

# Gender identity and the electric guitar in heavy metal music

## Philip Kelly

Robert Walser attempts a definition of heavy metal, a genre of music which developed in the late 1960s from the hard rock movement:

During the 1960s, British hard rock bands and the American guitarist Jimi Hendrix developed a more distorted guitar sound and heavier drums and bass that led to a separation of heavy metal from other blues-based rock. Albums by Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath and Deep Purple in 1970 codified the new genre, which was marked by distorted guitar 'power chords', heavy riffs, wailing vocals and virtuosic solos by guitarists and drummers.<sup>1</sup>

Heavy metal is a much maligned genre of music which has been dominated by controversy since its beginnings in the late 1960s. It has consistently drawn fire from various lobby groups because of its sometimes controversial subject matter often involving violence, death, sex and the occult. Like most rock music heavy metal is a musical genre dominated by men. The electric guitar, the genre's most iconic instrument, has been predominantly played by men since its development in the 1950s.

My motivation to investigate this subject is due to my interest in both heavy metal and the electric guitar. In this chapter I will attempt to outline the gendered characteristics of heavy metal and the electric guitar and address the question: has society's impression of heavy metal as a primarily masculine pursuit been so imbedded in Western culture that we will never see a female heavy metal band achieve the same level of success as a male heavy metal band?

Part one of the chapter is a broad examination of how masculinity is expressed through playing the electric guitar in this genre of music. Part two is an investigation into the apparent absence of

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Walser, 'Heavy Metal', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. by Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell, 2nd edn, 29 vols (London: Macmillan Publishers, 2001), xi, 301.

female heavy metal electric guitar virtuosi who perform professionally on the world circuit. Finally, part three analyses and discusses a music video from the genre of heavy metal for gender codes and metaphors contained within the performance of the artist.

*Heavy metal, heavy metal*

*What do you want?*

*Heavy metal, Heavy Metal<sup>2</sup>*

### **1. Metal as masculinity**

Since its creation, the electric guitar has been predominantly played by men. It has been used by these musicians as an expression of masculine power, through its capacity for loud volume. The notion of masculine power communicated through the electric guitar and heavy metal will be discussed throughout this chapter. This notion of masculine and feminine has permeated musicology. A.B. Marx's description of Sonata form, for example, employs gender terminology to describe the various sections of a sonata:

In this pair of themes [...] the first theme is the one determined at the outset, that is, with a primary freshness and energy — consequently that which is energetically, emphatically and absolutely shaped...the dominating and determining feature. On the other hand, the second theme [...] is the [idea] created afterward [*Nachgeschaffne*], serving as a contrast, dependant on and determined by the former — consequently, and according to its nature necessarily, the milder [idea], one more supple [*schmeigsam*] than emphatically shaped, as if it were [*gleichsam*] the feminine to the preceding masculine.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Judas Priest, *Ram it down*, Track no. 2, 'Heavy Metal' (Sony, B0000630BW, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> A. B. Marx, *Die Lehre von der musikalischen Komposition*, 2nd edn (Leipzig 1845), p. 221. Trans. by James Hepowski, 'Masculine. Feminine. Are current readings of Sonata Form in Terms of 'Masculine' and 'Feminine' exaggerated? James Hepowski argues for a more subtle approach to the politics of musical form', *The Musical Times*, 135 (1994), 494–99 (p. 494).

Chopin's music was often criticized for 'unmanning' the listener, suggesting that a quiet emotional section of a piece is feminine in nature and may destroy masculine power. Speaking of a Chopin nocturne Arthur Hedley said: 'Let us not tarry in this Capua — it bewitches and unmans'.<sup>4</sup> If one is to categorize masculinity and femininity in music by these ideas then one could argue that heavy metal, and its ear splitting volumes (listening example: Metallica: 'Fuel' from the album *Reload*, 1997<sup>5</sup>) and powerful musical themes played on the electric guitar are undoubtedly masculine.

Masculinity as an expression of power can only exist in a society or cultural system where power is derived from a dominantly patriarchal structure. In the book, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, Robert Walser states that 'Heavy Metal is, inevitably a discourse shaped by Patriarchy'.<sup>6</sup> This musical genre places large emphasis on masculine power. This is evident within many aspects of the genre, through the clothes worn by the participants, the swaggering walk and theatrical posturing of the performers and the ever present suggestion of imminent violence conveyed by the music.

Is heavy metal dependant upon this depiction of masculinity; can the genre of music survive without it? Can the music exist within itself and for itself without Western societal notions of masculinity dominating its subject matter?

Heavy metal is an expression of masculinity as perceived to be demanded by young, predominantly white males in Western society in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. 'Notions of gender circulate in the texts, sounds, images, and practices of heavy metal, and fans experience confirmation and alteration of their gendered identities through their involvement with it'.<sup>7</sup> Rapid and significant societal changes have occurred in the last century regarding gender identity.

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<sup>4</sup> Arthur Hedley, *Chopin: The Master Musician Series* (London: JM Dent, 1947), p. 131.

<sup>5</sup> Metallica, *Reload*, Track no. 7, 'Fuel' (Elektra/Wea, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Walser, *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), p. 109. Hereafter referred to as Walser, *Running With the Devil*.

<sup>7</sup> Walser, *Running With the Devil*, p. 109.

Women have become increasingly empowered and in most areas of Western society they now occupy the same social status as men; this leaves men in some doubt as to what their specific gender identity is in relation to that of their female counterparts. How does one define masculinity when the attributes that were originally used to describe it, and the specific roles associated with it, now encompass both sexes? The sociologist R.W. Connell writes about changing notions of masculinity in Western society:

The fact that conferences about 'masculinities' are being held is significant in its own right. Twenty five years ago no one would have thought of doing so. Both the men-and-masculinity literature that has bubbled up in the interval and the debates at conferences and seminars, testify that in some part of the Western intelligentsia, masculinity has become problematic in a way it never was before.<sup>8</sup>

Heavy metal may allow for the expression of many different masculinities rather than a singular masculinity, therefore mirroring complex gender issues in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This will be examined subsequently in the analysis of a heavy metal music video.

The electric guitar has been at the centre of the heavy metal movement from its beginning and is without doubt the genre's most iconic instrument. It holds a position of power within this music that sometimes surpasses that of the vocals. In heavy metal, levels of extreme virtuosity are often demanded from the guitarist in the group. The guitar solo is one of the most important aspects of the genre and some guitarists are worshipped because of their technical mastery of the instrument.

The electric guitar has always been a male dominated instrument and in heavy metal music it takes on an almost hyper-masculinity. Very few female heavy metal guitarists exist on the world circuit. Why do so few women succeed in making a career from playing heavy metal electric guitar? The cultural sociologist Deena Weinstein claims:

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<sup>8</sup> R.W. Connell, 'The big picture: masculinities in recent world history', *Theory and Society*, 22 (1993), 597–623 (p. 597).

Heavy metal is a musical genre. Although some of its critics hear it only as noise, it has a code, or set of rules, that allows one to objectively determine whether a song, an album, a band or a performance should be classified as belonging to the category 'heavy metal'.<sup>9</sup>

Could it be that women simply do not conform to the accepted rules laid down by the culture keepers of heavy metal? This may well be the case considering that heavy metal has been contrived by men, for men, as an expression of masculinity. Can female performers be accepted into a genre that has been developed by men as such an extreme expression of masculinity? The majority of female performers who have been accepted into this genre of music tend to be singers – one such example is the Swedish metal band Arch Enemy's Angela Gossow (listening example: Arch Enemy, *Songs of Rebellion*, 'We will rise', 2003<sup>10</sup>) – rather than guitarists, which further enforces the electric guitar's association with the male performer. The apparent absence of female electric guitarists from the genre of heavy metal will be investigated later.

Heavy metal electric guitarists are known for their theatrical body movements, for example strutting confidently around the stage. This posturing may be more than just egotistical theatrics: it contributes to masculine connotations about the electric guitar. The guitar is worn on low straps that hang just around the waist-line or lower. I argue that this could have phallic connotations. Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie write about phallic symbols in rock music in their 1990 publication 'Rock and Sexuality', in which they specifically link Led Zeppelin with this sexual nature of the guitar. 'Cock Rock shows are specifically about male sexual performance ... In these performances mikes and guitars are phallic symbols; the music is loud rhythmically, insistent, built around techniques of arousal and climax.'<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Deena Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 1991), p. 6. Hereafter referred to as Weinstein, *Heavy Metal*.

<sup>10</sup> Arch Enemy, *Anthems of Rebellion*, Track no. 3, 'We Will Rise' (Century Media, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, 'Rock and Sexuality', in *On Record: Rock Pop and the Written Word*, ed. by Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, (New

Coupled with this wearing of the guitar below the waist, some guitarists strike a pose that is commonly known as the 'power stance', whereby the guitarist positions his feet at twice the width of his shoulders, with knees bent and head quite often thrown back as though caught in a moment of inspired genius (See fig. 1).

**Figure 1. Slash from Guns 'n' Roses, power stance<sup>12</sup>**



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York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 371–89 (p. 372). Hereafter referred to as Frith and McRobbie, 'Rock and Sexuality'.

<sup>12</sup> Photograph taken from <<http://www.gibson.com/en-us/Lifestyle/Features/Slash>> [accessed 18 February 2008].

Stances such as this have been used through the centuries as battle stances, with weapons replaced by the guitar, as they convey strength, power and unwavering balance to a foe or in the guitarist's case, the audience. A recent lecture by Dr. Jason Toynbee of the Open University's Sociology department discussed communication in music performance through the body language of a performer.<sup>13</sup> He spoke about an artist, specifically Bob Marley, developing a system of communication with an audience through body language. I argue that heavy metal guitarists use similar methods to communicate notions of masculinity to an audience. The power stance and theatrical shaping around a stage is expected and even demanded by a heavy metal audience; guitarists who do not perform in this manner may not be accepted by the audience. This posturing is most common in heavy metal music which further suggests guitarists longing to express their masculinity and sexuality through their music, as well as fans' willingness to accept this action as an integral part of heavy metal culture.

Clothing is also a very important part of heavy metal culture and is used as an expression of masculinity and power by the performers and as a means of expression of identity by the heavy metal audience. In heavy metal, leather is one of the main materials used for clothing. Deena Weinstein says that 'Marlon Brando made the leather jacket a symbol of both masculinity and rebellion'.<sup>14</sup> This is one of the most recognisable features of heavy metal fashion (see fig. 2).

Heavy metal guitarists like Slash (fig. 1), originally from the band 'Guns and Roses' and now currently playing with 'Velvet Revolver', wore leather trousers, a leather jacket and heavy boots usually complemented by a black tee shirt. Leather has traditionally been used by warriors and hunters because of its strength and durability; both of these roles have strong masculine associations. The heavy metal guitarist's use of this material is undoubtedly linked to Brando's use of the leather jacket as an expression of masculinity and perhaps to the use by ancient warriors and hunters of leather as a form of armour.

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<sup>13</sup> Jason Toynbee, 'The primitive author, Bob Marley Performing Reggae as Rock', *NUI Maynooth Media Studies Seminar*, Maynooth, Ireland, 20 February 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Weinstein, *Heavy Metal*, p. 30.

**Figure 2. Metallica leather clad<sup>15</sup>**



Other guitarists in this genre wore spandex: 'Pants made of this material allow greater freedom of movement on stage and better display the athletic bodies of the performers, thereby promoting an image of vital power'.<sup>16</sup> This type of costume was popular amongst bands like Van Halen (see fig. 3).

Weinstein suggests that this costume was used as a way of distancing the band from the audience, and enhancing the theatrical element of heavy metal.

During the 1980s electric guitar manufacturers began to design guitars which would further contribute to the electric guitar's association with the male performer. Guitars were designed to reflect fashion trends amongst musicians and often enhanced a band's image as metal performers. These newly designed guitars further enhanced

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<sup>15</sup> Photograph taken from <<http://www.metallica.com/media/photos/gallery>> [accessed 18 February 2008].

<sup>16</sup> Weinstein, *Heavy Metal*, p. 30.



notions of masculinity within the music of the performers as they took on new shapes, often employing spikes or the shapes of weapons. This is quite fitting as the electric guitar is also known as an 'Axe';<sup>17</sup> this further associates the electric guitar with the role of the warrior. BC Rich, Ibanez, Jackson, and ESP were the main manufacturers of these new guitars (see fig.4).

**Figure 3. Van Halen wearing spandex<sup>18</sup>**



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<sup>17</sup> Rusty Ed. Cutchin, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Guitar Heroes* (Flame Tree Publishing, London, 2008), p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Photograph taken from <<http://www.rateitall.com/i-12769-van-halen.aspx>> [accessed 18 February 2008].

**Figure 4. BC Rich Beast guitar<sup>19</sup>**



The shape of the guitar was not the only thing that changed in these new designs: technologically the guitars were modified to allow for louder volumes and greater levels of distortion. These modifications included the development of the active pickup, a new electronic component on the electric guitar. This device uses a separate power supply and a built-in preamp to eliminate noise generated by electricity passing through the pickup. In his article 'California Noise: Tinkering with Hardcore and Heavy Metal in Southern California' Steve Waksman states that 'Tinkering with the electric guitar has been a predominantly masculine endeavour, the end of which could be deemed the fortification of manhood as much as the specific technological or musical goals that are

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<sup>19</sup> Photograph taken from <[http://www.bcrich.com/beast\\_nt.asp](http://www.bcrich.com/beast_nt.asp)> [accessed 18 February 2008].

sought'.<sup>20</sup> Waksman is referring to the process of modifying the electric guitar as an expression of masculinity. I also argue that the development of active pickups and the widespread use of them by electric guitarists in heavy metal was an expression of masculinity, as these new pickups allowed for greater volumes and more distortion, which as I have already stated are used directly as an expression of masculine power.

The gender division in heavy metal performance does not hold true for audience members. 'Since around 1987, concert audiences for metal shows have been roughly gender balanced'.<sup>21</sup> This means that heavy metal and the heavy metal guitar do not exclusively appeal to men as a genre of music. From a commercial point of view the female audience is immensely important for heavy metal as it propels heavy metal's fan numbers out of minority and into majority mainstream popular culture. Robert Walser argues that this gender balancing of heavy metal was largely due to the impact of the release of Bon Jovi's album *Slippery When Wet*. 'Bon Jovi managed to combine the power and freedom offered by metal with the constructed "authenticity" of rock, and, most important, the romantic sincerity of a long tradition of pop'.<sup>22</sup> Bon Jovi offer a different kind of masculinity to the audience than that of conventional heavy metal and has often been dismissed as being 'too soft' to be considered metal, although their guitar based songs are steeped in hard rock and heavy metal traditions. Richie Sambora, the guitarist from Bon Jovi, demonstrates excellent technical command of the instrument in his playing on the song 'Living on a Prayer' from the album *Slippery When Wet*.

While audience statistics for heavy metal concerts are indicative of a gender balance amongst fans since the release of *Slippery When Wet*, performance within this genre still remains a primarily masculine pursuit. What is it about this musical genre which prevents women from

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<sup>20</sup> Steve Waksman, 'California Noise: Tinkering with Hardcore and Heavy Metal in Southern California', in *Social Studies of Science*, ed. by Michael Lynch (London: Sage Publications, 2004), pp. 675–702 (p. 676). Hereafter referred to as Waksman, 'California Noise'.

<sup>21</sup> Walser, *Running With the Devil*, p. 110.

<sup>22</sup> Walser, *Running With the Devil*, p. 120.

engaging with it in a performance capacity, specifically with the electric guitar?

## **2. Why are there no great female heavy metal electric guitarists?**

Linda Nochlin addresses the question of the exclusion of female artists in her article 'Why have there been no great women artists?'<sup>23</sup> Nochlin does not directly answer this question, instead investigating its nature and the social circumstances that allow it to be asked:

It is when one really starts thinking about the implications of 'Why have there been no great women artists' that one begins to realise to what extent our consciousness of how things are in the world has been conditioned — and often falsified — by the way the most important questions are posed.<sup>24</sup>

Nochlin argues that this question essentially answers itself:

But like so many other so-called questions involved in the feminine 'controversy', it [the question] falsifies the nature of the issue at the same time as it insidiously supplies its own answer: 'There are no great women artists because women are incapable of greatness'.<sup>25</sup>

Nochlin does not argue that there have been great women artists to rival the already established pantheon of 'great' male artists like Dali, Da Vinci and others. Nochlin asks why great women artists are not allowed to exist. I ask the same question specifically of female virtuosic performers in heavy metal guitar playing.

In this regard a virtuoso musician has been defined by Owen Jander as:

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<sup>23</sup> Linda Nochlin: 'Why have there been no great women artists?', in *Women Art and Power and Other Essays*, ed. by Linda Nochlin (Colorado: Westview Press, 1988), pp. 147–58. Hereafter referred to as Nochlin, 'Why have there been no great women artists?'.

<sup>24</sup> Nochlin, 'Why have there been no great women artists?', p. 150.

<sup>25</sup> Nochlin, 'Why have there been no great women artists?', p. 147.

A musician of extraordinary technical skill ... A virtuoso in music may have been a skilled performer but more importantly he was a composer, a theorist or at least a famous *maestro di capella* ... the true virtuoso was a musician of exceptional training, especially theory ... there has been a tendency to regard dazzling feats of technical skill with suspicion (and even, in such cases as Tartini and Paganini, to ascribe to them some supernatural power), the true virtuoso has always been prized not only for his rarity but also for his ability to widen the technical and expressive boundaries of his art.<sup>26</sup>

And, it is interesting to note here that Jander uses gendered language to define virtuosity as a male pursuit. In 1978 the heavy metal band Van Halen released their debut album entitled *Van Halen*. This was perhaps the most important album for the development of the electric guitar for almost a decade, and may have been the catalyst for all virtuoso electric guitar records since then:

Eddie Van Halen had revolutionised metal guitar technique with the release of Van Halen's debut album in 1978, fuelling a renaissance in electric guitar study and experimentation unmatched since thousands of fans were inspired to learn to play by Eric Clapton's apotheosis in the late 1960s and Jimi Hendrix's death in 1970.<sup>27</sup>

Joe Satriani, one of the world's premier heavy metal electric guitar virtuosos credits Eddie Van Halen with bringing electric guitar virtuosity into mainstream popular music. Speaking in an interview in October 2007 regarding his ground breaking album *Surfing with the Alien*, Satriani paid tribute to Eddie Van Halen: 'Eddie's success meant Steve Vai and I could do our thing without people turning around and saying, "Stop that!" He made it acceptable. God bless him, but it's all his

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<sup>26</sup> Owen Jander, 'Virtuosity', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. by Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell, 2nd edn, 29 vols (London: Macmillan Publishing, 2001), xxvi, 789–90 (p. 789). Hereafter referred to as Jander, 'Virtuosity'.

<sup>27</sup> Walser, *Running with the Devil*, p. 11.

fault. No one would let us do it in public until that'.<sup>28</sup> Satriani's statement shows how important Eddie Van Halen was in the development of this style of guitar music. Before Van Halen no other guitarist had played the electric guitar in this manner and been commercially successful. His success inspired a new style of guitar playing and a new sub-genre of heavy metal, 'Shred Metal', in which Satriani and Steve Vai excelled both commercially and artistically. Van Halen's success allowed Satriani and Vai to release albums that entirely contained solo heavy metal electric guitar music, usually without vocals.

Heavy metal guitar playing is dually influenced by African American *blues* and Western art music. While growing up, Eddie Van Halen was fortunate enough to have received classical piano tuition. His father was intent upon Eddie and his brother Alex becoming classical musicians. 'Jan Van Halen encouraged his sons to become classical musicians, and both boys started piano lessons while very young, dutifully practicing Mozart until their interests in guitar and drums prevailed'.<sup>29</sup>

I believe that heavy metal guitar soloists are influenced heavily by romantic connotations about virtuosity, specifically romantic virtuoso violinists such as Paganini, and argue that this influence brings with it the gender and sexual ideals already established by romantic violin virtuosos:

Virtuoso codes of violin performance were gendered in several ways, ways so obvious to contemporaries as to have been transparent. From the new symbol of the violin as a feminine form (no longer the "king of instruments") and the bow as a phallic symbol to the sexual connotations of male violinists in the act of performance, gender codes were ubiquitous.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ciarán Tracey, 'Gone Surfing Again...', in *Guitarist*, ed. by Mick Taylor (London: Future Publishing, 2007), p. 61.

<sup>29</sup> Walser, *Running with the Devil*, p. 67.

<sup>30</sup> Maiko Kawabata, 'Virtuoso Codes of Violin Performance: Power, Military Heroism and Gender (1789–1830)', *19<sup>th</sup> Century Music*, 28/2 (2004), 89–107 (p. 103). Hereafter referred to as Kawabata, 'Virtuoso Codes'.

Maiko Kawabata argues that virtuoso violin playing was related in the nineteenth century to military heroism and power, something which was linked entirely with societal notions of masculinity. 'I argue that virtuoso codes of performance — a network of physical and musical gestures — combined to create the overall impression of the violinist as a hero, as a symbol of military power'.<sup>31</sup> I argue that male heavy metal electric guitarists exhibit these concepts in the performance of their music and this may be one of the reasons that there are very few female heavy metal electric guitarists.

Kawabata writes about heroic codes being embedded in virtuoso violin music. In the late 1970s, with the release of Van Halen's debut album, Eddie Van Halen wore the mantle of guitar 'hero', following in the footsteps of guitarists such as Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix. In the eyes of fans, guitarists were more than just musicians; romantic concepts of virtuosity, heroism and power were apparent in the imagery and ideology of the electric guitarist. 'For all his widely admired virtuosity, Edward Van Halen was expected by his bandmates, and perhaps by many of his fans, to adhere to an ethos of rock "heroism"'.<sup>32</sup>

Contemporary with the release of Van Halen's first album, Floyd Rose was developing a new vibrato system for the electric guitar. Some electric guitars come equipped with a movable bridge to allow for the production of a vibrato like sound. The bridge is manipulated by an arm attached to the bridge (see fig.5).

The guitarist depresses (sometimes raises) the arm to create a vibrato effect. This can have a detrimental effect on a guitar's tuning. Floyd Rose set out to make a vibrato system that would allow the guitar to stay in tune even with extended use from the guitarist. Rose devised a system that incorporated string clamps at the nut of the guitar that would hold the guitar in tune and a series of fine tuners, similar to a violin, which would allow for minor tuning adjustments (see fig.6).

Maiko Kawabata writes: 'The sight of a violinist lashing around with the bow, attacking the string aggressively, and disciplining the resonance of that string with tight dotted rhythms seems to enact sexual domination.'<sup>33</sup> The new Floyd Rose vibrato system allowed for the heavy

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<sup>31</sup> Kawabata, 'Virtuoso Codes', p. 91.

<sup>32</sup> Waksman, 'California Noise', p. 117.

<sup>33</sup> Kawabata, 'Virtuoso Codes', p. 103.

metal guitarist to attack the guitar with the vibrato arm and produce screams and moans from the guitar, which has obvious sexual connotations similar to that of the romantic virtuoso violinist 'disciplining' the string. This is evident in listening to the following: Steve Vai, *Alien Love Secrets*, 'Bad Horsie'.<sup>34</sup>

**Figure 5. Fender Stratocaster, note bridge vibrato system and attached vibrato arm<sup>35</sup>**



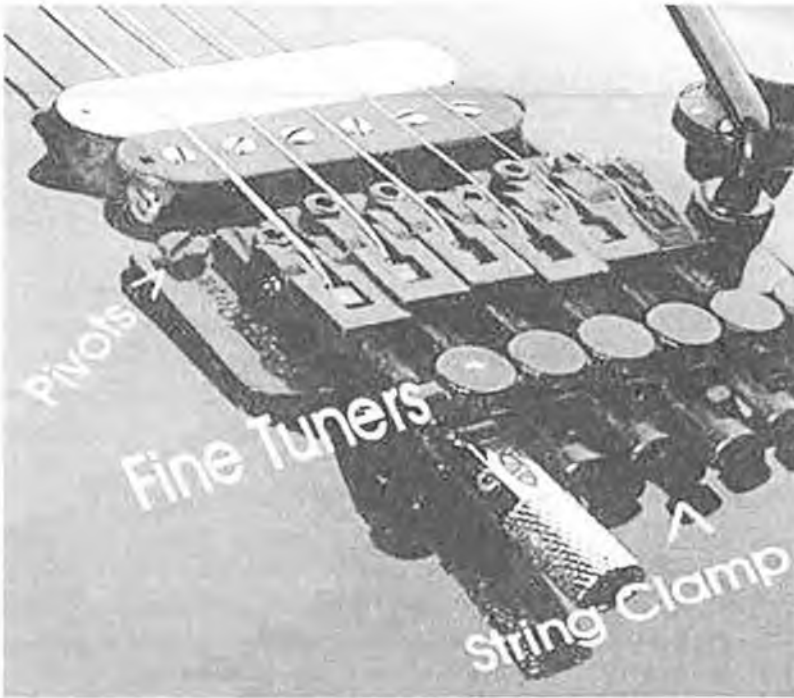
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<sup>34</sup> Steve Vai, *Alien Love Secrets*, Track no. 1, 'Bad Horsie' (Relativity Records/Epic Records 074646803127, 1995).

<sup>35</sup> Eric Johnson Stratocaster photograph taken from <<http://www.fender.com>> [accessed 19 March 2008].



**Figure 6. Floyd Rose vibrato unit<sup>36</sup>**



‘A handful of women performed the music under discussion during Paganini’s lifetime, and they were seen as successful only when imitating masculine displays of power’.<sup>37</sup> In this quotation Kawabata reflects upon Nochlin’s ideas. He considers that women were only successful when imitating men; he agrees with Nochlin’s idea that an audience’s consciousness is conditioned and I also argue that this is the case for female heavy metal electric guitarists. As I have stated heavy metal culture is dominated by patriarchy and if a female is to succeed perhaps she will only do so if imitating masculine displays of power.

In the course of my research I reviewed videos of female heavy metal guitarists. In each video there is an evident commonality between female guitarists and male guitarists; the female guitarists are shown

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<sup>36</sup> Floyd Rose Vibrato Unit photograph taken from  
 <<http://www.fretnotguitarrepair.com>> [accessed 20 March 2008].

<sup>37</sup> Kawabata, ‘Virtuoso Codes’, p. 104.

performing in the same manner as their male counterparts in terms of movements, body language and the ideology behind costume choice, for example, clothing that accentuates the performers' gender or sexuality. This reinforces Kawabata's above statement regarding women imitating male performers. Jennifer Batten and Katherine Thomas (Thomas is also known as 'The Great Kat') are two of the most successful female heavy metal guitar virtuosos. Both guitarists conform to Kawabata's above argument, presenting typically masculine displays of power in their performances as examined in section one.

Batten and Thomas play as fast and as theatrically as any of the male virtuoso electric guitarists. Why then are they not held in as much esteem as Eddie Van Halen or Steve Vai? In her performances Thomas accentuates both masculine connotations associated with the electric guitar as examined earlier and her own femininity. Photographs of Thomas show her in clothing that accentuates her femininity but she usually counterbalances this with extremely violent imagery (see fig. 7).

Thomas, a Julliard graduate, promotes herself as both a classically trained violin virtuoso and a heavy metal guitarist. Her albums feature Western art music by composers such as Wagner, Rossini, and Vivaldi, the titles of which generally feature the names of classical composers in a deliberately controversial manner such as *Wagner's War*, *Rossini's Rape*, *Beethoven on Speed* and *Bloody Vivaldi*. Thomas's extremely dramatic and violent image seems to be a marketing tool for self promotion. She uses it to differentiate herself in a genre of music dominated by men. Thomas was recently placed at number ten in a top ten list of heavy metal guitarists by *Guitar One* magazine:

The Great Kat: Girl power is an understatement. Born Katherine Thomas, this Julliard-trained violinist snapped after graduating and mutated into the world's first shredding dominatrix — the self dubbed 'High Priestess of Shred Guitar'. Not that she doesn't really belong here but we were scared to leave her off.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Christopher O' Byrne, 'Top Ten Fastest Shredders of All Time', *Guitar One*, April 2003, p.12.

Figure 7. 'The Great Kat', *Bloody Vivaldi*<sup>39</sup>



Even in this article negative language regarding Thomas' inclusion in the top ten is present, albeit in good humour. Nevertheless the negative connotations regarding Thomas' gender are there.

In an article entitled 'No Girls Allowed?' in the *Washington Post*, David Segal asks questions regarding the absence of female electric guitar heroines:

Where are all the guitar heroines? Where are all the female guitarists who can light it up in some original, groundbreaking and influential way? Can you name any? Come to think of it, have you ever heard the term 'Guitar Heroine?' [...] Here's the hard and horrible truth: Fifty years after Elvis Presley recorded 'That's All Right Mama', the grand total of pantheon-worthy female rock guitarists is zero. There isn't a single one.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> The Great Kat Photograph taken from <[www.thegreatkat.com](http://www.thegreatkat.com)> [accessed 20 March 2008].

<sup>40</sup> David Segal, 'No Girls Allowed?', *Washington Post*, 22 August 2004, p. 1.

It is useful here to once again make reference to Owen Jander's definition of virtuosity:

The true virtuoso has always been prized not only for his rarity but also for his ability to widen the technical and expressive boundaries of his art.<sup>41</sup>

Jander defines virtuosity as an artist's ability to develop the genre in which they perform. The reason Eddie Van Halen, Steve Vai and Joe Satriani are held in such high esteem is that they have all been innovators in the genre of heavy metal. Katherine Thomas and Jennifer Batten possess the skill to play at the highest level of this genre. Batten played guitar in Michael Jackson's touring band and has also played with other esteemed guitarists like Jeff Beck. Is it possible that the female guitarists are not held in as high regard as their male counterparts by the heavy metal audience because they have not broken new ground, as Jander states, in the same way that Van Halen or Vai have? One could argue the point that they have been innovators in so far as few women have played guitar in this manner before, but this point suggests the guitarists are novelty acts rather than legitimate artists. Male guitarists have played in this style for a number of years. Mary Ann Clawson writes in her article 'When Women play the Bass: Instrument Specialisation and Gender Interpretation in Alternative music': 'Being a novelty is an advantage for females ... This continuing novelty status is but further confirmation of rock's character as an obviously displayed bastion for male exclusivity'. I believe that women must have more than novelty to offer to this genre of music. Rather than offering something strictly new to the genre, I argue that female heavy metal guitarists like Batten and Thomas offer a unique perspective on heavy metal guitar; a feminine interpretation of a primarily masculine form.

These arguments do not fully answer my initial question: Why is heavy metal guitar virtuosity a primarily masculine endeavour? Is Nochlin's proposal about great art correct? Do societal notions about the electric guitar prevent women from offering their own, uniquely feminine, interpretation of the electric guitar within heavy metal? By

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<sup>41</sup> Jander, 'Virtuosity', p. 789.

this I mean a female electric guitarist who is not directly imitating the already established masculine approach to the instrument.

The question 'Why are there no great female heavy metal guitarists?' implies the same answer as Nochlin's 'Why are there no great female artists?' Does the heavy metal audience feel that women are 'incapable of greatness', as Nochlin states? I believe that in order for a female heavy metal guitarist to have the same success and be regarded as highly as male performers in the genre, the heavy metal audience's and heavy metal music industry's perception of the instrument and genre must change.

### 3. Music video analysis

In the following analysis of a heavy metal music video I will attempt to demonstrate some of the sexual and gender codes typical of heavy metal exhibited in the performance of the artist.

Heavy metal artists use many different media to communicate the heavy metal ideology to their fans, for example, magazines, fan websites and music videos. Robert Walser writes: 'Verbal meanings are only a fraction of whatever it is that makes musicians and fans respond to and care about popular music'.<sup>42</sup> Walser is referring to popular music having meaning beyond the lyrics of songs. I agree with Walser and argue that popular music bands, including heavy metal groups, use many methods to communicate meaning to fans. I believe the music video is one of the most effective media used by the popular music industry to communicate with its consumers.

I argue that heavy metal bands use the music video to communicate the visual ideology attached to heavy metal culture, i.e. clothing, actions, and body language, to their fan-base. The music video may heighten a fan's sense of identification and closeness with the band. Terry Bloomfield comments on imagined intimacy with a band or artist:

'When I'm getting off on an Al Green record there's Al, there's me, and there's very probably an absent woman I'm having a love fantasy about'. (Roberts 1991) But there isn't Al. If Al were there he would be giving a private performance to Chris Roberts as patron: an odd conception in the present-day world ... In his comment Roberts has

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<sup>42</sup> Walser, *Running with the Devil*, p. 26.

been captured by the Romantic understanding of the song; that its essence is (artistic) interiority made exterior. He is not alone in his fantasy of access to the pop singer.<sup>43</sup>

This 'fantasy of access', as Bloomfield calls it, is created by the artist using a variety of methods to give the listener a sense of closeness with the performer and a means by which to identify with the band or artist.

The music video is a highly effective method of conveying a band's image or message to a mass audience. With a music video a band reaches a far larger audience than would be possible at a single concert. The music video allows for repetition of a performance and with television channels such as 'VH1' or 'Kerrang' dedicated almost exclusively to the airing of music videos there is great potential for exposure to an extremely large audience.

Walser writes that heavy metal music videos are only part of how fans relate to the performers:

'Headbangers' Ball', the weekly three hour MTV program devoted to heavy metal, is quite popular with the fans I surveyed, but it is hardly the most important aspect of their involvement with metal. Concerts, records, radio, fan magazines, and quite often playing an instrument figure as primary components of metal fans' lives ... A significant number of fans (especially male) watch MTV seldom or never ... This is not to argue that metal videos are unimportant but rather to say that they do not operate in a social vacuum: their analysis must be inflected by knowledge of the lives and cultural investments of the viewers.<sup>44</sup>

Walser wrote this in 1993 before the mass proliferation of music video television channels devoted exclusively to the airing of music videos. Since then MTV has diversified and become less about showing music videos and more about generic popular culture with programs ranging from 'Reality TV' to film review shows. In its stead other channels have sprung up whose mandate is to exclusively show music videos. Some of these channels dedicate themselves entirely to heavy metal, with 'Scuzz'

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<sup>43</sup> Terry Bloomfield, 'Resisting Songs: Negative Dialectics in Pop', *Popular Music*, 12 (1993), 13–31 (p. 13).

<sup>44</sup> Walser, *Running With the Devil*, p. 112.

being perhaps the channel most devoted to showing heavy metal videos in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland. I argue that since the time Walser wrote his book the heavy metal music video has become increasingly important for the initial mediation of the genre of heavy metal to new fans and perhaps as a way for older fans to keep in contact with the genre.

Heavy metal music videos generally show the band in question in the act of performing their songs. I believe this is to heighten the sense of musical authenticity that heavy metal artists strive to communicate with their fans, a way of saying they are more musically legitimate and honest than other popular music performers through 'performing' in front of the fans. As Walser writes:

The most distinctive feature of heavy metal videos is that they typically present the spectacle of live performance; bands are shown on stage, performing in synch with the song ... In the typical metal video, however actual concert footage is often used ... Heavy metal has long had the most loyal touring support of any popular music genre, and the arena concert experience of collectivity and participation remain the ideal that many videos seek to evoke.<sup>45</sup>

Weinstein agrees with Walser:

During the 1980s, music videos provided another medium for the visual expression of heavy metal's sensibility ... The first rule is that concert footage or a realistic facsimile must be a strong element in the video. However, the medium of television cannot capture the aural power and general excitement of a heavy metal concert. TV is too domesticated in its ubiquitous position as a member of the household to stimulate the all-inclusive concert experience. Its smaller-than-life screen and low-quality speakers cannot begin to approximate the sensory inputs of the live venue.<sup>46</sup>

I argue that since Weinstein wrote the above some television sets have become larger-than-life, with incredibly high definition picture quality

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<sup>45</sup> Walser, *Running With the Devil*, p. 114.

<sup>46</sup> Weinstein, *Heavy Metal*, p. 31.

and surround sound speakers which contribute to bringing the concert experience closer to the audience's home, thereby increasing the importance of the heavy metal music video.

#### **4. 'Tender Surrender' – Steve Vai**

The video for 'Tender Surrender' by Steve Vai<sup>47</sup> will now be analysed to examine the way in which a male virtuoso heavy metal electric guitarist expresses masculinity and sexual power through his performance. While this piece of music may not seem to conform to most of heavy metal's characteristics, the distorted electric guitar and flamboyant techniques used by Vai are all hallmarks of heavy metal. Vai has performed and recorded with many of the most successful heavy metal bands in the world, including Whitesnake and David Lee Roth. Vai has also released over twenty solo albums and been nominated for six Grammys of which he has won two. He is renowned for his incredible virtuosity and ability to fuse heavy metal guitar techniques with other styles of music including jazz, as can be seen and heard in this video.

This video shows Vai, surrounded by his band, exclusively in the act of performance. The video begins with Vai playing an octave motif. It is interesting to note Vai's costume: a suit with no shirt beneath his blazer, a choice of costume which is used, as Weinstein suggests, to show Vai's slender physique, demonstrating athletic fitness and power, thereby contributing to notions of sexual power. Vai initially plays the guitar tenderly, strumming lightly with his thumb to create the desired tone. His actions contribute greatly to sexual connotations about virtuosity in heavy metal. Vai gazes lovingly at the guitar as though trying to communicate his love for the instrument to it. In the early parts of this video Vai does not use the 'power stance', instead he moves sensuously and gently from foot to foot. Close up shots of Vai's hands reveal that his sensuality of movement continues even to the way he frets the notes he plays. Throughout the video, Vai moves his mouth as though the guitar is voicing a feeling he cannot express. Vai, like many other guitarists, was influenced in this regard by Jimi Hendrix who also moved his mouth in this manner.

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<sup>47</sup> Steve Vai, 'Tender Surrender', *Alien Love Secrets DVD*, dir. by Devin Meadows (New York, Epic Records 014381549621, 1995).



This piece begins in E minor and is built around a series of climaxes over given chord progressions. The initial chord progression is Em7 |Am7 |D |Em |Em7. Each time the chord pattern begins Vai increases the level of virtuosity in his playing, building eventually to a solo of extreme virtuosity. Vai knows his fans expect a guitar solo and manipulates this expectation throughout the piece. As the level of virtuosity increases, Vai's movements become more energetic, as though the music is propelling him to ever increasing levels of physical pleasure. This display has obvious sexual connotations and the continual building to a climax in the music is, as Frith and McRobbie write, representative of male sexual performance: 'The music is loud, rhythmically insistent, built around techniques of arousal and climax.'<sup>48</sup>

When Vai eventually reaches the guitar solo in the piece, he uses distortion to allow him to sustain long notes and his body language and facial expressions become more vivid. The majority of his movements have sexual connotations, for example running his hand through his hair while sustaining a note. From this point in the video Vai begins to move as though he is putting tremendous passion and energy into his performance. His facial expressions sometimes suggest intense pleasure, moments of inspiration and disbelief at the passage just played; seemingly surprising himself with his own skill. Vai frequently mouths the notes he's playing, particularly high, sustained pitches, here it looks as though the guitar is screaming for Vai and expressing the passion he is putting into his performance and perhaps representing sexual pleasure (see video at 2.31 and again at 2.41).

Vai accentuates his skill and technical proficiency by pointing to his left hand fingers as they speed down the neck. In bar 51 of this piece, (video: 3.07) Vai bends the vibrato arm ferociously, making the guitar scream. Not satisfied with one scream from the guitar, Vai bends the vibrato arm again, at the same time shaking his head as though encouraging the guitar to scream again for him. I argue this has sexual connotations, similar to Kawabata's romantic violin virtuoso, as discussed in section two, 'disciplining' the violin string with the bow. Vai repeats this action moments later followed by a flurry of semi-demi quavers in complex metrical divisions. Vai's facial expression at this point is indicative of the effort required to play this passage. He ends

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<sup>48</sup> Frith and McRobbie, 'Rock and Sexuality', p. 372.

the guitar solo with a series of rapid arpeggios over chords of Em7 and D major. The last note of the solo is a high D and as Vai plays this he leans back with his mouth open again emphasizing the technical skill, effort and bodily energy needed to play such a fast passage.

The song ends with a recapitulation of the initial octave pattern over the familiar chord progression starting on Em7. Vai comes to the end of this piece with some more vibrato arm work, initially playing notes as he pushes the arm, moving his mouth as though voicing the notes. He begins to push and pull the arm with great intensity, making the strings rattle off the pickups, increasing in volume and speed until Vai slows down and eventually stops. Vai's facial expressions match the intensity of the sound he creates with the vibrato arm. This is perhaps the most obvious representation of arousal and climax in the piece, summing up the entire form of the piece in this one act. Vai ends the piece by licking his finger and playing an artificial harmonic on the note A, while the organ plays a supporting Em11 chord.

Vai's actions during his performance of this piece contribute to male sexual connotations regarding heavy metal electric guitar virtuosity. Almost all of his movements imply male sexuality and power, even the title of this piece has sexual connotations. Vai's stamina and energy are exhibited when playing extremely fast passages over prolonged periods, which contribute to notions of athletic fitness and male sexual power.

### **Heavy metal: masculinities in the twenty-first century**

It has become apparent that heavy metal is indeed a genre of music almost completely dominated by men. In the beginning of this piece it was shown how masculinity and patriarchy dominate virtually every aspect of the genre, from fashion trends and timbre of instruments, to body language and technological advancements of the instrument. The development of heavy metal as an expression of masculinity and the methods used in the communication of this masculinity to the heavy metal audience were also examined.

Section two examined the absence of professional female heavy metal guitar virtuosos from the world circuit. Research for this section has highlighted that electric guitar performance is a strongly male dominated musical role in heavy metal, although female heavy metal vocalists like Angela Gossow from Arch Enemy make successful careers within the genre. I feel that if a female heavy metal electric guitarist is to

achieve the levels of success of Eddie Van Halen or Steve Vai, significant changes must occur within the heavy metal audience's perception of the electric guitar and the gender codes embedded in its performance.

With the analysis of the music video in section three it was demonstrated that gender and sexual codes are indeed present in heavy metal electric guitar performance. Steve Vai communicated his own personal, sexual and gender identity through this performance. It is important to state that the specific gender codes displayed in Vai's performance are not universally accepted and shared in heavy metal and that each heavy metal performer offers his/her own interpretation of their unique gender identity. One wonders if the varying depictions of gender identity in heavy metal music videos are conditioned by the audience's reaction to them or is the audience's perception of gender identity determined by what they see and hear on screen?

It seems that heavy metal has endured since its beginnings in the late 1960s because of its popularity amongst fans and its mass appeal. I argue that one reason for this is because it confirms and reifies different masculinities for its fans. It allows the male fans to assert themselves in relation to gender in a way they see fit and feel comfortable with.

It has become apparent to me that people need a way of expressing gender and sexuality. Heavy metal appears to have been a viable means for the expression of masculinities as defined by Western society in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As the factors that define gender in Western culture continue to change over time, one wonders whether heavy metal will continue to endure as a means of expressing masculinities.

*An armour plated raging beast  
That's born of steel and leather  
It will survive against all odds  
Stampeding on forever*<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Judas Priest, *Ram it down*, Track no. 2, 'Heavy Metal' (Sony, B0000630BW, 1980).

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