is no sex difference in the way the false folds work, there is no difference in men's and women's ability to growl.

Instead, many gender conventions align to give growling the cultural ascription of 'masculine': low pitch, rough timbre, association with aggression (gendered masculine), and that men's use of the style is more well-known than women's.<sup>35</sup> Women have been growling in metal since the early 1990s, yet their vocals are still met with surprise and expressions of being 'very good for a chick', thus showing that in spite of positive evaluations by metal fans, the style itself is deeply gendered.<sup>36</sup>

Women making metal are more likely to be making symphonic or 'goth' metal than other subgenres.<sup>37</sup> In this subgenre, they are typically singers using an operatic style. We can celebrate the inclusion of more women making metal, but we should question how the over-representation in this genre, as opposed to other genres, relies on restrictive and racist ideals of white femininity. The 'female-fronted' or *metal à chanteuse* genre name, which is often applied to symphonic metal, is often accompanied by pejorative media coverage, and it treats the genre as homogenous.<sup>38</sup> The 'marking' of some bands by the gender of its members indicates that women making metal are seen as outsiders<sup>39</sup> – after all, Iron Maiden are never referred to as 'male-fronted metal' or as an all-male band.

## Empowerment for Women

Women metalheads *do* face sexism within the genre, for example, requirements that they 'prove' their fandom to men;<sup>40</sup> exclusion by male fans in group settings;<sup>41</sup> male-dominated concert spaces characterised by groping and sexual harassment from men; exclusion from mosh pits and stage diving. Yet, for all that, metal *can* provide an 'escape' from everyday oppressions outside metal<sup>42</sup> as well as alternative routes to self-presentation that do not rely on burdensome strictures of femininity.<sup>43</sup> And although metal is very often gendered as masculine, this is a problematic construction: the idea of gender itself is a social construction, and we should therefore be wary of reading gender onto music.<sup>44</sup> Taking a Butlerian approach, metal is not essentially masculine, but can rather be read more like drag in which masculinity is performed<sup>45</sup> without there being an original: the music itself is the reiteration or copy of previous performances of gendered music.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, metal supplies multitudinous pleasures for women metal fans: aural pleasures of enjoying the riffs and beats; visual pleasures of enjoying the spectacle of metal; erotic and romantic pleasures in watching musicians; enjoying the feel of the music in the body;<sup>47</sup> embodied experiences of gender

transgression in the mosh pit;<sup>48</sup> identities which do not rely on physical attractiveness.<sup>49</sup>

## **Metal as a Vehicle for Feminist Fury**

Indeed, during the 2010s and 2020s, a space within metal culture has arisen for feminist musicians to scream and growl their discontents at patriarchy. Anger is a staple emotion of heavy metal, and as women have increasingly become more exasperated with sexism, misogyny and male violence, metal's toolkit to convey fury looks increasingly attractive.<sup>50</sup> Not veering too far from metal's conventions, some bands such as *Castrator* sing violent revenge fantasies against rapist men through 'vigilante feminism'.<sup>51</sup> Such bands draw inspiration from riot grrrl and place their rage centre stage. For others, metal is seen as the perfect vehicle for exploring experiences of violence, such as the victim/survivor's experience of gendered-based violence in which the abused body of earlier metal portrayals screams back. Jasmine Shadrack<sup>52</sup> argues that black metal is the perfect vehicle for purging the trauma of domestic abuse, as the genre is a way to look at the darkness inside ourselves. Similarly, Kristin Hayter, aka noise/metal musician *Lingua Ignota*, argues that noise/metal is a good genre for representing the experience of trauma suffered in domestic abuse.<sup>53</sup> There is a white privilege in being able to employ anger, however, because stereotypes of Black women as inherently angry make rage an unwieldy weapon for them. Nevertheless, Black women are making angry metal<sup>54</sup> and drawing on African heritage in the same ways that Nordic black metal might draw on Viking heritage and archaeological instruments. For example, *Vodun* (UK) use feminist lyrical themes related to Vodun religion and Afrobeats to create heavy Afro doom metal.

This exciting new movement, however, does not yet have the inter-band organisation of riot grrrl, the feminist punk movement that begun in Olympia, USA, in the early 1990s. Riot grrrl was successful because of the centrality of feminist solidarity and practical support systems.<sup>55</sup> Feminist metal has a little way to go before becoming a movement that extends beyond Western countries, although feminist solidarity in metal has the potential to raise consciousnesses and create empathy for survivors of gender-based violence.<sup>56</sup> That said, the internet and social media are facilitating new ways of being involved in metal, enabling women who previously lacked access to musical networks to get feedback on their music<sup>57</sup> and to come together to write and perform in women-only groups. The *Chaos Rising* collective is one such example, drawing in musicians from Europe, Iran and South America.



Chaos Rising release a song a month, written and performed by any members of the collective, rather than being an unchanging unit of band members. The members highlight their different kinds of experiences and the need to be respectful of these differences, rather than locating their commonality in essential characteristics.<sup>58</sup> The collective is not an overtly feminist collective, but a space where women can come together to make music without some of the tensions and discriminations that they sometimes experience in working with men.

## Conclusion

Metal is a genre that is often *thought* to be inclusive, but it exists in a sexist world, and so sexism is written into the genre. In many ways, the sexism within metal are the same as in other genres (for example, the barriers to music-making), but the extreme masculinity of some subgenres presents additional challenges (for example, viciously misogynistic lyrics). Such misogyny has profound effects on women's participation. And yet metal provides much for its female fans and musicians to get excited about. The new trends towards collectivity and feminist themes, alongside greater recognition for women like Jinx Dawson, provide an opportunity for metal culture to shift towards a more feminist consciousness, to work towards really being inclusive.

## Notes

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