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**Rock 'n' Roll Ain't Noise Pollution:
Artistic Conventions and Tensions
in the Major Subgenres of Heavy Metal Music**

**Bruce K. Friesen
Jonathon S. Epstein**

Despite its almost universal condemnation by music critics and cultural watchdog groups, heavy metal has become one of the most predominant and important genres of popular music in the 1990s. Once considered solely the musical province of undereducated and alienated working class youth, metal has entered the mainstream music market and has, in fact, dominated the popular music charts for the past half decade. It has been reported, for example, that over 20 percent of the artists in *Rolling Stone* magazine's top-50 album charts for the year 1989 could be considered heavy metal (Epstein and Pratto).

For the most part sociologists who have examined heavy metal have done so from the point of view of the effects of the music on its fans (cf: Epstein and Pratto; Epstein; Epstein, Pratto and Skipper; Binder; Rosenbaum and Prinsky) or the subcultural activity surrounding the consumption and dissemination of the music (Friesen; Weinstein; Kotarba). To date there has been little attention paid to heavy metal as a musical form *as such*. Heavy metal, like all other musical forms, is in a large part a result of specific, socially constructed definitions which serve to delineate what heavy metal is and, conversely, what it is not. These definitions become the conventions of heavy metal as a genre by virtue of the constraints they impart on the production of the music itself. While these conventions are tacitly understood by both the musicians who produce the music and their audience, they have not been explicated in the sociological literature on heavy metal. This essay will attempt to address this lacuna by focusing specifically on the social construction of the aesthetics of heavy metal as an art form.

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Heavy Metal as Art World

In an effort to delineate the dynamics inherent in the production of heavy metal, we will draw upon the ideas expressed by Becker in his book *Art Worlds*. Becker focuses on art worlds by recognizing that "All artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people" (1). He further qualifies his focus by adding, "It is *not* an approach that produces aesthetic judgments, although that is a task many sociologists of art have set for themselves. It produces, instead, an understanding of the complexity of the cooperative networks through which art happens..." (1, emphasis ours).

The selection of Becker's perspective might be mistakenly seen as problematic, since Becker attempts to focus on the social rather than technical activity that surrounds the production and dissemination of art. Yet Becker repeatedly refers to aesthetical criteria in the production of art, particularly in reference to his concept of "conventions." While Becker sees conventions as "dictating the form in which materials and abstractions will be combined" (29), he further suggests that:

Humanistic scholars—art historians, musicologists, and literary critics—have found the concept of the artistic convention useful in explaining artists' ability to make art works which evoke an emotional response in audiences. By using such a conventional organization of tones as a scale, composers can create and manipulate listeners' expectations as to what sounds will follow. They can then delay and frustrate the satisfaction of those expectations, generating tension and release as the expectation is ultimately satisfied. Only because artist and audience share knowledge of an experience with the conventions invoked does the art work produce an emotional effect. (29-30)

It is the understood aesthetics of the music which allow the audience to become involved in the existential experience of tension and release.

This essay is also an attempt to deliberately offset what the authors perceive to be a consistent bias on the part of sociologists to examine various facets of music cultural activity while simultaneously ignoring the focal point of all activity: the music itself. Almost 20 years ago Denisoff argued that sociological content analyses tend likewise to ignore contextual factors surrounding the creation of lyrics while focusing on the lyrics alone (Denisoff 458). Since then, more sociologists have examined social processes organized around the music, but

still relatively few make attempt at unraveling the social nature of the music itself; of understanding how knowledgeable audiences experience existential feelings of tension and release while listening to music. Part of the reason for this lack of focus might be that this type of analysis is more frequently associated with the field of musicology than sociology, but the social dynamics inherent in the development and acceptance of musical aesthetics suggests that a sociological approach can also be beneficial. Schiano's analysis of the Beatles' lyrics and music is exemplary here.

The study of aesthetical conventions, then, is a sociological question. It involves the identification of regularities, patterns, and innovations which make up the unique characteristics of each style of music. Becker further suggests that "People who grew up in a completely different musical tradition might not understand the question [of predicting patterns in music], and would not know the answer if they did, never having learned the conventions necessary for the problem's solution" (41-42).

Following from Becker's assertion, a description of an ideal type of heavy metal is first attempted in this essay. While the standardization and general acceptance of "conventional" aesthetics typifies the maturation process of most new musical genres, equally important is the "creative" convention to which each artist or band aspires: to make a unique contribution to the genre as a whole. New subgenres may then emerge over time if other artists begin using the new aesthetic and if there is some support for the new style. Following an ideal-typical description of heavy metal aesthetics, then, a description of each new form will follow. Today, budding artists must sooner or later choose which subgenre to work in, often to the exclusion of others.

Musical Differentiation

Heavy metal music is distinguishable from other forms of rock music by its reliance on heavily distorted electric-guitar-based minor key song structures and the absence of the use of keyboards. Heavy metal is extremely loud, relatively simplistic, and generally associated with the alleged delinquent, or worse, behavior of its fans. Historically, heavy metal as a form (in the Simmelian sense) of rock music can be traced from the psychedelic bands, generally British, of the 1960s; notably Cream, the Jimi Hendrix Experience, and Black Sabbath. It is Black

Sabbath in particular that serves as the ideal typical heavy metal band and that provides the general musical scheme that all heavy metal is ultimately compared with (Epstein et al.). Weinstein (21) refers to this as the "sonic dimension" of the "heavy metal code."

Central to the production of heavy metal is a strong, relatively stable rhythm which continues throughout a song. Unlike more mainstream forms of music, which center primarily on either vocals or melody, emphasis in heavy metal is placed on the actual rhythm, or "beat" of the music. This occurs by either accentuating the more regularized "on" beats (beats 1 and 3 in a 4/4 signature) or the "off" beats (beats 2 and 4 in 4/4 time). This focus on a song's rhythm creates a strong emphasis on drumming in heavy metal, and the genre has spawned a number of modern music's "great" drummers, particularly the late John Bonham and Rush's Neil Peart.

Heavy metal accentuates, and makes an explicit part of the overall song structure, the rhythmic pattern of the music which remains more implicit in other styles. This emphasis on rhythm has been a central feature in the criticism of heavy metal by the genre's detractors, who claim that the rhythm of the music as such contributes to the negative effect of this music on the young. What these detractors share is the assumption that it is the beat, or rhythmic intensity, of the music itself which subverts innocent listeners into doing things they would not normally do (Larson 66).

Indeed, part of the initial moral outrage against rock music and heavy metal came from the violation of what had been until that time a normative feature of musical aesthetics: implicit rather than explicit rhythm (Friesen, "Labelling"). While the bass and snare drum simultaneously emphasize the predominant and subliminal beats, other instruments (most notably the rhythm guitar) produce most of the syncopation in the music. According to music therapists and others, this emphasized syncopated beat can frustrate or interrupt otherwise regular beating patterns of the human body, thus producing a mild state of euphoria or excitement (Farnsworth, "Changes" and *Social*; Berlyne).

In an effort to accentuate the lower end "punch" of songs, the playing of the bass guitar and bass drum often occur simultaneously. In more recent years, the increased use of double-bass drums has increased the intensity of the music. In these situations, bassists will continue to emphasize on beats, but in half or quarter time to the beat of the bass

drums. For example, the bassists will often play a derivative of eighth notes as the double-bass drums play 16th notes. Regardless, the net effect of bass drum and bass guitar is to provide a characteristic "lower end grunt" or kick to most heavy metal songs.

Perhaps the most obvious convention in heavy metal music is the use of the electric guitar. As noted above, heavy metal is primarily a guitar-based musical genre. All heavy metal music uses the guitar as the focal instrument. The guitar, in heavy metal, is used in three key ways: as a rhythm instrument (technically, the guitar is a percussion instrument), as a solo instrument (often referred to as playing "lead guitar," a misnomer in that heavy metal guitar solos generally follow, and therefore do not "lead," the songs overall rhythmic underpinnings), and to provide chordal structure to the music (referred to as playing "rhythm guitar").

Many heavy metal bands divide the three guitar functions between two guitars/guitarists. On the one hand, the rhythm guitarist is responsible for playing the basic chord progressions of the music. Because each strum or pick of the strings also represents a beat or rhythm, rhythm guitarists also provide what the name implies—a rhythm. However, because the basic rhythmic structure of the music is provided by the drummer, the rhythm guitarist often provides a distinct but complimentary rhythmic structure to the music. This second structure is almost always syncopated, and often consists of a repeated abbreviated musical "theme" or "riff." The rhythm guitar typically occupies a place in the background, but adds to the complexity of the music.

Contrasted to the rhythm guitar is the lead guitarist. Because of the development of the lead solo convention, lead guitarists typically occupy the limelight and draw at least as much attention as vocalists. Goertzel (91) has commented: "Today's rock guitar solos tend to be unoriginal and perfunctory; and the most innovative guitar soloing is taking place in jazz and heavy metal music, outside the context of mainstream rock." One such example of mistaken importance was the breakup of the original Van Halen lineup. Vocalist David Lee Roth left the band to pursue even greater ventures on a solo career. However, the musical virtuosity of lead guitarist Eddie Van Halen, coupled with the addition of the popular heavy metal vocalist Sammy Hagar, allowed Van Halen to increase in popularity despite the change in vocalist. Original vocalist

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Roth has so far not achieved the same level of popularity as his original band, with the possible exception of his critically acclaimed first solo album *Eat 'em and Smile*. The success of the album was due, at least in part, to Roth's choice of heavy metal guitar virtuoso Steve Vai as his guitarist.

While most heavy metal bands use two guitars to separate these functions, the existence of power trios (e.g., now defunct Triumph, Rush, King's X) is also a typical feature of heavy metal style bands. Here, the guitarist performs all three functions of rhythm, chording, and solos. While for the recording of music this presents little problem, given the availability of multitrack recording and real-time sequencing, it can present problems during live performance where the audience will often judge the quality of the performance by how closely the band's sound resembles its recorded work. In such cases the musicians will generally attempt to recreate the recorded music as closely as possible by either using prerecorded tapes of the parts which they can not recreate or by attempting to fill in by expanding the musical responsibilities of the bass player to include the rhythm guitar section.

The guitar solo, often mistakenly referred to as the "lead," is widely considered the ultimate musical expression of heavy metal music. Lead solos often occur well into the song. For example, in a typically structured pop metal song, a verse-chorus-verse-chorus pattern is interrupted by a bridge in which the solo serves as a musical climax. Following the solo, the heavy metal song frequently returns either into the chorus-verse format or resolves into a vamp until the songs end. It has been frequently noted in guitar oriented publications (cf; *Guitar Player* or *Guitar for the Practicing Musician*) that the guitar solo epitomizes the essence of heavy metal: a controlled chaos; an emotional peak brought about by the virtuosity of the artist (Goertzel 91). Its primary emphasis lies not in the words sung but in the musical experience itself.

The final component of heavy metal music is the vocalist. Again, as in many other types of music, heavy metal vocalists carry the melody line of the song. In pop-metal tunes the vocals are sung at typically high ranges, while the voice is lower in grunge metal bands and lower still in most thrash metal bands. Growls, grunts, yells, and appeals to become involved in listening ("Come on!" "Let's rock!") are typical. In heavy metal, the voice is used as another instrument. No other instrument

carries the melody line, perhaps with the exception of the lead guitar solo, which may (or may not) repeat the melody theme only after the vocalist has stopped singing. Harmonies are not common with the exception of more popularized versions of heavy metal. While the function of the vocals is unique, they may be replaced in instrumental songs by the lead guitar.

Aesthetical Conventions in Heavy Metal

While the preceding discussion has emphasized the function of each individual contribution to heavy metal music, it is clear that these instruments are interdependent. As Bennett notes, young inductees into popular music playing soon find out that their instrument is not a solo instrument. Each contribution is needed in order to create a coherent and full sound. This is in part what makes rock music unique. The minimum number of instruments and musicians are assembled in order to make music that moves people. For this reason rock music has been called somewhat simplistic or rudimentary. But the heavy metal experience cannot be isolated; it is a collective effort on the part of several musicians working together for a distinct sound. One musician cannot produce live heavy metal music.

Heavy metal borrowed an additional important convention from the rock music movement which preceded it: an emphasis on music over and above the lyrics. For those not familiar with such conventions, a frequent criticism is "you cannot hear the words," which is, of course, precisely the point. The emphasis in heavy metal music production is on the enjoyment listeners get from the music itself; the physiological response of frustrated body rhythms, the process of tension and release, and the anticipation of such pleasure. Increased volume serves only to heighten this experience. What might be seen as the essence of irony to outsiders is the dual presence of bands of very different philosophical persuasions. Stryper, for example, an explicitly evangelical Christian group with lyrics that support such a belief system, opened for bands such as Anthrax on tour. To insiders, however, this is most plausible. "What counts" said one insider (in reference to Stryper) "is that they can thrash it out" (Friesen, "Labelling"). The frequent inclusion of solely instrumental songs on albums and the high sales volume of instrumental albums (e.g., Joe Satriani, Steve Vai) attest to the primary importance of music over lyrics.

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Kealy has identified two additional music aesthetics which, although tied to the emergence of rock music, were particularly exploited by heavy metal progenitors. The first aesthetic was that of loudness achieved through amplification. By increasing the loudness of performances, musicians were able to increase the sonic power and impact of the music. Aside from attention-getting ability, amplification increases the physiological effects of the music mentioned previously.

The second aesthetic identified by Kealy is electronics. He notes that "the primary instruments which rock musicians played involved electronic sound processing" (106-07), and that the diverse array of music equipment, filters, amplifiers, equalizers, and the like began to greatly affect the way recorded music was produced. Heavy metal musicians like to greatly experiment with different types of sounds on recorded music. Earlier musicians or musical groups like Cream, Jimi Hendrix, and Led Zeppelin incorporated many new electronic "effects" into the production of their music. Heavy metal guitarists have been particularly well known to use nontraditional guitar techniques to produce unique sounds with electric guitars (e.g., hammer-ons and pull-offs, bends, vibratos, power slides, scrapes, harmonics, bending behind the nut, bending the neck, mutes, rakes, feedback) or electric guitars equipped with "whammy bars" (e.g., dips, shakes, divebombs, extended pull, vibrato-dives on harmonics—see Stetina and Burton). Most of these techniques combine playing virtuosity with the unique features inherent in electronic sound amplification.

While more mainstream musicians used amplification largely only to make their unamplified sound louder, heavy metal musicians fully embraced the new technology and experimented with possible sounds, using different combinations of amplifiers, instruments, effects pedals and the like. Today, most of the earlier discovered sounds have been incorporated into guitar "effects" pedals, and with a press of a switch the sound of the guitar is changed from, say, chorus to flanger to distortion. Electronic guitar effects units can commonly produce in excess of 140 different guitar sounds. Similar effects can be used on other amplified instruments or even vocals. For example, bands can use vocal or instrument harmonizers, which produce simultaneous harmonies that match perfectly either the vocalist or instrument being played.

If heavy metal deviated from earlier forms of music because of its emphasis on music, it was equally unique in terms of its musical

deviation. Early rock music was characterized by very standardized patterns of chordal progressions. The most basic consisted of three related chords in any given key. If each note (or accompanying chord) of a major scale of eight notes is numbered from one to eight in ascending order, chords 1, 4 and 5 are typically used to make up a traditional song. Heavy metal broke with this aesthetical convention, however, preferring to experiment with a wide variety of minor keys and chord progressions. Jimmy Hendrix and Black Sabbath, for example, created sounds and music that had heretofore not been part of the traditional experience of American music. The minor chords and patterns created a new and different "feel"—a "feel" that mainstream America labeled "deviant" or "evil."

Subgenres: Institutionalizing New Conventions

Musical experimentation remains a mainstay of the heavy metal experience, providing continuously "fresh" or innovative musical experiences. Over time, new aesthetical styles may become routinized and institutionalized into conventions, creating a subgenre of heavy metal music. Several new types of heavy metal subgenres have emerged over time. In 1991 Weinstein identified three subgenres: traditional/classic metal, lite-metal, and speed/thrash metal. Traditional/classic metal was described as a preference for music of original heavy metal artists; although each band today could be considered a part of, or inspiration for, a later subgenre. A content analysis of 30 heavy metal albums (282 songs) revealed three similar subgenres: pop metal, progressive metal, and thrash metal (Friesen, "Labelling"). Since that time at least one new subgenre has emerged, usually referred to as "grunge metal."

A certain amount of artistic tension exists between artists creating in each of metal's subgenres.

Pop Metal

Pop metal is currently that (rather large) fringe of the heavy metal scene which is produced primarily with the hopes of receiving radio airplay and enjoying large volume sales. Such bands include (but are not limited to): AC-DC, Def Leppard, Winger, Kiss, Alice Cooper, Bon Jovi, Slaughter and Aerosmith. For the most part, music composed in the pop metal format conforms to other conventions typical of most top-40

music. For example, song length is usually limited to a three or four minute duration, and follows a standard musical organization of "verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-verse-chorus." An important musical aesthetic is commonly referred to as a "hook"—a catchy musical change in the music that catches the listener by surprise. At times this hook will be displayed in the bridge, but more often than not the hook is some form of syncopation integrated in the chorus.

Thematically, almost all pop metal tunes deal only with songs about relations between members of the opposite sex or partying (Friesen, "Labelling"). A "loss of control" theme often pervades either topic. That is, the lyricist describes losing emotional control in a relationship or engages in partying beyond his or her control. Periodically, a song's lyrics may reflect upon a more cynical approach to life or authority figures, but existential themes usually pervade the music.

Progressive Metal

The second style of heavy metal music may be titled "progressive," a style not identified by Weinstein (*Heavy*). Progressive metal likewise attempts to meet all of the aforementioned aesthetics, but takes more liberty in experimenting with different rhythms and musical styles. Some of the bands in this subgenre might better be simply referred to as progressive music. However, bands like Rush, which tend to appeal to a mass audience, have a significant proportion of their followers within the heavy metal community.

Many progressive pieces of music may extend over the three or four minute maximum allowed for radio airplay. Emphasis is placed on complex changes in tempo, key selection, key changes, dynamics, style, and chord progressions which require more skill to perform than pop-metal. Instrumental albums (usually featuring some guitar virtuoso) also fit this subgenre. Examples of such artists are: Rush, Queensryche, Joe Satriani, Dream Theater, Extreme, Steve Vai, and Warrior Soul. Certain progressive metal bands receive radio airplay, although more frequently on alternative FM than mainstream top-40 stations.

Lyricaly, more philosophical/reflective themes, combined with a political or social consciousness are the norm. Lyrics often deal with contemporary issues like changing gender roles or political correctness, or may approach issues of social justice or environmental protection. Some bands (such as Queensryche) may incorporate mystical or

supernatural themes. While there are exceptions, lyrics frequently approach life from the point of view of an observer rather than a moralist or evaluator. The approach taken is often someone who describes rather than evaluates a feeling or event.

Thrash Metal

The third style of heavy metal can be categorized as "thrash" music. Almost unknown to people outside of the subculture, thrash metal is characterized less by syncopation of the beat than by speed and fast timing. Hard-driving beats are prominent in the music, creating a very aggressive, intense, and energetic aura. Emphasis is again on the complexity of the music, with additional intensification and skill needed to keep up the fast pace. While lyrics are an important part of thrash metal, the voice of the vocalist is again used as a separate instrument, with guttural growls, screams, grunts, and the like inextricably linked with the presentation. Guitar work is usually in the form of power chords where only the lower three strings are played, often in cut-time (twice as fast). The bass guitar and bass drum often combine to produce the lower-end "grunt" of the song. Guitars are frequently tuned down a half-step or full-step lower than standard guitar tuning, further enhancing the lower end feel.

To the uninitiated, listening to even a few bars of thrash music is described by them as a miserable, unpleasant experience. Even at low decibels, the music presents such an open affront to civility, pleasantness and order that the average citizen is immediately offended. The production and consumption of thrash music, then, remains "underground" for the most part, enhancing its deviant image and "acquired" feel. Thrash bands include Slayer, Anthrax, Merciful Fate, Confront, and Mutilage.

Thrash metal lyrics are even more difficult for the uninitiated to tolerate. Themes tend to center around death, speed, and "black" or satanic subjects. To some extent, thrash music is organized around these themes (see Friesen, "Labelling"). Considerable controversy surrounds the inclusion of satanic or supernatural themes in such aggressive music, and even heavy metal listeners more accustomed to either pop or progressive metal do not always understand the tongue-in-cheek manner in which it is performed. The following quote from a heavy metal journalist serves as a partial explanation (Ebert, "Reaping"):

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Listen up, troopers, very few black metal bangers are true satanic preachers the likes of King Diamond, late of Mercyful Fate. The vast majority of them adhere to the same principles which Ozzy and Iommi [sic] laid down with Black Sabbath's first two masterpieces, *Black Sabbath* and *Paranoid*, back when yuppies were still wearing love beads. That being, "Let's give 'em some fantasy; let's fuck with their psyche." In other words, let's have some FUN.

That, quite simply, people, is the essence of devil metal; sheer amusement for healthy imaginations. No more, no less.

Some heavy metal bands, then, embrace deviant symbols (such as Satanism), thereby rejecting "normal" society and what it stands for. This embracing is done, for the most part, without any belief in supernatural powers of any sort. Even King Diamond has commented: "O.K., I'm just putting forward what interests me in an entertaining way, because at the bottom, that's what it is, an entertainment. I was much more influenced by Alice Cooper than I ever was by the occult" (Crunch 21). While these themes are most commonly used in thrash metal, they are not limited to it. Alice Cooper and Black Sabbath were among the first bands to write lyrics dealing with such. Today, both bands would be more typical of pop metal or progressive styles.

Grunge Metal

A recent addition to the heavy metal scene has been the dramatic rise in popularity of grunge metal bands. Following the styles made popular by "Seattle scene" bands, grunge metal artists have again redefined their own heavy metal music conventions. Taking apparent offense to the popularized style of pop metal, grunge bands shun flashy clothes and stage shows, high vocals, emphases on guitar virtuosity and a false or pretentious stage presence. Instead, grunge artists are attempting to "rediscover" more of the musical experimentation and express more musical depth. This is done by using a wider variety of chordal progressions, with minor and diminished chords, tempo changes and vocal simplicity. Grunge musicians often describe their craft as an "in-your-face" type of music.

Not all bands within the grunge movement can be considered metal bands, but there are some who continue to embrace the metal aesthetics of loudness, aggressive performance, and lower end "punch." Among

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these are Nirvana, Soundgarden, Pearl Jam, Stone Temple Pilots and White Zombie. Grunge lyrics reflect the diversity, confusion, cynicism and escapism of Generation X'ers growing up in the postmodern terrain, and are often simultaneously optimistic, pessimistic, cynical, rebellious, idealistic, and rude.

Aesthetical Tensions Within Heavy Metal Subgenres

Although each of the subgenres can be considered a part of the heavy metal movement, a certain amount of antagonism exists between adherents of the various styles. Thrash adherents, for example, tend to be quite antagonistic toward pop metal per se, and even more so to those who listen only to pop metal. Thrash adherents condescendingly refer to pop metal adherents as "poseurs"—individuals who are associating with heavy metal primarily because of the deviance prestige associated with the music. Thrash adherents feel that poseurs have not developed an appreciation for the true aesthetics of metal, and must therefore be accorded less prestige with the subculture.

Likewise, grunge metal adherents find the virtuoso-demagogue phenomenon in metal particularly distasteful, as illustrated in the following (Brown 97):

...how much do you think a high-tech guitarist like [progressive metal band Dream Theater's] John Petrucci appeals to a member of the '90's grunge culture? ...[Grunge band] Blind Melon guitarist Christopher Thorn reacted to the Dream Theater single "Pull Me Under" and its musicianship with pure vitriol, starting a tirade that culminated in the blanket statement, "That sort of guitar playing is just stupid!"

Such antagonisms are partially a product of aesthetical differences which define the musical parameters of artists in broader terms. To some extent these divisions appear to be generational: as a part of each new youthful age cohort embraces heavy metal they go on to make it their own. Pop metal emerged in the late 1960s and early 70s, progressive metal in the mid-70s, thrash metal later in the 70s and early 80s, and grunge emerged as the heavy metal music of the 90s. Yet seen from another perspective, such subgenres can be seen as the logical outgrowth of a craft based on experimentation and creativity on the one hand, and standardization and familiarity on the other.

Such tensions inherent in both the music and the social forces surrounding the music shape the direction each band will take. Many of the tensions are not unique to heavy metal alone but to the production and dissemination of music itself. For example, musicians have long felt a tension between playing music that they want to play and playing music that others want them to play. Becker ("Dance") noted such a tension years ago among jazz musicians. To play what one wishes is to be true to one's self, but to play what others want to hear is to earn a living but to "sell out." Death metal guitarist Kerry King of Slayer commented: "I think we're doing what Judas Priest and Iron Maiden used to do before they sold out" (Shapiro 23).

Other tensions exist. How each band or band member decides to resolve each tension in some way influences the style and type of music that will be produced. For example, bands must decide which new technological innovations to embrace as part of their sound, and which they will ignore. Musicians must consistently balance their desire and ability to play technically fast and complexly with a demand to play simpler but with feeling. The approach to lyrics is another tension which must be dealt with—will the band "tell it the way it is," or create songs that describe ideal resolutions or scenarios? These and other tensions must continually be negotiated when producing heavy metal music. While frustrating at times, such forces produce new dimensions of sound, taking musicians and their listeners in new directions.

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to describe the aesthetical conventions of heavy metal. It is necessarily descriptive rather than analytical. This is in line with Becker's thinking on art worlds, since he states:

The functionalist suggestion is true in the trivial sense that ways of doing things will not survive exactly as they are unless all the things necessary to that survival continue to aid in it. It is misleading in suggesting that there is any necessity for such ways to survive exactly as they are. (*Art* 6)

At the same time, theoreticians might note correlative trends that occurred simultaneously with the emergence of rock music or heavy metal in particular. It has been described, for example, as a uniquely urban style of music. Gillett suggests (but fails to demonstrate in any

causal fashion) that rock music has been the "sound of the city"—"in rock and roll, the strident, repetitive sounds of city life were, in effect, reproduced as melody and rhythm" (x). In addition, the form of heavy metal appeared to crystallize after the disillusionment of the counterculture movement of the late 1960s. It has further been described as a music that has (at least in the past) been produced primarily by the young. And yet again, it is a music that has been associated with subcultural activity more common to urban working-class males. Surely these correlates suggest some type of causality?

Perhaps. But for each correlate there appears a negating trend. While heavy metal is produced in urban centers, it enjoys high sales in rural areas and small towns as well. And while heavy metal did seem to develop after the demise of the counterculture, heavy metal progenitors were present well before the summer of love, and heavy metal artists continue to draw on songs prior to the 60s for inspiration (e.g., Judas Priest's remake of "Johnny Be Good"). Heavy metal was initially produced by the young, but many of its early artists (from bands such as Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin) continue to produce similar music while approaching their 50s. And Friesen ("Labelling") noted that approximately 50 percent of the heavy metal adherents he came into contact with during his year of participant observation study came from middle-class backgrounds.

Other potential explanations for the emergence of heavy metal aesthetics may yet be found. We have attempted here only to describe a music that has been in many ways misunderstood, and to contribute to a burgeoning literature that aspires to categorize and synthesize available information on music a cultural artifact—eminently social at its roots. In time, perhaps, a number of such studies might reveal, in grounded fashion, some larger patterns regarding the interplay of people and their music.

Note

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