Putting the 'studies' back into metal music studies

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Abstract

The field of metal music studies is in the ascendancy and has established itself as a legitimate domain of enquiry. In this article, we argue that the study of metal has the capacity not only to provide us with rich histories of the subculture and the experiences of fans as academics, but is able to (and should) contribute to wider concerns within society. We aim to answer three key questions that, we argue, underpin and legitimate academic enquiry of metal music: (1) *why* does the study of metal matter? (the need to ask and answer the 'so what?' question); (2) *how* does metal matter? (the case for methodological rigour) and finally, (3) epistemologically: how can we justify our claims to knowledge? As such, this article is a call to reflect on the wider questions and issues that underpin the study of metal and move the field beyond descriptive representational accounts.

Introduction

In recent years, metal music studies has gained legitimacy as a field of study (Spracklen et al. 2011; Hickham 2014). In this growing area, we have seen scholars pay attention to a wide range of questions, and literature has emerged around topics as wide as the history of metal (Weinstein 1991; Walser 1993; Brown 2011a), the culture of metal (Hassan 2010; Kahn-Harris 2007; Spracklen et al. 2011), metal as a form of resistance (Bettez Halnon 2006; Scott 2016b), fandom and community within the genre (Gaines 1998; Hill 2014, 2016; Riches 2011), gender/ethno-racial inequality (Dawes 2012; Hill 2015; Savigny and Sleight 2015; Schaap and Berkers 2014) and globalization (Berger and Greene 2011; Mayer and Timberlake 2014; Berkers and Schaap 2018; Wallach et al. 2011). As such, metal music studies has increasingly secured itself a place in the academy as a legitimate area of study, encapsulating a wide array of scientific disciplines (predominantly sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, media studies, psychology, musicology and history) and methodologies (quantitative but mainly qualitative). The number of scholars engaged in this endeavour has grown, and through this proliferation we not only see that metal music is discussed in mainstream

journals, but also that it now has its own international professional organization (ISSMS); a peer-reviewed international journal (*Metal Music Studies*) and a regular series of international conferences. All of these serve to legitimate the field as an area of academic enquiry.

The works of Walser (1993), Gaines (1998) and Weinstein (1991) have come to be referred to as the lynchpins and historical foundation for our field. Perhaps it is because these works are perceived as the start point that our field has developed in the way that it has. These key works made interesting and normative points, arguing that the study of heavy metal and its culture matters. These were important ideas and played a central role in legitimizing the study of metal music in the academic community. However, in order to progress the field, we argue, we need to move forward both methodologically and theoretically. To defend the field from the claims that it is simply normative (that the study of metal music intrinsically 'matters') and is therefore easily dismissed as 'fan writing' we argue that we need to take stock and reflect on the rigour that we apply to this work. We need to take this claim seriously as we have regularly encountered work and witnessed presentations under the moniker of metal music studies, which failed to give any valence to the word 'studies'. It is perhaps interesting to observe that the personal interest component is one area of critique in this genre, and yet across the entire academy we might suggest that scholars pursue a personal passion. Perhaps there is something to unpack as to why music can be subject to this particular charge. However, in order to defend ourselves from these critiques and think through how we might advance the field to enhance the contribution metal studies is able to make more widely to fields beyond its own inner circle, to those perhaps of sociology, cultural studies, media studies and political science, we argue that metal studies *can be* and *should be* underpinned by rigorous theoretical and methodological analysis of metal music and its culture. In doing this, we move away from simply normative and anecdotal approaches.

In this article, we are building on a tradition of work that is asking not just 'what we can understand *about* metal [but also] what we can learn *from* metal' (Hill and Spracklen 2010, original emphasis; see also Kahn Harris 2016). As such, we think it is useful to stop and reflect critically about that which constitutes the growing field of metal music studies. From the outside, as noted, some may dismiss metal music studies as simply 'fan writing'. We need to take such critiques seriously, as this is in some cases not far from the truth and such critiques rightfully undermine the recently acquired legitimacy of the field. We want to argue that those who see themselves as metal music scholars need to take seriously a set of key questions about the intellectual endeavour that we are engaged in as academics – not as fans.

In other words, metal music studies benefit from critical academic distance and a healthy dose of Bourdieusian 'disinterestedness' (Bourdieu 1998). Our article is therefore structured around three key questions that, we argue, underpin and legitimate academic enquiry: (1) *why* does the study of metal matter? (the need to ask and answer the 'so what?' question); (2) *how* does metal matter? (the case for methodological rigour) and finally, (3) epistemologically: how can we justify our claims to knowledge? By asking these questions, we demonstrate how metal music studies is and can be more than simply journalism or fan writing. Rather, within metal studies, we have the potential not only to make sense of the genre and understand how it is that metal might be unique as a subculture and by extension a subfield of analysis. We build on the critical scholarship that reflects on the nature of metal studies (Brown 2011a, 2011b, 2018; Lind 2018) to further establish not only the uniqueness of the field in its own right, but to reflect on metal studies and its potential to ask those wider questions through which we can make sense of what the world looks like, and, following Scott's (2016b) normative argument, what the world could look like.

So what?: Why does metal matter?

While the history of metal music as a subculture or genre dates back to (debated) key points in time (according to its origin, be that black music and the blues in the United States, or the emergence of bands in the United Kingdom in the 1960s/1970s), the area of academic inquiry into heavy metal is grounded in three key works. Gaines (1998) offered an ethnographic account of being part of a fan community. Weinstein (1991) and Walser (1993) provided us with a historical mapping of the cultural significance of metal music. In these three texts, we are invited to reflect on the nature of metal, as the authors seek to make sense of its popularity, its appeal. What is it that metal offers? The sense of alienation felt by bands and fans alike is captured in these texts, and the three authors provide us with insights, which highlight how metal is different from other cultural forms and from other subcultures. In its desire to transgress or reject established norms and behaviours, metal then offers a space for those who may feel alienated by their social context. It provides an alternate community. In this sense, we might argue that the metal community represents a site of resistance (cf. Scott 2016b), and alternatives to existing power structures and sites of oppression. More widely we might also see that these key metal studies can thus be located within a tradition of cultural studies. Cultural studies ask us to unpack what we see taking place and reminds us that there is no 'natural order' of things. Rather, what we see and experience is socially and culturally

constructed. In this construction then, the concept of hegemony helps us to unpack and understand the ways in which social order is maintained, through the circulation of dominant (elite) belief systems. Discourse, semiotics and the ways in which cultural discourses circulate and function to oppress and co-opt subordinate groups. From this vantage point, we are encouraged to ask: What are the power structures in place? Do these structures function to oppress? To limit? How might we resist them? To be able to make sense of this, we may look at discourses and representation or ask questions about the nature of hegemony asking: How do power structures circulate and become reinforced? What does metal do to challenge them? Since the cultural turn in British cultural studies, the study of popular music has grown significantly (Bennett 2008). Rather than only focussing on the cultural products themselves and what they signify, attention shifted towards the production, distribution and reception of popular music. This has guided attention to our 'understanding of cultural production and participation in relation to music, not merely as a top-down process, but rather as a dynamic interactive process in which the everyday reception, appropriation and aestheticization of popular music texts, artefacts and associated resources are integral to the production of musical meaning and significance' (Bennett 2008: 430). Not only did this invite scholars to excavate how structural or institutional conditions influence the production of music and genres (Peterson and Anand 2004), but also to explore how the production and reception of music relate to broader social distinctions and boundary work based on class, gender, sexuality, nationality and race-ethnicity (Roy and Dowd 2010). Such advances have massively increased the scope and relevance of popular music studies, mainly by merely asking the question: why is popular music relevant socially?

To illustrate this, we will take a recent example. In Hickham's discussion on the rise of metal music studies, the author explains that metal music lacks an ethnic identity, which will make it difficult to gain legitimacy in wider social science:

> My prediction is that metal studies will not become as conventional as hip hop studies either. Both rap/hip hop music and metal music have anti-social and mainstream/commercial segments, both fan bases have their negative stereotypes, and both genres face prejudices and detractors. Hip hop studies, however, like jazz studies, benefits from being associated with an ethnic culture that is largely viewed as having a richer, more respectable history than do the subcultures of heavy metal and hardcore punk. Jazz studies and

> hip hop studies benefit from falling under the umbrella of African American studies. Since the overlapping genres of heavy metal and hardcore punk have always been marginalized and discounted within rock music and popular culture, they do not have such an umbrella from which to benefit. (2014: 16)

In other words, the fact that a marginalized group is associated with a musical genre is seen as the reason that such a study gains academic legitimacy. By looking at metal music from the outside (society) rather than the inside (scene), we would argue otherwise. It is exactly the numerical and symbolic dominance of white men in metal music production and reception that demands further scrutiny (cf. Dawes 2012; Hill 2016; Schaap 2015). Seeing that in western societies whiteness and maleness are typically left unmarked (Brekhus 2015) and hence largely unproblematized (both socially and scientifically), metal music as a genre can actually be highly informative of larger societal inequalities based on gender, class, race-ethnicity and sexuality. How, for instance, does female participation in a male genre relate to masculine cultures? (Krenske and McKay 2000; Vasan 2011; Hill 2014, 2016; Savigny and Sleight 2015)? Or how do non-white fans navigate the 'white spaces' that metal scenes are (Dawes 2012; Anderson 2015)? By creatively applying a larger sociological imagination beyond metal as a genre – and being critical of it as scholars, not as fans – such important questions should immediately become apparent. Along with social theorists we also argue, that to make claims about society, we need to do more than simply reflect on our own individual experience. In this sense, we are also issuing a call for methodological rigour.

Methodological rigour: How does metal matter?

Academia is distinguished from journalism, blogging and fan writing, by its commitment to methodological rigour. Many scientific fields are shaped by a shared methodological focus (the laboratory for the chemist; the archival site for the archivist; the experimental set-up for the psychologist). In the social sciences, particularly sociology, it is on the other hand very common to employ widely varying methodological frameworks – from purely quantitative multi-level analyses to creative qualitative participant observations. To prevent this from becoming a weakness, methodological rigour – thinking about validity, reliability and accountability – rather than methodological determinism, is part and parcel of conducting social science. This means that we have an evidence base from which we are able to make our claims and are open to (or actually looking for) ways to falsify our claims. Metal music

studies is united by a topical focus but needs the same focus on methodological rigour to justify the 'studies'. It is not sufficient for metal scholars to simply write about what particular songs mean to them or what they think it means to others. It is also not sufficient to 'use some academic quotes' to make this seem more scholarly. It is not sufficient to collect examples on YouTube or Google Images and present this as evidence for a point one is trying to make (i.e. welcoming confirmation bias). Not only is metal music studies as a field under threat when methodological rigour is neglected, the whole of social sciences becomes open for critique. As academics, it is our task to ensure that our data and methods of analysis are valid, transparent, reliable and – if possible – reproducible. As such, we can claim accountability. This does not mean that we should have a singular methodological approach – we think this would actually harm the field – but that we should uphold a high standard for methodological rigour and be critical when we see peers neglecting this. This certainly does not mean that methodological rigour is nowhere to be found in metal music studies – quite the opposite. There are innumerable examples of excellent scholarly excavations of metal music and its culture that uphold high standards of methodological precision. To take just a few examples, in the qualitative spectrum, we find Hill's (2014, 2016, 2018), Riches' (2015), Vasan's (2011), Krenske and McKay's (2000) and Shadrack's (2018) work on gender inequality; Clifford-Napoleone (2015) on queerness in metal; Scott (2016a) and Spracklen (2017) on the complexities of masculinity in metal and Bettez Halnon on the carnivalesque (2006) and the reading of music as text (Elliot 2018; Coggins 2018; Hay 2018). In the quantitative sphere, we find comprehensive statistical analyses of metal's global cultural diffusion (Mayer and Timberlake 2014), metal festival demographics (Guibert and Guibert 2016) and key works like Bryson's (1996) 'Anything but heavy metal'. Especially in psychology and youth studies, metal music has frequently been studied from a perspective of mental health issues (Arnett 1996; Lacourse et al. 2001; Scheel and Westfeld 1999; Selfhout et al. 2008; Barker and Brown 2014; Sharman and Dingle 2015). And more widely, we are encouraged to reflect on the need for theory building within the field (Brown 2011b).

Methodological (and theoretical) rigour in combination with academic distance and disinterestedness thus legitimates our work in three key ways: first, in providing a base of evidence from which to offer analysis and substantiate our claims to knowledge; second, to enable the field (of metal music studies) to be taken seriously within the academy; and third, to offer interventions as to what analysis of metal is able to offer for the study of music, culture and society more widely.

'We're all fans': Why epistemology matters to metal

Like most areas of research – specifically in the study of culture – metal music scholars often gravitate towards the field from a personal passion or set of interests. As we all know, metal music fandom runs deep and can be highly informative for various kinds of life choices (Gaines 1998). As a point of departure for academic studies however, fandom can be highly problematic. Being a fan means – in many cases – being protective of that which one loves. As sociologist Max Weber argued in 'Science as a vocation', 'whenever an academic introduces his [sic] own value judgment, a complete understanding of the facts *comes to an end'* ([1917] 2004: 21, original emphasis). Full understanding of facts begins with being open to facts that are politically, ideologically or personally 'inconvenient' to the researcher (22) – a key way to prevent confirmation bias. As is normal in fields such as sociology, cultural studies and anthropology, metal music scholars should always wonder whether their fandom and protection of that which they love have any influence on their research foci and results. Academic scrutiny involves the potential complete deconstruction of that which one studies. Results of such excavations tend to stand at complete odds with one's personal interests. In the poetic words of Berger et al. (1973):

> Sociology is essentially a debunking discipline. It dissects, uncovers, only rarely inspires. Its genius is very deeply negative, like that of Goethe's Mephistopheles who describes himself as a 'spirit that ever says no'. To try to change this character is to destroy whatever usefulness sociology may have - especially its moral and political usefulness, which comes from being held in balance, simultaneously and within the mind of the same person, with the affirmations of moral passion and humane engagement.

Although taking on such a position might hit hard for personal fandom, it gives the researcher the necessary credibility to make claims about that which s/he studies. Theories, hypotheses and results should never be treated kindly but rather be bashed from all sides – to see what is left. Any serious scholar who starts researching a phenomenon in metal music culture that fascinates them by looking for evidence (rather than counter-evidence) for their ideas should consider this.

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