

13 | Metal as Leisure Space and Tourism Industry Destination

KARL SPRACKLEN

For 23 hours, the red-white ferry will be at the mercy of dark, or even diabolical, forces! Heavy metal energises the darkest time of the year – and the floating stage will give you both an excellent sound and the chance to relax: after all, this is not a music festival with tents and beer fences, but a cruise ferry with everything from a spa and sauna to exquisite food.¹

The tropical cruise was once the quintessential getaway of the elderly retiree – a relaxing voyage through sun-soaked climes augmented by the soothing sounds of the open ocean. Not any more. Come Sunday evening, the vast expanse of the Caribbean Sea will echo to the altogether more riotous noise of ‘Shiprocked’, a heavy metal festival aboard the giant Norwegian Pearl cruise ship. Setting sail from the port of Miami, Florida, the floating concert will alight in Great Stirrup Cay in the Bahamas five days later. Pina coladas by the pool and tranquil ocean sunsets from the cabin balcony this raucous event is not . . . According to ‘Shiprocked’ owner Alan Koenig the event will be ‘the ultimate hard rock festival at sea’.²

Consider what these pieces of marketing and reporting tell us about metal and its place in today’s global society. *Viking Line* (who published the first quote), a great name for a tourist corporation operating in northern Europe, is trying to get metal fans on board a metal holiday cruise with them. They target metal fans with a reference to ‘diabolical forces’ that will endanger the cruiser ferry. But they know that the marketing will work because metal and metal holiday cruises are an acceptable part of the tourism and leisure industry. The report from the CNN website (the second quote) is an older piece that is making fun of the idea that metal fans – headbangers who drink beer – would ever be found on a cruise ship sipping cocktails and soaking up the sun. As the reporter tells us, cruises typically have attracted older people, wealthy retirees spending their pension money.³ Now, of course, an entirely new cohort of music fans have been attracted to festivals taking place on cruise ships, not metal and rock fans but fans of every possible subgenre, who want the fun of a festival with the pleasure of sailing around in circles for a few days.⁴

In this chapter, metal as a space for leisure and tourism will be explored. I will first discuss how metal is leisure, for musicians and for fans, by exploring the meaning and purpose of leisure and leisure's relation to modern society. I will look at how metal is a part of the wider entertainment industry, and how that industry is best defined as commodified popular culture. Finally, I will discuss three specific forms of tourism and leisure industries that align with metal: tours, festivals, and the recent growth of metal holiday cruises.

Leisure and Metal

First, what do we mean by leisure spaces and leisure activities? Both are taken to be things we do in our free time, of our own free will, when we are not compelled to be in other spaces and doing other activities that are forced upon us.⁵ That is, leisure activities are things that are not work activities: work, then, is the thing we have to do in workspaces. When we were hunter-gatherers, we worked to hunt and gather food. But we also worked to construct weapons, prepare and cook food, and look after our children. Our leisure was the free time we had (if we had any at all) to tell each other stories, sing and play music, or draw on the walls of our cave.⁶ Of course, the reality of any culture is that work and leisure activities and spaces can be and are blurred. The hunter-gatherers in our past almost certainly chatted to each other when they were out finding food. And at night, the chores of work and the activities of free leisure often merged. But the idea that leisure is the thing we do when we are fed up with the work that pays our bills is still meaningful today. Being a metal fan is a leisure choice.⁷ We put on a record or watch a video, and we are hooked, and this becomes our leisure identity as metal music and metal culture enrich our free time. Being a metal musician is also a free choice: metal musicians feel the urge to be creative because this is the music they love and feel gives them meaning and purpose.

In the preceding paragraph, we jumped back in time to a period before historical records began, then came right back to this century. It is necessary to do some more historical reflection, as it allows us to make sense of how leisure today has become constrained.⁸ In the Classical Age, the time of the Greeks and the Romans, work was something done by the lower classes, women and slaves. In Greece, elite men like the philosopher Plato spent their leisure time doing physical activity, writing and speaking to their fellows, and playing music. They nurtured an ideal of a leisured life but on the blood and sweat of the toil of others. In Rome, this ideal of what

elite men did was adopted, but the Romans had a society in which significant numbers of lower-class men were free and had some influence in politics. That meant elite Romans had to create entertainment for the lower classes: chariot-racing, gladiatorial combat and other spectacles in the theatres. These were the first examples we have of what became the sports and entertainment of the wider leisure industry.

Fast-forward to the start of the modern age, the period known by historians as modernity. In the nineteenth century, the United Kingdom became one of the most powerful of the imperial powers of Western Europe, but the rest of the West was outcompeting the rest of the world as well. This was because the West had new technologies such as steam engines and the new sciences of physics and chemistry that underpinned the Industrial Revolution.⁹ The West had capitalism, liberalism and had seen a shift from rural to urban economies. For the rulers of the British Empire, the lessons of Classical Age were close to their hearts: they all learned Latin and Greek in the British public schools such as Eton. They believed in the Greek ideal of the healthy body and the healthy mind. They also saw the importance of bread and circuses: keeping the lower classes from rioting and rising up by giving them things to consume and things to distract them. It was no surprise, then, that in the second half of the nineteenth century, modern sports such as athletics and football emerged.¹⁰ For elite men taking part in these sports, playing the game taught them to serve the Empire. But many of these sports quickly became entertainment, with paying spectators becoming hardcore fans in football clubs around the world wherever British imperial or commercial interests spread.¹¹

Western society, at this point in time, became a site where technology and urbanisation and the interests of elites constructed the form of consumer capitalism we see today.¹² Because there were more workers who were well-off, and men and women with free time, industries emerged that targeted them: pre-prepared food and domestic appliances; restaurants; public houses; tourism facilitated by trains and steamships; and music halls.¹³ Some of the elites in Britain loathed these attractions and bewailed the poor leisure choices of the working classes. Drinking alcohol in pubs was seen by many as a moral danger as well as a danger to the health of British workers. But others – the owners of breweries, for instance – defended pubs as places where hard-working men could quench their thirst.

Finally, modernity was where the divide between classical music and popular music was formalised and used as a way of controlling the meaning of culture. Popular music was at first dismissed by the elites as something simple-minded for the lower classes but increasingly co-opted by governments in the West as a means of stopping the urban working classes from

taking part in morally bad leisure and politically bad activism.¹⁴ From the music halls to the invention of recorded music and radio, popular music like sports such as football soon became a leisure form shaped by mass spectatorship. Popular music became a leisure space that was used as both a site of control and a site of resistance. Metal music has emerged from rock music, itself a form of popular music. Rock'n'roll offered young people a sense of belonging, of being different from their parents and rebelling against them. Rock music in the nineteen-sixties soon offered fans a chance to be a part of an alternative counterculture. And metal, like rock, has been created as alternative leisure space that stands against the mainstream of popular music and popular culture.

Metal has been unfashionable, situated in the margins of society and its culture, and its rules have been leisure spaces that are characterised as underground. Many metal fans spend much of their free time debating genres online, collecting vinyl and seeking out the most obscure black metal. Many metal fans revel in metal's rebel, evil, Satanic stereotypes, believing that metal is the only form of popular music that resists mainstream trends.¹⁵ Metal fans and musicians believe they have found metal through their own free leisure choices. Metal is what we might call a *communicative leisure* choice, something found freely and entered into through our own will.¹⁶ Metal is not the clever choice that makes a musician money, or the one entered into because one wants to be best friends with the men in Darkthrone t-shirts. Metal is not imposed on its fans and musicians by government legislation or by the government putting adverts for metal in newspapers. Metal is not sold to its fans through the round of popular music competitions on television, or through the ubiquitous social media influencers. Nonetheless, it is not wholly true to say that leisure choices made by metal fans, or the creative choices made by metal musicians, are completely free. This is because metal is part of the entertainment industry.

Metal as a Part of the Entertainment Industry

The entertainment industry is a product of modern capitalism and the successive industrial and scientific revolutions we are all still living through. The German critical theorist Theodor W. Adorno was the first person to attempt to understand its purpose, though he called it the culture industry.¹⁷ For Adorno, modern sports and popular music in the first half of the twentieth century were intertwined with the media (at the time, newspapers, radio and films) to keep the masses believing they were free when actually

they were being controlled by governments and corporations. This was hegemonic power, as Antonio Gramsci identified occurring in Fascist Italy: the working classes were fed lies in the media and sold products and fantasy stories, and were fooled into thinking the Fascists were working on their behalf.¹⁸ People did not give away their freedom, they were distracted by the magician's sleight of hand and did not even notice they lost their freedoms. There is no doubt that totalitarian states manipulated the culture industry and used it to maintain power and keep their rivals and internal enemies in check. But Adorno saw the instrumental logic of the culture industry in totalitarian states operating to a lesser degree in liberal democracies in the West, such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Adorno loathed all forms of culture and leisure that were commodified, bought and sold to consumers by capitalists. He hated the rise of three-minute popular music played on radio and would have hated Instagram and TikTok if he had lived in our times for their reductive, artificial, inauthentic culture.

The culture industry grew into what we now know as the entertainment industry.¹⁹ At its greatest extent, the industry covers the following forms of modern leisure and culture: music, music-making and music audiences; dance; theatre; performance arts; comedy; books; magazines and newspapers; spectator sports; television; digital leisure; social media; active recreation; drinking and eating out (hospitality); and some elements of active recreation and tourism. The entertainment industry is one where millions of people around the world work full-time as professionals, with millions more working part-time or unpaid. Many of the people who work are paid poorly, whether they are musicians struggling with streaming contracts or delivery drivers carrying fast food. The entertainment industry's workers are generally making things that are consumed by others in their leisure time: the 12-inch pepperoni pizza is exactly the same as the black metal vinyl; it is all a product that meets someone else's leisure needs. It is all a product that is part of a capitalist exchange that has transformed what we think of as our leisure choices.

Imagine a slightly different modern society and its popular culture. This is a thought experiment, and what follows never happened. In this alternative Earth, modernity emerges exactly like it does, and the United Kingdom is replaced by the United States of America as the political power that shapes the twentieth century. Instead of jazz, African Americans create *coastarama*, dance music played on North African tribal drums inflected with English sea shanties. Coastarama spreads around the world as a form of popular music and creates variant subgenres green, blue and pink.

Coastarama pink is adopted as the music of the middle-class counterculture in the sixties, then coastarama pink-brown becomes a darker version of coastarama pink. This music becomes popular among young, white, working-class men in the seventies and eighties, and was subsequently sold to them by the entertainment industry. There is no doubt that if this form of popular music actually existed, music fans and musicians around the world would believe that they had found coastarama pink-brown by their own free will. They would argue about who was an authentic coastarama pink-browner, who was a sell-out, who was a fashion victim, who was evil, who was underground. Coastarama would saturate every aspect of our lives, and its variants would be the subject of books, films, websites, blogs, television programmes and podcasts. Leaders of nations would be interviewed expressing their love of coastarama pink bands. Fans would be able to buy everything coastarama, spending billions of dollars every year on coastarama pink products. Transnational corporations would invest in coastarama pink festivals, tours and bands. These corporations would own recording studios, radio stations, television stations and websites, ensuring they had an economic stake in every part of the mechanical processes of the industry. Governments would be happy that their citizens were too busy arguing the merits of coastarama green (or blue or pink or pink-brown) to notice their rights were being eroded in successive waves of rationalising legislation.

Metal, then, is completely gripped in the talons of the entertainment industry. It has its own independent labels that operate as supposedly authentic voices of an underground subculture. It has bigger labels like Nuclear Blast or Earache that operate like the big transnational corporations that control mainstream popular music. And, increasingly, those large independent labels are being controlled or taken over by the transnationals. Metal music is constructed according to the templates and restrictions of popular music, using electric instruments and using recording studios to create products to sell. Metal music is sold to fans as a form of resistance and rebellion, but the labels and managers who control the bands are just replicating the business models of the wider popular music industry.²⁰ Metal is about albums, not singles, but that is the same as rock music, or indie music, or folk music. And metal bands rely on music that is catchy enough – or kult enough – to make some impact as musicians. Of course, the advent of illegal downloads and legal streaming means it is difficult for any bands or musicians to make enough money from metal to turn their leisure activity into a work one. Once upon a time, bands quit their jobs or left school to try to become the next Manowar or Iron Maiden. In those

days, managers and labels could make huge amounts of money from the labour of their bands, but the bands themselves could live off their earnings, too. Now, though, it is almost impossible for metal musicians to become full-time professionals – they have to keep other jobs and limit the metal music-making to times when they are free. But that does not mean metal is rejecting the norms of the entertainment industry. Musicians still want their songs to be heard and still conform to those norms. Musicians make demos and send them to labels, seeking contracts. They seek out the music press, the magazines and fanzines that remain important arbiters of taste, hoping that someone in the media will endorse them. Musicians seek out managers, producers, booking agents, accountants and stylists. They use social media and the internet to reach out directly to fans, using what is currently fashionable in that virtual space to carve a metal niche that sell their music.²¹ Musicians or their partners become adept at sourcing and selling their merchandise: knowing who can offer cheap rates for bulk purchase of black t-shirts; finding companies that print designs; setting up as limited companies to make sure every padded envelope is tax-deductible. Bands that build up a fanbase can get bigger deals for their merchandise or may choose to license their logo and imagery to companies that have money to advertise online and in metal magazines. Finally, metal remains part of the entertainment industry in the way it has adopted the model of selling the product through playing live.

Metal Tours, Festivals and Holiday Cruises

For metal fans, there is nothing more authentic than listening to their favourite bands live. The live performance is at the heart of the relationship between musician and fan, and that relationship is based on authenticity. Metal fans want to prove to each other that they are true fans, so they attend gigs, enter the mosh-pit, raise their horns and buy the tour t-shirt. Metal fans tell each other about the bands they have seen, and they boast about seeing bands live when they talk to each other, to show how metal they are: 'So, you saw Iron Maiden in 1985? I saw them down the pub in 1979'. Live albums and video recordings – and the infinite database that is the internet – allow fans who are unable to get to attend the gigs (or are too young, or in the wrong half of the world). Tours allow true fans to see the same band play the same set-list at different venues up and down a country. Some bands have huge, dedicated followings who meet each other when these tours happen, fans who take holidays to tour with their band. For metalheads,

being a casual listener or consumer of metal is not enough. You must *love* the band and the music that you dedicate your holidays to and your free leisure time to: catching the bands live – or talking about tours. Watching bands play live is also important in metal because one of the founding ideologies is: metal is real music, played by real musicians. Popular and rock music has an infamous secret history of inauthenticity. In the sixties and seventies, many hit singles were constructed from the talent of session musicians, people not listed on the backs of the actual singles. Even pop singers would get a lot of help and were sometimes replaced altogether by someone who could sing perfectly. By the eighties, many popular music singles and albums were completely constructed from samples and artificial drums, guitars and pianos. Metal fans are fearful of fakery, so watching bands play live is a way of reassuring themselves that they are not being sold something artificial. Of course, metal bands are just as happy as pop artists to find ways of making recorded productions and live music as easy as possible. But they know their role in this part of the industry: they must try to perform as truly as possible, but as close to the album recordings as they can, even if that means a bit of fakery around the edges.

Bands tour because this is how the entertainment industry has evolved. Metal bands are like the rock bands of the sixties and seventies. They make albums, then they tour those albums. Early in their careers, many bands play support slots and do not make any money from the privilege of supporting an established band (sometimes support bands have to pay and lose money on the deal). Promoters want to ensure that they sell out the entire tour. Managers and accountants of the headline bands want to see better returns on merchandise in each new region the tour heads through. Before the internet allowed people to share music illegally, albums were the most important part of a band's portfolio, and tours were viewed as the way to sell albums: metal fans hooked in the eighties and nineties would buy the whole back catalogue if they could. Since the internet made music fans reluctant to buy the music they loved, the entertainment industry changed the way it made its money.²² Now, the album was a new product that the bands had to play live to their fans who would not buy the album – but they would go to see their favourite metal bands play live. Touring, then, became the way already successful bands made money for themselves and their labels and managers and shareholders.²³ Touring is still a lucrative route for metal bands, as metal fans are still happy to buy tickets to see their favourite bands, to buy the merchandise and even the new album on shiny new vinyl. Touring, however, has become harder, as bands and labels make less and less

money, and established suppliers and venues reduce around the world. For many metal bands who are not signed to a big or at least respected label, or who have just established their own label, there is still the problem that becoming a full-time professional is difficult, especially in the age of streaming.²⁴ So these bands are unable to tour extensively, tap into new markets and create media exposure because they do not have the leisure time or space. Metal musicians working as delivery drivers and raising children cannot easily abandon those commitments to go support Mastodon around South America.

Festivals have become the main space in the entertainment industry for metal bands and metal fans to reach out and find each other. Music festivals were first established for classical music – but in the post-war period, promoters and labels saw an opportunity to use the festival model for jazz, blues and popular music.²⁵ Festivals allow a number of bands and artists to appear one after the other in the same place. In the sixties, Woodstock demonstrated that huge numbers of popular music fans could be encouraged to pay for tickets for such events if the range of acts on the bill was sufficiently diverse. Woodstock also showed that festivals needed proper security and support facilities. In the seventies and eighties, Glastonbury and others such as Pinkpop developed the model of the modern music festival, balancing the commodification of the event (the food stalls, the toilets, the fields for tents, the big fences, the showers, the marketplaces) with the desire of the fans to catch the acts they loved.²⁶ Metal music, as it matured, developed its own dedicated music festivals, or became dominant in pre-existing music festivals. Wacken is probably the most famous metal music festival, though there are now metal music festivals in every part of the world. Metal festivals now have multiple stages, so fans can drift from one performance to the other. Some stages may be dedicated to extreme metal or to unsigned or local bands. Metal festivals offer VIP camping or hotel packages. They offer signing tents, beer tents and stalls selling everything a metalhead might need: burgers, chips, albums, tattoos, piercings, t-shirts. Again, metal festivals are exactly like any other modern music festival. They are sold as events, spaces to get away and get stoned, to live a liminal experience, like a pilgrim. But these liminal spaces are part of the entertainment industry and have been ever since free festivals and mass invasions of paying festivals disappeared. Instead of peace and love, there are things to buy, purchased from the businesses and corporations making huge amounts of money. Even where festivals are run by people with progressive politics, or for charity, the entertainment industry is never far away, making a profit from running ticket sales or catering or security.²⁷

Metal festivals allow metal bands to play in front of fans without the need for extensive touring. Headliners can make more money from festivals than from playing multiple arenas, as festival owners know fans of the headline bands will always pay for a festival ticket even if they do not watch any band other than the one of which they are a fan. Multiple nights allow multiple headlines, so more tickets can be sold at a higher price. For bands halfway down the bill, there is not so much money as the headliners, but the fees are enough to make these bands happy and reluctant to lose money touring more extensively. Again, a carefully cultivated line-up means more dedicated fans are buying tickets just to see a band that may never come to this country again. For the bands at the bottom of the bill, there is often only the offer of a free pitch for their tents, or even a demand for money – these bands are living the dream, and festivals know there are other bands keen to share the bill if and when these bands give up.

Festivals invite fans to meet other fans and listen to their favourite bands in idyllic fields.²⁸ They offer fans the idea of living in a tent by a stream, or a hedgerow, or a tree, watching the sun rise. Of course, real festivals are horrible spaces, filled with other people's rubbish and excrement. Rain and wind make many festivals a nightmare of slipping knee-deep in mud and flash floods. It is no surprise, then, that some promoters developed the idea of music cruises. The cruise industry had grown at the end of the twentieth century as more and more middle-class people in the West retired early with comfortable pensions. Cruise holidays allowed these people to imagine they were authentic travellers, visiting islands in the Caribbean and the Mediterranean, but having the luxury of the all-inclusive hotel in a beach-side resort.²⁹ Cruises also became a way for these people to travel to places beyond the seaside resorts, to Norway or the Baltics. Cruises allowed these people to claim a higher status than the working classes who flocked to the beach resorts in Spain and Mexico. Then some of the people who normally went to those resorts all started going on cruises as well, and the cruise industry expanded even more. This meant music fans, musicians and promoters were already going on cruises and enjoying the buffets and the bars and the spas. Meanwhile, the cruise industry itself was looking at ways to maximise its profits and the return on its capital investments: the enormous cruise liners packed with fun and luxury plumbing. The worsening economic climate in the second decade of this century and the fall in the number of people with secure pension schemes meant that the industry had to find new customers.

It was not long before the first music cruises emerged as small events using spare cruise liners.³⁰ Metal promoters followed their rock and prog equivalents

and realised cruises were a perfect, safe environment for festival-style events. Cruise-liner owners saw metal fans as being well-behaved, high-spending consumers who could become future cruise-liner regulars. Onboard ship, the fans can mix with the bands, but the bands can also get luxury cabins. Onboard ship, fans can drink all day, eat all day, soak up the sun and mosh on a floor that is not a swamp. For the bands, the same benefits and problems occur on a cruise liner as they do at a festival. But at least the problems of being low on the bill on a cruise liner is you get to be on holiday in a sunny part of the world for a few days – and you might get the chance to make new fans and sell them your new merch.

Conclusion

Metal is inextricably part of the entertainment industry. No metal fan or musician has come to metal of their own free choice. All forms of popular culture are inherited by the people who live in them. But metal still gives meaning to people's leisure lives and allows musicians to make the music they love, and for fans to be moved by that music. All leisure is constrained, but metal is less constrained than mainstream pop music, say, because it remains unfashionable to critics and uncool to trendsetters. Metal, therefore, provides a communicative leisure space in which fans and musicians can find meaning, belonging and solidarity. Musicians make the music because it gives them satisfaction and status in metal culture, and many do it in their free time alongside other things that pay their bills. Until metal becomes trendy, it retains some potential as a leisure form that resists conformity, commercialisation and control. Metal's uncompromising riffs and unfashionable themes still make it more likely to be a space for resistance rather than a way for the entertainment industry to maximise profits.

Notes

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