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Special Issue:
Metal Studies? Cultural Research in the Heavy Metal scene
Guest Editors: Karl Spracklen, Andy R. Brown and Keith Kahn-Harris

Introduction

Given its popularity, visibility and complexity, the scholarly study of heavy metal needs no justification. Like other popular music cultures, heavy metal is a contested and controversial marker of both cultural *resistance* and sub-cultural *conformity*, offering a resource that enables individualised identity-formation and collective practices of association, consumption and commodification that are now global in character and complexity. At the same time, when compared to research on punk, hip-hop and other scenes, the study of heavy metal was slow to get going, with substantial studies not appearing until the 1990s.

With little fanfare, heavy metal studies has begun to flourish in the last few years. In summer 2011 a multi-media event, involving exhibitions of photography and fan-memorabilia, art and performance, personality musicians and presentations, publicly celebrated 'the Home of Metal' in the British West and East midlands - Birmingham in particular. The event was followed in September by an international conference, held over three days and gathering together a host of academics, practitioners and industry-professionals. The conference was the fifth international conference to have been convened, specifically centring on the subject, since 2008, and more are to follow.

This recent surge in academic interest on the subject of metal and the extent to which it is reflective of a hitherto unrecognized depth of scholarly engagement that is global in character, certainly demands explanation. Prior to 2008, although there were papers presented to conferences on the subject of metal, they were to some extent smuggled in under other themes, such as subculture, popular music, media and cultural studies, and the like. As Weinstein and Kahn-Harris both attest (this volume), prior to 2008, no one who was seriously interested in studying metal believed it would be possible to put on a conference exclusively devoted to the subject or that an international, peer reviewed journal could possibly see the light of day.¹

It is this dramatic shift and the possible explanations for it that are the subject of this special issue of the Journal for Cultural Research. One possible explanation for this change is that there has been a rise in the volume of PhD research, as younger scholars who perhaps were once fans themselves, have wanted to explore the cultural significance of their own formative identity practices. The data presented by Hickam and Wallach (this volume) seems to attest to this, as does the growing inclusion of heavy metal as a music preference among graduates respondents, in recent cultural surveys, replacing or co-existing with those for classical music and jazz (Savage 2006). This in itself suggests a dramatic shift in the disciplinary focus and treatment of the subject of heavy metal, a key concern of the opening survey article by Brown in this volume.

The increased scholarly attention to heavy metal has developed alongside a recent dramatic shift in the journalistic representation of heavy metal music and culture. Heavy metal has, for much of its history, been generally (but not exclusively) scorned and/or ignored by music critics and journalists (Weinstein 2004). Yet there appears to have been a decisive and largely unexplained, sympathetic and measured treatment to the news representation of heavy metal culture and fandom in recent years. It is possible that this is connected to the growth in academic interest in metal-related research.

Perhaps the best illustration of this (in the UK context) is the notable shift in coverage concerning heavy metal music to be found in the quality or broadsheet papers concerned with deciphering the cultural impact of the recent global recession to impact upon the G8

countries. This qualitative shift was exemplified by a piece in the Observer review (25.03.2007) which reported current academic research that suggested that 'some of the brightest young people in Britain like nothing more than a monster riff after a hard day of being a chess prodigy' (Empire, 2007: 9). This report, drawing on academic research presented at a Psychology Conference held at Warwick University, derived from a survey sample of members of the National Academy of Gifted and Talented Youth (Nagty), indicated that one third of the sample, 'rated metal among their favourite genres of music, ahead of classical and jazz, two complex genres thought to be the sound of choice for braniacs' (ibid).

This feature, echoing others from that year, was followed by a series of articles and weekend supplements in 2008, linking the dramatic resurgence of hard rock and heavy metal to the economics of the global recession. 'For those about to rock...heavy metal set to be the soundtrack of the summer' announced the Guardian Weekend, in May (Gibson, 2008: 11) and in June, 'Aaarrggghh! Why Iron Maiden still rule' (Quirk, 2008: 4-6), acknowledged the band's global appeal and the fact that they were due to play Twickenham stadium in July, to 55, 000 fans. In November, The Times 2, ran a feature in its colour supplement, 'Recession Rocks: Hard times call for heavy metal' (Wall, 2008: 1-4), which linked the resurgence of the metal genre and its popularity with a new generation variously to the success of the computer game, Guitar Hero, notions of authenticity, value for money, and the anti-mainstream credibility of a genre that had last been globally popular during the 'hard times' of the 80s.

The upsurge in research on metal together with the increasingly nuanced way it is seen outside of the academy should be welcomed by all those concerned with nurturing a reflexive approach to popular music and popular culture. At the same time, questions are beginning to be raised about the disciplinary status of this emerging field of research. At conferences on metal and on scholarly e-mail lists, the term 'metal studies' is increasingly being used, suggesting the view that the study of metal constitutes a multidisciplinary field in its own right. In this special issue of the *Journal for Cultural Research*, we aim to examine this claim, by mapping the scope and ambition of metal studies within the wider context of cultural research, identifying the key theoretical and methodological developments of the field, from the seminal work of Weinstein and Walser, to the more recent focus on Extreme metal, the global metal Diaspora, comparative regional and national research and the perennial 'border skirmishes' which mark the still problematic relationship of metal scholarship, metal fandom and the academy.

The issue is divided into two parts: Debate – Theory and Directions; and Research Articles. In the first part, a key positional paper by Andy Brown reviews the developments and directions taken within academic studies of heavy metal, and the growth of the idea of a more self-conscious 'metal studies'. Brown's paper suggests a number of possible theoretical and methodological futures for such studies, and identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the recent 'cultural turn' in metal research. This paper is complimented by the series of critical reflections offered by an invited panel of notable metal scholars - Deena Weinstein, Nicola Masciandaro and Keith Kahn-Harris – that follows it. These concise opinion pieces welcome the advent of a more specific and critical scholarship on metal, while also warning against the dangers of metal scholarship becoming a too self-regarding ghetto, where a small community of metal fans talk to each other about metal using the language of the academy to justify their fandom. It is important that scholars who are not fans of heavy metal contribute to the dialogue about metal studies; hence the need for this special issue.

Part two presents a diverse range of current metal research drawing on sociological and cultural theory. Jeremy Wallach and Brian Hickam signal, in their paper, a theme of this recent work, by exploring the gendered nature of metal scholarship and the myths of gendered belonging and exclusion in the wider metal scene. Caroline Lucas, Mark Deeks and

Karl Spracklen explore the burgeoning heritage-based black metal scene in the north of England, and examine the similarities and differences between those bands and the elitist Norwegian bands of the early 1990s. Rosemary Hill looks at the letters pages of *Kerrang!* magazine, tracing the fan-controversy surrounding the emergence of the 'emo' sub-genre and its 'threat' to traditional, masculinist notions of metal music and performance. Gabby Riches focuses her attention on the rituals of the 'mosh', and the role of dancing, physicality and liminality in extreme metal. Finally, Sonia Vasan explores the American death metal scene's constructions of femininity and the limited roles in that scene available for female death metal fans. All these research papers are united by critical approaches to heavy metal, and the prevalence of qualitative, reflexive, theory-laden cultural research.

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ⁱ The launch of a dedicated journal is muted, supported by the formation of the International Society for Metal Music Studies (ISMMS). An incident that indicates the extraordinary transformation that has occurred in the academic sphere recently is that two of the editors of this volume had an e-mail conversation in 2007 – a year before the first conference emerged – exploring whether it would be possible to stage a conference entirely dedicated to the study of heavy metal – tentatively title 'Metal Studies' – which concluded with the view that there were possibly not enough scholars to make it viable and so the idea was shelved!