

## **How Diverse Should Metal Be? The Case of Jewish Metal, Overt and Covert Jewishness**

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### **Abstract**

Many critiques of metal mention its ‘whiteness’ as a problematic feature of it. Such critiques are to a certain extent refuted by the increasing number of studies that have demonstrated the national and ethnic diversity in metal scenes across the world. Metal is increasingly invested in notions of location and national origin, resulting in forms of ‘folk metal’ developing in metal scenes around the world. At the same time, there are some striking limitations as to the diversity of global metal. Metal scenes are much less developed in some conspicuously ‘non-white’ places including much of sub-Saharan Africa and many ‘non-white’ ethnic and national groups, such as those of Chinese origin, are under-represented in metal worldwide. It is also true that most of the metal scenes that are dominant in global terms, such as the Swedish scene, are overwhelmingly ‘white’.

This chapter examines how far the aesthetic and political validity of metal is dependant on its diversity. To what extent is pushing for ethnic and national diversity within metal an important political, social and aesthetic goal? This chapter examines the case study of Jewish metal to illuminate these questions.

**Key Words:** Jewish Metal, Jewishness, Popular Music, diversity, difference, music and social policy, aesthetics, politics.

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Since 2005 I have written a blog called ‘Metal Jew’<sup>1</sup>. The blog stems from my deep interest and involvement in both the Jewish and metal communities. The blog was never intended to be a serious platform for the lengthy expressions of either my personal life or my intellectual ruminations. Rather, it is a fairly light-hearted place for me to draw attention to and discuss things that interest me in the Jewish and metal worlds. In particular, I am interested in the intersection between the Jews and metal, Jewishness and metalness, Jewish culture and metal culture.

I’m not the only one interested in this intersection. The internet has facilitated the linking up of Jewish metallers –for example there is a Facebook group called ‘Jewish Metalheads’. Although I am the only dedicated Jewish metal blog, other Jewish bloggers have discussed metal and their connection to it<sup>2</sup>. More broadly, a key part of contemporary Jewish culture in the last few decades has involved tracking the Jewish involvement

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in popular music. So, books like Scott Benarde's *Stars of David: Rock n Roll's Jewish Stories*<sup>3</sup> and Guy Oseary's *Jews Who Rock*<sup>4</sup> and websites like *JewsRock.org* have revealed the Jewish backgrounds of popular musicians. Thanks to such projects I now know that the Jewish involvement in metal is not restricted to such well-known Jewish figures as Gene Simmons of Kiss and Dave Lee Roth of Van Halen; it extends to members and former members of metal bands like Cannibal Corpse, Anthrax, Dream Theatre and Manowar.

Most of these projects are little more than contributions to the Jewish parlour game of 'Spot the Jew'. The very existence of this parlour game is testament to the lack of overtness in the Jewish contribution to popular music. Whereas for example Hispanic or African-Americans have been highly visible and audible in their dissections of their backgrounds and identities in their work, the same has historically not been true with regard to Jewish popular musicians. In recent years however, there have been a number of studies that have dissected the Jewish contribution to popular music by scholars such as Steven Lee Beeber, Michael Billig, Jeffrey Melnik and Michael Rogin<sup>5</sup>. Such studies have demonstrated a specifically Jewish contribution to the development of twentieth century popular music, and have shown that the coyness of this contribution – often as songwriters, producers and impresarios rather than performers – is revealing of the ambivalences of contemporary Jewish identity.

Much of this work has focused on first and second generation Jewish immigrants to the United States and UK, Jews who grew up in an ambivalent and marginal place. With later generations of Jews, who grew up in highly assimilated families, it is often hard to see how their Jewish upbringings made much of a difference to their work. In the case of metal, in most cases, the specifically Jewish contribution to metal bands appears non-existent or obscure.

There is of course no obligation on Jews or anyone else to speak of their backgrounds and identities in metal or any other music. Nor is a 'subterranean' Jewish influence on one's music unworthy of interest. However, in my ongoing work on contemporary Jewish culture I am principally interested in attempts to make particular cultural forms 'explicitly' Jewish. How can an artistic work 'speak' Jewishly in ways that do not require complex processes of decoding? How can an artist be a 'Jewish artist' in ways that indelibly stamp their productions as Jewish in open and visible/audible ways? Again: I am not suggesting that other, less overt forms of Jewish expression are secondary or unworthy of interest. I *am* suggesting that overt forms of Jewish expression are curiously under-explored in some artistic forms – such as metal – and that they pose certain challenges to artists.

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Furthermore, while ‘subterranean’ forms of Jewish expression may be no less intrinsically valuable than other forms, it is problematic when the Jewish contribution to an artistic field is dominated by covert rather than overt Jewishness. In such situations, there is a danger of the erasure of Jews themselves as the subjects and objects of artistic expression. If Jews are simply a ‘ghost in the machine’ in an artistic field, then what becomes of living, breathing Jews?

This question becomes particularly problematic with regard to the influence of the holocaust on metal. Following my presentation of an early version of this chapter the 2008 ‘Heavy Fundamentalisms’ conference, Jeremy Wallach argued in response that the holocaust has been an important source of fascination in the development of the vocabulary of metal. A similar argument has been made with regard to the early development of punk in the US by John Stratton<sup>6</sup>. Certainly one can point to the ubiquity of the term ‘holocaust’ as a descriptive term in metal lyrics and in descriptions of metal music and the foundational importance of Slayer’s song ‘Angel Of Death’ in the development of extreme metal cannot be understated. However, even if the holocaust is of such central importance, it is as a trope of extreme evil rather than anything that has to do with ‘real’ Jews.

#### 1. **Jewish Metal**

Overtly Jewish metal is rare but not entirely absent in the global metal scene. Examples include:

- The Israeli bands Orphaned Land, Amasefer, Desert and Arallu who combine metal and Middle Eastern music sources, drawing on Jewish texts, legends and symbolism<sup>7</sup>.
- Jewish metal by orthodox Jews, including the Hassidic-influenced extreme metal of Teihu and the outreach-focused metal of David Lazzar (known as ‘The Rocking Rabbi’)
- The Ultra-orthodox Jewish black metal of Schneerson and Golgolot.
- The Makkabees and Metalish who play metal covers of Jewish standards.
- The Yiddish language metal of the Israeli band Gevolt.

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- The avant-garde experimentation of Jamie Saft's 'Black Shabbis' project.

Many of these bands are short-lived, one-off or unsigned, existing only as a couple of songs on a myspace profile. Only Orphaned Land and Arallu have made much impact on the global metal scene. There are also traces of Jewish themes found in the wider metal world, drawn on by both Jewish and non-Jewish artists. The holocaust is a recurring theme but, as I have argued that the holocaust is usually denuded of Jews to serve as an exemplar of evil (the exception being the rare cases of anti-semitic metal found in National Socialist black metal). Kabbalistic themes occur on occasions in black metal, although again it is generally a kabbalah subsumed into a Satanic rather than Jewish mythos.

My search for Jewish metal has been comprehensive but its findings have been few, far-between and generally very obscure. Until fairly recently, I saw my search for Jewish metal as a fun and innocent form of play. However, I have come to think that my project and the 'field' (such as it is) of Jewish metal, raises some more serious issues regarding music and diversity. In particular, the Jewish presence or its lack in metal and in other popular music genres has helped me in questioning and complexifying assumptions about the aesthetics of difference.

## 2. Metal and Difference

A criticism that has often made about metal is that it is 'white', that it reflects a deliberate flight away from metal's African-American blues roots and the racial melting pot of contemporary popular music<sup>8</sup>. In fact, as section two of this collection demonstrates, metal is one of the most globally diverse forms of music, with well-populated metal scenes everywhere from Indonesia to Morocco to Peru. While it is true that much of black Africa (with the puzzling exception of Botswana<sup>9</sup>) is more or less metal-free, global metal is highly diverse and far from 'white'. While it has historically been the case that the iconography of metal has drawn on signifiers of whiteness, such as Vikings<sup>10</sup>, the increasing popularity of 'folk' metal and of local metal syncretisms has considerably widened the musical and symbolic diversity of metal.

However, if metal were exclusively 'white' – white in the most unambiguous, northern European dominated, blond haired sense of the word – would it actually matter? Does metal need to be diverse to be socially or aesthetically 'valid'? Does metal music need to represent musical differences? And if so, how much difference is 'sufficient'? Is the current situation – in which almost any difference is represented apart from black

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African difference – ‘good enough’? And finally – do we need more Jewish metal for metal to be worthwhile?

In part, such questions can be answered easily: if metal’s hypothetical homogeneity, or its actual limited heterogeneity, is dependent on racist or oppressive practices of exclusion then that is of course highly problematic. There is indeed a racist strain within certain quarters of the black metal scene, some of which, as I have recorded elsewhere, has been directed against Jews. Yet this racist strain is not a dominant strain and it has not prevented the explosion of folk metal themes and metal’s globalisation in recent years. As I have argued elsewhere, the limitations to metal’s diversity, the exclusion of certain groups, is largely down to complex processes of self-exclusion<sup>11</sup>. The barriers to the development of Jewish metal and to black African metal are self-imposed ones, rooted in the perceived incompatibility with what is constructed as the metal habitus.

### 3. Music, Difference and Social Policy

If we look at other musical and cultural practices though, it does seem that diversity is in some quarters a key touchstone of political and aesthetic validity. In 2001, Greg Dyke the then director-general of the BBC described the organisation as ‘hideously white’. In 2008, the UK culture minister Margaret Hodge was widely interpreted as having argued that the proms were ‘too white’, arguing:

This isn't about making every audience completely representative but if we claim great things for (cultural) sectors in terms of their power to bring people together, then we have the right to expect they will do that wherever they can<sup>12</sup>.

Addressing this argument of course takes us into the realms of social policy, in which a common goal is to ensure that publicly funded cultural institutions reach the broadest possible cross-section of the population. The concern here is less aesthetic than ensuring that institutions funded by a cross-section of tax-payers will be accessible to that cross-section of tax-payers, and further that cultural institutions can play a role in facilitating ‘social cohesion’ by creating connections between different kinds of people.

State social policy is also used to help to nurture the participation of particular countries, regions, localities and ethnic groups in global and national musical practices. As the various essays in Martin Cloonan and Simon Frith’s 2008 special issue of *Popular Music* on popular music policy show<sup>13</sup>, there is a strong desire from governments and local authorities to preserve the voices of their constituents against the perceived homogenising effects of globalisation.

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Policies to preserve and nurture diverse musical voices are generally directed at certain kinds of institutions and forms of music. Popular music policy aims – in broad terms – to increase the visibility of particular constituencies in global or national music making and/or to develop the export potential of their music scenes. Policy generally proceeds from the assumption that a particular music scene is not diverse enough, but this judgement tends not to be made in aesthetic terms. Further, only certain types of music tend to be the subject of such judgements – that is, those that are globalised or exported to the extent that the involvement of diverse populations is a valid and important project. So, to take a hypothetical example, the government of Austria might develop policy to ensure the visibility and export of Austrian rock musicians on a global stage. However, the Austrian government would not promote the involvement of Austrian musicians in Trinidadian calypso, nor would the Trinidadian government promote the involvement of Trinidadian musicians in Austrian schlager. Of course the Austrian government might sponsor tours of schlager groups to Trinidad or the Trinidadian government of calypso groups to Austria; this is a matter of ensuring global cultural visibility but not of creating a globalised schlager or calypso. It is a given that such musics are the preserve of national, local or regional groups and their global exportation does not carry with it the obligation to ensure diverse global involvement in them.

There is thus a vast swathe of musics that are understood as emerging from more or less homogeneous communities and whose aesthetic and political validity is in no way seen as being compromised by this homogeneity. Why then might this argument not be seen to be applicable to other musics? Why might diversity be an issue in metal and not an issue in schlager or calypso? The reason of course is that for much of its over 40 years of existence, metal has been a highly globalised music that has spread to most parts of the world. Metal emerged from Britain and America, two powerhouses of global musical production, and consequentially the export of metal worldwide raises real issues about power and the homogenisation of global culture.

The question is less about whether it is appropriate for metal to be exported globally – such things are inevitable in a globalised capitalist system – but how and whether metal can be exported globally without concomitant imbalances of power. In my research on metal I have argued that the global metal scene is relatively egalitarian in that global participation and exposure is possible from most locations<sup>14</sup>. Particularly in the more underground forms of metal, bands from a wide range of countries can and do tour and have their music circulated throughout the global metal scene.

But how far does metal *music* reflect the global diversity of the metal scene? Here the situation is much more uneven, with some bands and

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local scenes producing highly distinctive forms of metal with others being more concerned to produce a ‘place-less’ form of metal. Interestingly, it tends to be the more globally prominent and powerful scenes such as those in Scandinavia that have been more concerned with creating distinctive local forms of metal. The most homogeneous sounding forms of metal are over-represented in its more marginal and far-flung locales. In countries that have traditionally been marginal to global cultural flows and where playing metal is difficult due to state control or simple lack of resources, being able to replicate a ‘place-less’ form of music without local traits is often seen as an escape from the constraints of locality. The ability and desire to articulate difference in metal is in many cases a function of a privileged position with global networks of power and capital. In this way then we should not assume that instances of local aesthetic difference within global metal are necessarily signs of aesthetic and political ‘health’.

If the aesthetics of difference are not necessarily a sign of a healthy politics of difference – at least in metal – then how far is difference *per se* necessarily necessary in metal? While the global metal community is more diverse and facilitates more egalitarian interaction than many other global musics do, it nonetheless has limitations to its diversity. As I mentioned before, with a few exceptions black sub-Saharan African and the black Caribbean are largely absent in metal. China and India have also traditionally been underrepresented. Further, throughout the metal world women are a minority, at least as musicians. Then of course there are the myriad differences in representation of all manner of ethic, religious and national sub-groups.

#### 4. Expectation, Absurdity and Difference

It is at this point that one becomes aware of the *reductio ad absurdum* in tracking the diversity of metal: that of comparing rates of participation in metal across every conceivable demographic category. Extended quantitative enquiry might be able to demonstrate that there are proportionally twice as many metallers in Staffordshire than Somerset. But what would this tell us and would it matter anyway?

My search for Jewish metal is perhaps part of this *reductio ad absurdum* – a delight in obscurity, a search for novelty, a desire to see metal everywhere – but there are still serious issues here. While globalised homogeneity is problematic, even abhorrent, it is not clear what kinds of heterogeneity, difference and diversity should be counterposed to it. My *reductio ad absurdum* of yearning for parity between the proportion of metallers in every conceivable sub-group is just that – absurd – but it does raise the question of where the search for diversity should stop and what kind of diversity is ‘sufficient’ to forestall the danger of a dystopian, homogeneous and monolithic globalised musical future.

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One possible answer might be that certain kinds of diversity are particularly important in particular kinds of music and particular modes of globalisation. So, one could make the argument for example that the absence of black Africans, black Caribbeans and African-Americans from metal is problematic as it represents a musical and social erasure of the African-originated blues roots from metal. Similarly, one could also argue that a greater Jewish presence in metal is necessary to problematise the simplistic dichotomisation of Christ-Satan often found in metal imagery. The presence of some sub-groups in metal can create productive tensions and interrogations of comfortable certainties that are productive of aesthetic and political dialogue and contestation. If the presence or otherwise of Luxembourgers in metal may be all but irrelevant in this regard, the presence of Jews and sub-Saharan Africans is certainly relevant.

I raise these questions as I think that within critical studies of popular music and indeed within cultural studies and related disciplines more generally, such issues tend not to be explicitly spelled out. Beyond a clear valorisation of difference, the tendency of cultural studies and related disciplines to eschew proscription and policy-making means that it is never clear how difference should be lived as a value. Further, this distancing from the realm of policy-making also makes the function of criticism unclear – who is being persuaded to do what and by whom? A key issue here is *expectation*. What is it reasonable to expect to see in terms of diversity within a popular music scene? And what is the relation of *hope* to expectation? What should we hope for and what expectations do we have that our hopes should be realised?

Within bureaucracies and state funded institutions it is possible and reasonable to set clear standards as to what kinds of diversity are expected within popular music production and consumption. Within chaotic and fluid global music scenes, any set standard of diversity, or indeed of other kind of behaviour is both absurd and unrealisable. Music scenes such as the global metal scene are not amenable to this kind of bureaucratisation and to centralised policy-making (although their constituent institutions and local scenes might be). Members of music scenes are not accountable to policy-makers, intellectuals and critics outside those scenes.

If scene members have an obligation that is open to external judgement and enforcement, it is perhaps to more abstract and less parochial ideals. The answer to the question ‘what should be expect from scene members?’ is ‘the same as any other human being’. How human beings should conduct themselves and the ideals that should structure and institute this behaviour is of course a question far beyond the scope of this chapter! With regard to diversity and difference within music scenes, the question becomes what kinds of practices and ideals can institute a kind of diversity

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within music scenes that is politically, aesthetically and ethically appropriate? And how what kinds of practices and ideals can be instituted 'outside' a music scene to ensure their replication inside a scene?

Jewish metal is – like my blog - largely an irrelevance; one more obscure curiosity in a world laden with trivia. This near-total absence is not proof of the political or aesthetic invalidity of metal, nor would its presence be proof of its validity. What *is* relevant are the nature of the practices that produce and restrict difference within the global metal scene. The presence or absence of any one grouping within global metal is not necessarily evidence for an inappropriate attitude to difference within metal – provided that that absence is not due to overt and racist practices of exclusion. Jewish metal might of course provide new and interesting perspectives on metal, but that does not mean that the absence of these perspectives undermines metal's aesthetic or political vibrancy or heterogeneity.

I will conclude this discussion by suggesting that popular music studies can benefit from a fuller consideration of diversity and its value. Indeed popular music, like cultural studies and related disciplines, can benefit from a fuller discussion of *value* per se. This chapter has perhaps shown how a consideration of difference, heterogeneity and diversity can take one to some perplexing questions and bizarre *reductio ad absurdum*. Further, this consideration also raises difficult issues about policy, change and the possibilities of external criticism of music scenes. If nothing else, Jewish metal has taken *me* to some interesting places, if few easy conclusions.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.metaljew.org>

<sup>2</sup> See for example <http://heebnvegan.blogspot.com/2007/01/struggles-of-jewish-air-guitarist.html> <http://asimplejew.blogspot.com/2006/08/trapped-in-lower-levels-jewish-heavy.html> - <http://www.thedeciblog.com/index.php/2008/04/18/dont-bogart-the-charoet/> (All accessed 1 October 2008)

<sup>3</sup> Scott R. Benarde, *Stars of David: Rock 'n' Roll's Jewish Stories* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2003)

<sup>4</sup> Guy Oseary, *Jews Who Rock* (New York: St Martins Griffin, 2001)

<sup>5</sup> Steven Lee Beeber, *The Heebie-Jeebies at CBGBs: A Secret History of Jewish Punk* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2006), <http://www.jewpunk.com/>; Michael Billig, *Rock n Roll Jews* (London: Five Leaves Publications, 2000); Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews and American Popular Song* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2001); Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise:*

*Jewish Immigrants in the Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996)

<sup>6</sup> Jon Stratton, 'Jews, Punks and the Holocaust: From the Velvet Underground to the Ramones - the Jewish-American Story,' *Popular Music* 24, no. 1 (2005): 79-106

<sup>7</sup> For more on Israeli metal see: Keith Kahn-Harris, 'I hate this fucking country': Dealing with the Global and the Local in the Israeli Extreme Metal Scene,' *Critical Studies* 19: Music, Popular Culture, Identities (2002): 133-151.

<sup>8</sup> See for example: Jeremy Wells, 'Blackness 'Scuzed: Jimi Hendrix (In)Visible Legacy in Heavy Metal,' in *Race Consciousness: African-American Studies for the New Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 50-63

<sup>9</sup> See my September 4 2007 blog post 'Metal Africa': <http://kkahnarris.typepad.com/weblog/2007/09/metal-in-africa.html>

<sup>10</sup> See Imke von Helden and Florian Heesch's chapters in this volume.

<sup>11</sup> Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (Oxford: Berg, 2006)

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in 'Hodge attacks Proms: they're narrow and lack the common British values' *The Guardian* 4 March 2008. Available online at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/mar/04/classicalmusicandopera.politicsandthearts>

<sup>13</sup> Martin Cloonan and Simon Frith, eds., 'Special Issue on Popular Music Policy' 27, no. 2: 189-316

<sup>14</sup> Keith Harris, "'Roots'?: The Relationship Between the Global and the Local Within the Global Extreme Metal Scene,' *Popular Music* 19, no. 1 (2000): 13-30

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