

rites of the condemned: sociomusical aspects of speed metal music

Thus the shriek, the caterwaul, the chainsaw gnarlgnashing, the yowl and the whizz that decapitates may be reheard by the adventurous or emotionally damaged as mellifluous bursts of unarguable affirmation.

---Lester Bangs¹

Our music foretells our future. Let us lend it an ear.

---Jacques Attali²

Foreword 2008: College Days Re-Revisited

This document is a senior thesis originally submitted to the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Haverford College in May 1992. At the time I wrote it, I had no idea that I would one day make a living as a popular music scholar. I want belatedly to thank Andy Jewett, now an academic historian, for sending me most of the articles I cite in it. I also want to thank ethnomusicologist Sarah Morelli for her suggestion that these framing remarks be moved to the beginning of the thesis.

I want to make it clear that this thesis was hardly greeted with enthusiasm by my professors. It received an A- and no one on my committee even bothered to send me comments on the final draft. At the time, I attributed this less-than-enthusiastic response to the unconventional subject matter of the thesis, but reading through it now I am painfully aware of its logical, methodological, and theoretical flaws. So why then make it available now?

I became interested in revisiting this research after attending the first international academic conference on heavy metal in Salzburg, Austria in November 2008. The papers were stimulating, some more than others, but what really struck me was the number of conference delegates who were *exactly my age*. They had grown up listening to the same set of bands as me and as adults--philosophers, political scientists, media studies scholars, and ethnomusicologists--they were determined to make the music of their youth the subject of serious scholarly inquiry. I thought then that it might be useful to go back to this early, earnest attempt at metal research as a way to reflect on what has and hasn't changed in the music and the scholarship over the last sixteen years--particularly now that 80s/early 90s metal appears to be enjoying a revival.

Perhaps the most significant development in what is now called "extreme metal" ("speed metal" is, of course, rarely used these days; the term seems to have fallen out of favor some time in the mid 1990s) is the rise of black metal, with its emphasis on mystical communion and in some cases the dissolution of the self in transgressive spiritual ecstasy. There are numerous other significant developments as well, of course, such as the replacement of glam/lite metal with nü metal and

the increasing subgenre fragmentation of metal, but the rise of black metal in my mind constitutes the most serious challenge to the argument of this thesis (which I now recognize as overly idealistic and totalizing) that metal music is about celebrating the moral integrity of the self in the face of an unjust and oppressive society. On the other hand, I think much of the analysis in this study can be applied easily to another metal subgenre that flourished in the period between then and now: grindcore.

As for metal scholarship, Rob Walser's *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* came out the year after the completion of this thesis and opened the floodgates for a new generation of heavy metal scholars of a cultural studies/critical musicology bent. Meanwhile the sociology of metal, inspired by the pioneering work of Donna Gaines and Deena Weinstein, continues to expand and develop and no longer has to fight so hard for respect. Harris Berger's 1999 masterpiece *Metal, Rock, and Jazz: Perception and the Phenomenology of Musical Experience* brought ethnomusicological perspectives to the study of metal culture. Just last year, Keith Kahn-Harris's *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*, which employs a combination of research strategies including multi-sited fieldwork, was released to considerable acclaim in the overlapping metal and scholarly communities. At the time of this writing, academic studies of global metal scenes, the history of punk and metal cross-fertilization, and metal's political and ethical ramifications are in the works. As people in my age cohort become more established in the academy, I expect a further efflorescence of metal scholarship in the next few years, and I hope this thesis, flawed and tentative though it is, will prove useful to those endeavors.

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December 29, 2008

Introduction

Speed metal is more often referred to as a social problem than as a style of music. This essay will look at the messages and the media of the speed metal phenomenon and examine the youth subculture that has formed around the music.

Most recent academic writings on popular culture have introductions in which the author(s) apologize for the tentative nature of their research and immediately go on the defensive, claiming that despite the fact that their writing is an incomplete and inadequate treatment of their subject, they feel their topic is a valid subject of study for any serious practitioners in their discipline. I will spare the reader such preliminary arguments, hoping that what follows will be convincing enough evidence that speed metal is a fascinating cultural phenomenon, worthy of serious academic attention, that can tell us a great deal about the role music can play in modern society.

In places this essay may resemble a descriptive account of a music-based subculture more than a thesis paper. This is necessary because the social phenomena upon which I rest my theoretical arguments tend to be wholly unfamiliar to many scholars (and to adults in general, I might add). My hope is that the central themes of the essay will not be lost amid the ethnographic detail that will be presented.

Origins

Speed metal, or "thrash metal,"³ was the name given to a style of music that developed in the early 1980s on the east and west coasts of the United States. It was (and remains) principally an offshoot of heavy metal music, which is now frequently called "classic metal" or "trad metal" to distinguish it from the movement it spawned. Deena Weinstein, author of *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology* (1991: 49-50), compares the emergence of speed metal to the Protestant Reformation in that it claimed to return to the bare essence of the heavy metal ethos and passionately rejected the extravagant trappings (outlandish stage costumes, slick studio production, radio-friendly singles) that had characterized heavy metal in the past. She remarks that this attitude is similar to the Protestant Reformers' rejection of the extravagances of the Catholic Church and their mission to revive the fundamental tenets of Christianity.

But speed metal is more than traditional heavy metal stripped down and played in street clothes. An apt analogy of speed metal's development would be the Bebop Revolution in the 1940s in the United States. Both speed metal and bebop are departures from an older style of popular music; traditional "swing" jazz and heavy metal, respectively. Both movements introduced accelerated tempos and increased rhythmic complexity to the parent musical form. Similarly, both speed metal and bebop musicians created new roles for pre-existing instruments in the traditional ensemble and significantly expanded the music's harmonic vocabulary and use of dissonance.⁴ Most importantly, both subgenres injected the musical style from which they developed with a new social and political consciousness.

The similarities do not end there. Speed metal, like bebop forty years before it, became embedded in a subculture that encouraged seemingly self-destructive behavior. For the cool hipster of the forties, this behavior meant heroin addiction and alcohol abuse. For the speed metal fan of the eighties and nineties, this behavior manifested itself in (once again) drug and alcohol abuse, and rituals

known as "stage-diving" and "moshing" (more on those terms later) at concerts. The activities favored by the speed metal subculture are considerably less lethal than heroin addiction but more dramatic; for example, an obviously drunk or stoned audience member at a speed metal show hurling himself from the top balcony onto the stage and then diving headfirst into the hapless crowd below before security personnel can apprehend him. More often than not, the performers onstage will not discourage such activities on the part of their audience, and may actually encourage them.

Part of my work in this essay will be to show that the overt political and social protest inherent in speed metal (and bebop) is related to the self destructive behavior it inspires. In an interview with *Pulse!* magazine, acclaimed saxophonist Sonny Rollins shares the following opinion about the rampant drug use among postwar bebop musicians:

A lot of guys like myself who played saxophone and looked up to Charlie Parker just wanted to imitate whatever he did to be able to play more like him--and that included shooting up. But in the larger sense, for a lot of people, it was a sort of social protest to use drugs. This was the first generation that would not go quietly to the separate hotel, the back of the bus, the separate food counter; they got into fights and lots of hassles about it. That's what I mean about the social thing about the drug abuse...They were so alienated, they had so much difficulty dealing with the double standards, they felt they had to turn to drugs.⁵

While jazz musicians railed against racism, speed metal concerns itself with the social injustices that plague the majority of its (mostly white) constituency. This group, which sociologist Donna Gaines, author of *Teenage Wasteland* (1991), refers to as "suburbia's dead end kids" has received very little attention from social scientists; the musical forms central to their culture have similarly been ignored in serious academic inquiries. Before the social and cultural elements of speed metal can be discussed however, it is necessary to look at elements of the music itself.

For the purposes of this paper, speed metal will refer to the whole subgenre of heavy metal which is also called thrash, punk, hardcore or death metal that arose in the 1980s. The more general term, "metal" is used for statements that apply equally to speed metal and traditional heavy metal.⁶

Musical Characteristics: The Medium and the Message

There seems to be unanimous agreement among social scientists that music is a form of communication, though there is much less agreement on how and what it communicates. Any attempt to describe the musical communicative process is confounded by the fact that "...music, or different kinds of music, as humanly structured systems of communicative sound bearing some kind of 'meaning' for the people who use a music, functions normally as an alternative to speech communication: it mainly communicates or 'expresses' what language does

not or cannot do (and vice versa), thus, to some extent, resisting any verbal explanation" (Stockman 1991: 318). The "medium" of music--its rhythm, melody, harmony, timbre, etc.--is intimately connected with its "message." What is communicated by a piece of music is inseparable from the music itself; the impact of a song must be evaluated in terms of its musical characteristics as well as lyrical content. Speed metal songs are no exception; in fact speed metal lyrics are somewhat less important than the overall sonic impact of the music. "Since vocal power is ordinarily valued more highly than clear enunciation, a song's inherent meaning of vital power is more important than any delineated meaning presented in the lyrics" (Weinstein 1991: 34). The following section will examine the primary musical attributes of speed metal--rhythmic, timbral, harmonic, and structural--and attempt to describe what "inherent meanings" these characteristics communicate to the listener.

The Rhythmic Profile of Speed Metal

Speed metal, as its name implies, is played fast. While most traditional heavy metal ranged from a lumbering shuffle to an energetic gallop, speed metal resembles an enormous freight train tearing across the countryside at 140 mph. Not all speed metal is played at previously unimagined velocities; many songs contain mid-tempo and even slow passages and it is still possible to distinguish a slow speed metal song from traditional heavy metal by the different approaches to rhythm in the two styles. While old heavy metal relied on simple, unsyncopated 4/4 rock drum beats, speed metal drummers have introduced a variety of off-beat accents and strange, complex rhythms that anticipate the downbeat and incorporate machine-gun-like 16th-notes played on the double bass drum (See Selections 1 and 2 on the supplementary tape.) These rapid-fire double bass drum rolls performed with both feet are a stylistic trademark of speed metal. They require considerable coordination and endurance on the part of the drummer to execute them properly. The high hat cymbal is not used to count eighth notes (its normal role in a conventional rock context) but rather plays quarter notes on the deemphasized beats, alternating with the snare drum. While a traditional rock drummer will keep the high hat cymbal closed with his left foot, speed metal drummers leave it open (both of their feet are needed to operate the double bass drum pedals), so that it creates a uniformly loud crash when struck. Most speed metal can be said to be in a very fast 4/4 or 2/4, but other more esoteric time signatures, particularly 7/8, are common, particularly in the slower, more menacing "mosh parts" (See Selection 3 on the tape).

Speed metal rhythms have a visceral impact on the listener. Together with the electric bass guitar, the double bass drums create a low-frequency sonic assault that one can literally feel vibrating one's chest cavity at loud speed metal concerts.

An interesting aside: from the very beginning of rock'n'roll's enormous impact on Western youth culture, rock's rhythms have been derided by adult authorities as resembling the rhythms of "the sex act" (prior to that, cultural commentators said the same thing about the "hot" rhythms of jazz). Alan Bloom, author of a recent bestseller called *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) is the most recent of a long line of elitist critics to make that charge (See Bloom 1987: Ch. 14). Although this accusation may seem plausible regarding the rhythm-and-blues backbeat in Elvis Presley's songs, speed metal rhythms do not seem to conform to the rhythms of sexual intercourse; they tend to be

either too fast or too slow or too uneven and jagged to be convincing representations of sex. Most speed metal rhythms are a great deal more suggestive of destruction than seduction; they invoke images of machine guns, jackhammers, and explosions. Donna Gaines mentions that speed metal differs from the hard rock and heavy metal music that preceded it by not being "sexy."

Unlike Led Zep, this is not sexy music. It's deeply emotional, powerful, and pummeling. Metaphorically, death replaces sex as resolution. (Gaines 1991: 204)

This lack of "sexiness" is likely related to the fact that there are almost no speed metal songs about sex.

Instruments and Timbres

Heavy metal has a long history of virtuoso guitarists. Lead guitarists in heavy metal bands are considered to be just as important as the lead singer (Weinstein 1991: 25). Speed metal continues the metal tradition of long (some would say excessive), technically proficient guitar solos, but in most cases these solos have become faster and less melodic. Heavy metal guitarists favor a distorted lead sound that resembles a human scream and their solos are usually rapid runs of blues and natural minor scales alternating with longer, held notes that are bent wildly up and down with a device called a "whammy bar" that temporarily detunes the guitar's strings (See Selection 4).

Guitar distortion effects, once caused by overdriven speakers and now most often created with electronic pedals and digital signal processors, have two uses. First, they markedly expand the frequency range of the instrument by creating new harmonic overtones, allowing a single guitar to fill the sonic space of a symphony orchestra. The second fundamental use of the distorted electric guitar is its culturally coded expression of anger, rage, and chaos. This musical meaning holds true in all rock'n'roll. Musicians and composers in the latter half of the twentieth century have used intentional distortion and electronic feedback to introduce an element of danger or to depict very strong emotions.

The distorted sound favored by most speed metal guitarists bears little resemblance to the acoustic ancestors of their instrument. Acoustic and non-distorted guitars are sometimes used for subdued introductions to songs or for slow songs. They are used to invoke the poignancy and despair that are the flip side of the rage and violence of the fast parts of the song. Many of these acoustic melodies, nearly always in minor keys, are remarkably intricate and evocative (for example, the beautiful and haunting acoustic passages in Metallica's "Fade to Black"[1984]--See Selection 6). Through these more accessible passages of speed metal songs an outsider can glimpse the pain and despair felt by the young people for whom the songs speak.

Bass is what makes heavy metal "heavy" (Weinstein 1991: 24-25). The bass guitarist, like the drummer, has an expanded role in speed metal. While the bass' primary function is playing the root notes for the guitar chords, in speed metal the bass often plays melodies that exist in a contrapuntal relationship with the guitar lines (as we shall see, the guitars often don't really play "chords"), and in recent funk-influenced speed metal, usually called "thrash funk," the bass has become a lead instrument, its importance in the overall sound sometimes

surpassing that of the guitar. Overall, speed metal bassists get more attention and respect from fans than the considerably more utilitarian heavy metal bassists do (unless the trad metal bassist is also the singer).

Vocals

Speed metal vocals range from operatic wailing to raspy, inhuman growls. As with most popular music genres, metal vocalists convey emotional content directly in their phrasing and intonation (as opposed to "art" music genres, where singing is highly stylized). Speed metal vocalists are expected to convey the emotional content of the song with absolute conviction.

While other kinds of harsh, loud music incorporate the use of electronically distorted vocals, this technique is rarely employed in speed metal, perhaps because electronically enhancing the human voice tends to make it sound cold and machinelike, which detracts from the emotional immediacy of the song. Distorted vocals tend to be used in various modern offshoots of punk music that convey themes of self-alienation and emotional detachment, in contrast to speed metal's self-affirming and melodramatic delivery.

Consonance, Harmony, and Dissonance

The predominant guitar chords used in speed metal consist of only the root, fifth, and the octave. These so-called "power chords" are used instead of more conventional triads and seventh chords because the guitars are so heavily distorted that smaller intervals would sound too muddy. Also, the complex, rapid, syncopated guitar parts in speed metal would be impossible to play using traditional chord voicings.

Because intervallic leaps larger than the tritone are rare, most speed metal completely lacks dominant-tonic cadences. This constitutes a novel approach to harmony where the most common resolution is ii-I (F down to E), rather than V-I. This musical device, used often in music of Asian cultures, creates a more immediate, more visceral harmonic resolution than the traditional dominant-tonic cadence.

Jacques Attali, author of *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, has written that music's order "simulates the social order, and its dissonances express marginalities"(1985: 29). Melodic devices that deviate from those based on the major scale have always been used to represent themes of chaos and "evil" in Western culture. Speed metal takes advantage of this association and incorporates liberal amounts of unstable intervals and chromatic scales into the music to create a musical environment of menace and disorder.

Speed metal is the most melodically dissonant form of popular music in the world. In contrast to rap music, which developed alongside speed metal in the 1980s, speed metal does not dispense with melody altogether, but rather uses terse repeating ostinati usually based on the chromatic scale. It is not "atonal" music because the music tends to have a definite tonal center, and most melodies consist of ascending and descending in small increments above the tonic note, which is almost always E. Intervals used in the guitar riffs tend to be smaller than a fifth, and the minor second, minor third, and tritone intervals are stressed. The repeating melodic patterns built on these intervals tend to be in awkward, jagged rhythms using triplets and syncopation.

Production Values

The important role the modern recording studio plays in creating a band's overall sound on record has been recognized in recent years by numerous scholars of popular music (in particular, see Cutler 1984 and Clarke 1983). No formalistic description of a musical form that is recorded would be complete without a discussion of studio production values. Speed metal is produced to sound "clean" and "punchy"; metalheads are surprisingly aware of production quality when discussing the relative merits of an album (for example, "the snare on the new Flotsam and Jetsam album is too 'poppy'", or "the bass isn't loud enough in the mix on ...*And Justice For All*."). Speed metal producers attempt to capture an "in-your-face" sound in their recordings. Speed metal records have very little sonic depth; all the instruments seem to be pressed up against the speakers, all occupying the same immediate space.

There are few prominent reverberation effects used on speed metal recordings, as they create the illusion of distance from the listener. When comparing the second recorded version of "Johnny B. Goode" by Chuck Berry to the original, musicologist Timothy Taylor comments that "The reverb turns the listeners into voyeurs, detached from the visceral directness of the first version" (Taylor 1992: 36). Speed metal recordings attempt to convey a "visceral directness" to the listener. Drums are as clear and crisp in the mix as possible. Ideally they should have no trouble slicing through the wall of distorted guitars that surrounds them. The drum kit and bass guitar are mixed higher than they are in most styles of rock, and the vocals are relatively lower so that they do not dominate over the rest of the instruments. No instrument should be indistinct, and a muddy overall sound is to be avoided at all costs, despite the variety of distortion techniques employed by the guitarists that can threaten to drown out everything else.

To conclude, speed metal production is consistent with its other formal attributes; it conveys an emotional immediacy that reinforces the power and directness of the music.

Song Structure

Speed metals songs deviate considerably from the conventional three-minute pop song. Speed metal songs tend to be closer to five minutes in length; some are over ten minutes long. These songs do not contain a conventional verse/chorus structure but contain many different riffs that connect to each other. Often speed metal songs have elaborate introductions consisting of long instrumental passages. Occasionally the vocals will not enter the song until over two minutes of introduction have transpired.

A typical speed metal song will have about five different sections, each one with a different set of riffs, rhythms, and tempi. It will also have at least one extended guitar solo. In the lyric sheet to Anthrax's album *Among the Living* (1987), every song contains a verse, pre-chorus, chorus, bridge, and a lead break. Some of the songs also have additional parts: introductions, "mosh parts," "harmony leads", and "mosh talk parts."

Speed metal composers are generally unconcerned with the catchy melodies, memorable choruses, or instrumental hooks of conventional songwriting. Rather, speed metal is music intended for close scrutiny and repeated listenings. Its rhythmic and structural complexity make

it satisfying and surprising even after listening to the same song several times.

Speed metal requires technical proficiency on the part of the performer, and a level of musical sophistication on the part of the listener. Speed metal audiences expect bands to be able to execute the difficult rhythmic changes and complicated guitar solos with the same precision onstage as they have on record, and they are rarely disappointed. Unlike punk and post-punk music fans, metalheads have no patience for bands that obviously can't play their instruments well.

The social ramifications of a music that expects virtuosity and musical sophistication are manifold. Again, speed metal resembles bebop jazz in this respect. The expectation of musical complexity and technical proficiency allows the enthusiast to make detailed stylistic judgments about different musicians and critically evaluate performances. One central consequence of speed metal's complexity, loudness, and dissonance is that it is inaccessible to all but committed metalheads. Even other kids have trouble understanding it. Knowledge of complex musical forms, the ability to appreciate a well-performed rhythm change, an imaginative guitar solo, a skillful drum fill entitles the music enthusiast to be a member of an exclusive group who possess "secret" knowledge unknown to the larger population. Sharing this esoteric knowledge with fellow cognoscenti forges powerful social bonds between members of a subculture while at the same time helps to further exclude outsiders.

Speed Metal and Academia

It is genuinely surprising that the heavy metal and the later speed metal subcultures have received so little academic attention when one considers that it is probably the most prevalent music-based subculture in the United States and perhaps in the entire industrialized world; there are abundant heavy metal fans, or "metalheads," in every European country, many Latin American urban centers (particularly in Brazil and Mexico⁷), and Asia (especially Japan) as well as the United States and Canada. Groups of teenagers dressed in the classic metalhead uniform--concert t-shirts, worn jeans, denim or leather jackets, long hair--are visible at practically every American high school with a significant white population. The metalhead, "headbanger," or "heavy metaler" is an enduring stereotype in popular culture⁸ and represent a social category that is readily recognized by American youth. "In my high school, the kids who listened to heavy metal (Led Zeppelin, AC/DC, etc.) music all dressed in a similar fashion--old blue jeans, concert t-shirts, untucked flannel shirts, and longer hair than most. They were withdrawn from the 'activities-oriented' crowds..."⁹

Analyses of the heavy metal phenomenon have been largely absent from the academic literature, even the literature explicitly concerned with adolescence and youth culture. Explanations for this lack of attention can be traced to the historical development of the two academic subdisciplines one would assume would be most concerned with the phenomenon: the sociology of youth subcultures, and the academic study of popular music.

The study of youth subcultures, which had been around since the 1930s, began to gather steam in the late 1970s in the wake of the punk revolution in England. Most of the writers, who were predominantly British sociologists, focused on the more flamboyant of England's

working-class male subcultures: the teddy boys, mods, glam rockers, punks, skinheads, and football hooligans (see Frith 1981, Brake 1985, Hebdige 1988, Mungham and Pearson, 1976). Although heavy metal has always been popular in England (it was first invented there, after all), its devotees were not written about in these studies. Even Dick Hebdige, author of *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, a central text for the study of youth subcultures, confines his remarks about the metal phenomenon to a brief (and rather dismissive) footnote in the back of his book:

Heavy metal is, as the name suggests, a heavily amplified, basic form of rock which relies on the constant repetition of standard guitar riffs. Aficionados can be distinguished by their long hair, denim, and 'idiot' dancing (again, the name says it all). Heavy metal has fans amongst the student population, but it also has a large working-class following. It seems to represent a curious blend of hippy aesthetics and football terrace machismo. (Hebdige 1988: 155n12)

Though there presently are a great deal more metalheads worldwide than there are punks, skinheads, or mods, they have not received half of the attention that these often romanticized and more socially volatile British groups have received from social scientists. Donna Gaines has speculated on why sociologists have seldom concerned themselves with suburban metalhead culture:

While left-leaning adults have valorized the politically-minded punks and right-wing groups have engaged some fascistic skins, nobody really thinks too much about organizing dirties or burnouts. Law enforcement officials, special education teachers, and drug treatment facilities are the adults who are concerned with these kids... Such wasted suburban kids are typically not politically "correct," nor do they constitute an identifiable segment of the industrial working class. They are not members of a specific racial or ethnic minority, and they have few political advocates. (Gaines 1991: 102)

The irony of this, as Gaines points out, is that there has been a growing need for a comprehensive study of heavy metal culture not only because of the never-ending, tedious debates over censorship and suicide lawsuits (convincing proof that adults do not understand the music at all), but because heavy/speed metal music is often the music of choice for the most emotionally disturbed and delinquent kids in suburban high schools. In order for teachers and counselors to reach out to these "at-risk" adolescents more effectively, I argue that they need to have an understanding of the crucial messages contained within the kids' music and to take those messages seriously.

It is only very recently that the metal subculture has begun to receive the attention of sociologists. Deena Weinstein's *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology* (1991) was billed as the first book of its kind when it was published last year. It is a thoroughly researched, satisfying treatment of a long-neglected subject.

Deena Weinstein is not the only social scientist to take an interest in heavy metal culture; throughout the text there are references to unpublished papers presented at sociology conferences with titles like "Functional Aspects of Adolescent Socialization through Deviant Subcultures: Field Research in Heavy Metal" (Weinstein 1991: 313) and "Adolescent Use of Heavy Metal Rock Music as a Resource for Meaning"(Ibid.: 317). Hopefully, as another generation of academics begins publishing, there will be new books and essays about metal written from a musical perspective as well.

The academic study of popular music is a growing subdiscipline which unites scholars from diverse academic backgrounds. Not surprisingly, those who write books on rock music tend to focus on their favorite bands. "There is more ideological vigor and consistency in the music of the Talking Heads than in the paradoxes of the academy...and the Sex Pistols come to fulfill the prophecies of Shelley" (Pattison 1987: xi). There is certainly nothing wrong with writing about the music one enjoys, except that few of these writers enjoy or listen to heavy metal (and most are too old to have been exposed to speed metal). Furthermore, the attitudes of such writers towards metal tend to be very close to those of mainstream rock critics. In fact, many of the best writers in this genre, including Simon Frith, actually are part-time rock critics. (For a discussion of rock critic's pejorative attitudes toward heavy metal, see the next section.)

The emergence of speed metal on the West Coast in the early 1980s went largely unnoticed by social theorists, perhaps because most of the writers on youth culture at that time were British and not American. Nevertheless, speed metal's rise to prominence represents a cultural revolution as powerful as the heavily-analyzed punk revolution in England seven years before. Speed metal's proliferation was in several ways America's answer to Britain's punk rebellion. Many of the social factors that were said to have led to the emergence of the British punk subculture in the 1970s--youth unemployment, economic disempowerment, alienation, and so on--did not exist in such dire form for undereducated youth in America until the early 1980s. While punk and speed metal have much in common--one was obviously influenced by the other--they differ in that the trademark punk sound was fabricated by those who wished to articulate a specific art-school-influenced ideology of rebellion and Romantic primitivism (see Wicke 1986: 136-8 and Pattison 1987). Speed metal, in contrast, arose out of a pre-existing musical ideology articulated by its parent genre, heavy metal. While speed metal takes its political, rebellious stance and fast tempi from punk music, it is first and foremost an offshoot of traditional "classic" heavy metal, and other than the sped-up tempi of American hardcore punk, is not influenced much by punk's simplistic and antimusical conventions. Sean Killian, vocalist of a band called Violence, told this to one interviewer:

I don't like to use the word "punk" to describe what we do. I mean, we are punk-influenced inasmuch as anyone who plays thrash is punk-influenced, but what we do can't really be considered in any way, shape or form, punk. The whole anger thing just comes from things I see around me, things I see on television...

(Chirazi 1990: 20)

As we have seen, speed metal is a complex music challenging for the performer and the listener. It contradicts the Romantic notion, shared by numerous rock critics, that music for the masses should be simple, catchy, and primitive. It is the responsibility of academics who specialize in the study of popular music to reject this assumption of the value of simplicity when confronted with music that is intentionally convoluted, dissonant, or esoteric, whether that music is free jazz, progressive rock, or Metallica.

While the sociomusical aspects of speed metal have been ignored for the most part by academics, much has appeared in print about the phenomenon in the popular press, from both magazines like *Industrial Metal* and *Rip* within the metal subculture and more mainstream publications. Unfortunately, most popular accounts written about the phenomenon are marred by pejorative and sensationalistic distortions.

"Five Out of Five Kids Who Kill Love Slayer": Speed Metal in the Popular Media

While speed metal may be too recent a phenomenon to have received much serious attention from social scientists, magazines and newspapers were quick to describe its impact. The problem with most accounts of speed metal and speed metal subculture by the popular media is that, since the mass media are motivated by profit and sensationalistic stories are lucrative, they tend to dwell on the more shocking and grotesque manifestations of any phenomenon. For example, a recent article on a famous speed metal band in *Esquire* magazine was titled "Five Out of Five Kids Who Kill Love Slayer" (hereafter referred to as Sager 1992).

The implication in the article that all Slayer fans are severely disturbed future murderers is ridiculous when one considers the many thousands of people worldwide who attend Slayer shows and buy their records, but it sure sells magazines. An earlier, less sensationalistic article that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* was titled "Speed Metal: Fans Fixate on Oblivion" (hereafter called Japenga 1987). Both the *Esquire* and the *Times* articles quote the same Los Angeles psychologist, Dr. Michael Peck, who counsels suicidal adolescents. He had this to say about speed metal fans:

The kids that we're talking about are heavy drug users, they have no positive orientation, and they're angry. Some of these kids are suicidal, some of them are homicidal, but I don't think you'll find many who are happy.
(Japenga 1987: 8)

Dr. Peck does not overtly suggest that it is the music these kids listen to that causes them to lack a "positive orientation," but the suggestion that all speed metal fans are heavy drug users and unhappy is inaccurate and unfair. The article observes that "[a]long with the music has arisen a speed-metal culture that is fascinated by death"(Ibid.: 1) that has taken hold particularly in the white working-class factory towns south of the city of Oakland, California. This "fascination" with "death-drenched music" is said to reflect how some kids "feel about their own lives and futures"(Ibid.: 8). Unfortunately the article does not discuss why they would feel that way. The *Esquire* article attempts a more in-depth (albeit rather patronizing) analysis

of Slayer's appeal:

At home, at school, on television, one thing is clear: Life sucks. Slayer commiserates. The demon on the stage recites truths that the kids in the audience already know inside themselves. Only when someone else says it do they know they aren't alone. And once that sinks in, and they see how hopeless everything is, the music and the buzz and the head-banging and all the rest helps them let it out, purge, a joyous, unified, tearless, savage good cry. (Sagel 1992: 129)

One assumption shared by these two articles, and many others like them, is that speed metal's popularity represents a "problem" that exists among America's youth. They do not consider the possibility that speed metal could have musical and artistic merit aside from its social significance; as a form of musical expression it has no value other than as an indicator of social ills. Many rock critics in the 1980s would have agreed; their attitudes toward speed metal, particularly back when the movement was largely "underground," reflected the longstanding hatred of heavy metal felt by practically all rock critics in both the mainstream and alternative press.

One rock critic called heavy metal "pimpley, prole, putrid, unchic, unsophisticated, anti-intellectual, dismal, abysmal, terrible, horrible, and stupid music...made by slack-jawed, alpaca-haired, bulbous-inseamed imbeciles in jack-boots and leather and chrome for slack-jawed, alpaca-haired downy-mustachioed imbeciles" (quoted in Martin and Segrave 1988: 233). The elitist and classist overtones in this description are readily apparent. The description is also somewhat inaccurate in that, relative to most styles of rock music, heavy metal (and speed metal, certainly) is more likely to be musically complex and to have lyrics that are more "intellectual" than the average, banal love songs on the radio. Besides, punk rock is musically "unsophisticated" and openly anti-intellectual in its orientation, and this style of music is met with approval by the rock critics who disparage metal.

Perhaps the best response to the rock critic's dismissal of heavy metal can be found in a 1987 letter to the editor by a reader of the *Los Angeles Times*. The author, David Wood from Santa Anna, is assailing the *Times*'s staff music critic, Robert Hillburn.

When he [Hillburn] touts punk rock and post-punk rock as innovative and anti-Establishment, he does not realize that he is the Establishment. And when his favorite albums are on Top 10 lists all over the nation, they have the Establishment's seal of approval.

Heavy metal is the only music that is truly rebellious and anarchic. Mom cannot do her aerobics to metal, as she can to new wave. Heavy metal does not have the approval of the wimp-writer rock critics. It is music that is hated by all adults, scorned by all critics. It is real rock'n'roll.¹⁰

As for the mainstream media's portrayal of speed metal as deranged, destructive noise for damaged children, here is a the complete text of singer Mike Muir's spoken rant at the end of the song "You Can't Bring Me Down" by Suicidal Tendencies. I believe the following passage sums up the attitude of speed metal musicians and fans towards their critics in the adult world:

Just because you don't understand what's going on doesn't mean it don't make no sense. And just because you don't like it don't mean it ain't no good. And before you go taking a walk in my world, try taking a walk in the real world, `cause this ain't no Mr. Roger's Neighborhood. Can you say "feel like shit"? Yeah, maybe sometimes I do feel like shit. I'm not happy about it but I'd rather feel like shit than be full of shit! And if I offended you--oh, I'm sorry, but maybe you need to be offended. So here's my apology, and another thing: Fuck you!

(from the album *Lights, Camera, Revolution* [1991])

Speed Metal Musicians--In Their Own Words

We just do a bunch of songs, know what I mean?
---Lars Ulrich, Metallica.¹¹

Interviews with the speed metal musicians themselves are perhaps the most reliable source when evaluating the central messages of the music, the above comment notwithstanding. There exists a surprising number of similarities between what different musicians tell journalists about the meanings of their songs; this agreement also applies to the songs' lyrics. In fact, the lyrical themes of speed metal appear to be as codified as its musical conventions.

The lyrics of speed metal songs focus on themes of violence and death. Some songs have overt political themes like censorship, police brutality, prison riots, nuclear war, and environmental degradation, while others are just collections of morbid imagery and Satanic incantations. More politically aware bands often criticize the black magic imagery of some of their peers. Anthony Bramante, guitarist for the band Nuclear Assault, describes his group's lyrical themes in this way:

Yeah, well, we're realistic. Instead of all that Satan crap, the Devil, and all of that stuff, we write about stuff that matters. We're talking about important things in the news: nuclear arms, innocent people getting killed, people getting brainwashed, people like Jimmy Swaggart [the corrupt TV preacher]. We're just keeping our lyrics real.
(Winfield 1988: 18)

Despite the negativity and fatalism in the lyrics, all speed metal songs reflect a common ideology that they share with traditional heavy metal: self-assertion and self-reliance in the face of a repressive

society that attempts to compromise the integrity of the individual. "No need to hear things that they say/Life's for my own to live my own way" in the words of one Metallica song. A classic description of this message central to the whole speed metal ethos is Testament guitarist's Alex Skolnick's comments on their song "The Ballad" from the album *Practice What You Preach* (1989).

The song is about coming in touch with yourself, not being suppressed by what other people say. When I was growing up in school, I was different-- I wasn't into school spirit or the homecoming parade, or trying to be the most popular. I got a lot of flak from other people...So the ballad is reassurance, for anyone who's going through the same thing that I had to go through.

(O. 1989: 7, 12)

It is the principal message of self-affirmation and the moral worth of the individual that causes many rock critics and other social commentators to dismiss metalheads as politically inert. The reality is that even the most politically strident lyrics are not intended as a call to collective action but as a call to individual awareness. In a 1990 interview with *Bay Area Music* magazine, Phil Demmel, a member of a very political band called Vio-lence, talked about the lyrical style of his bandmate, Sean Killian:

Sean sees what he sees, makes his observations and leaves them open for people to draw their own conclusions. We're telling stories. He isn't telling people what to do and how things are. He's saying that, from certain viewpoints, things are a certain way and you can find your own set of personal opinions and answers.

(Chirazi 1990: 20)

In interviews speed metal musicians are emphatic in their insistence that they are not telling anyone what to do in their lyrics, that they want their audience to "draw their own conclusions" and make their own decisions about the issues and ideas presented to them in the songs.

Speed metal musicians, unlike hardcore punks and politicized mainstream rockers, do not see themselves as political organizers intent on turning their fans into activists. They do not expect their audience to share their ideological convictions, and the degree to which the musicians believe they can influence their audience tends to be rather modest. Alex Skolnick describes another song on *Practice What You Preach* this way:

"Greenhouse Effect" is about the rain forest in South America, which supplies oxygen for the planet--if there's no more rain forest, there's no more air to breath. If people hear about the greenhouse effect on the news, they may not know what it is, but if it rings a bell because it's on a Testament record, they might take an interest in it--and they should, because the greenhouse effect will

affect everybody, including heavy metal fans.
(O. 1989: 7)

Speed metal musicians refuse to act as political organizers, despite the strong political convictions that they express in their songs, because the whole idea of telling someone else what to think about something is antithetical to the speed metal ethos. Mike Muir, the outspoken lead singer and lyricist for Suicidal Tendencies quoted above, shared this opinion with *Bay Area Music* magazine:

I believe in freedom very much. I don't tell people what to do `cause I don't like people to tell me what to do. I think that's pretty simple. (Moerer 1988: 12)

He goes on in the same interview to sum up the speed metal subculture's attitude towards social change.

Politicians don't make the world better.
Politicians don't solve hunger. Politicians don't make people happy. The only way you can make the world a better place for sure is by making yourself a better person, because that's the only person you have control over. (Ibid.)

About the only (paradoxical) advice speed metal songs can unambiguously give to their fans is, in the words of the Dirty Rotten Imbeciles, "Think for yourself/Don't rely on someone else."

While speed metal fans may be politically inactive as a group, they are not necessarily oblivious or even apathetic. The music conveys a profound skepticism and cynicism regarding the political system and regarding collective solutions to social problems; this skepticism is also evident in the attitudes of members of the speed metal subculture.

Lyrical Themes in Speed Metal Songs

The most common targets of speed metal songs reflect the central ideology of self-reliance and personal integrity expressed in the music. Most speed metal lyrics that are of a political nature are attacks upon the myriad forms of hypocrisy the artists observe in the outside world.

Evangelist you claim God speaks through you
Your restless mouth full of lies breeds popularity.
You care not for the old that suffer
When empty pockets cry from hunger.
--from "Read Between the Lies," Slayer (1988)

It should come as no surprise that there are innumerable speed metal songs about television evangelists, who not only tell people what to believe but are frequently exposed as hypocrites that are solely out for their own financial gain. A complete list of anti-televangelist songs in the speed metal subgenre would be quite extensive--a few notable examples include "Make Me Laugh" (Anthrax), "Send Me Your Money" (Suicidal Tendencies), "Fake Healer" (Metal Church), and "Leper Messiah" (Metallica). Of course, these same evangelistic ministers are

also heavy metal's sworn enemies, and this does not improve their image among metal's supporters.

Another common lyrical theme in speed metal is found in the anti-war song. These songs are descended from "War Pigs," first recorded by heavy metal pioneers Black Sabbath in 1972. Most speed metal songs about war focus on the plight of the hapless soldier who is forced to fight and die for corrupt politicians. In "Disposable Heroes," a track from Metallica's landmark album *Master of Puppets*(1986), the song's protagonist is a soldier who is badly wounded in combat. The final verse and refrain of the song are:

Life planned out before my birth
Nothing could I say
Had no chance to see myself
Molded day by day.
Looking back I realize
Nothing have I done
Left to die with only friend
Alone I clench my gun.

Soldier boy/ made of clay/ now an empty shell.
Twenty-one/ only son/ but he served us well.
Bred to kill/ not to care/ do just as we say.
Finished here/greetings, Death/ he's yours to take away.

(Like all rock lyrics, the above passage loses much of its effectiveness when translated into words on a page. In the actual song, the words are barked over a background of churning guitars and racing drums which reinforces the unsubtle message of the song considerably--see Selection 5 on the tape.) Metallica's most famous anti-war song is "One," a song narrated from the point of view of a soldier who was blown up by a landmine and lying in a paralyzed state of living death in a military hospital.

Other well known anti-war songs include "Mandatory Suicide" (about soldiers in the Vietnam War) and "War Ensemble" by Slayer, "Mouth For War" by Pantera, and "Join the Army" by Suicidal Tendencies. These songs portray the corruption of the state and its destructive consequences on the hapless individuals who are forced to fight for it.

Perhaps the most eloquent attack on all speed metal's favorite targets is Mötörhead's "Orgasmatron" (1987--later covered by Sepultura, a Brazilian "death metal" band in 1991):

I am the one, Orgasmatron, the outstretched, grasping hand.
My image is of agony, my servants rape the land.
Obsequious and arrogant, clandestine and vain
Two thousand years of misery, of torture in my name.
Hypocrisy made paramount, paranoia the law.
My name is called Religion, sadistic sacred whore.

I twist the truth, I rule the world, my crown is called deceit.
I am the emperor of lies, you grovel at my feet.
I rob you and I slaughter you, your downfall is my gain.
But still you play the sycophant, and revel in your pain.
And all my promises are lies, all my love is hate.
I am the politician, and I decide your fate.

I march before a martyred world, an army for the fight

I speak of great, heroic days, of victory and might.
I hold a banner drenched in blood, I urge you to be brave.
I lead you to your destiny--I lead you to your grave.
Your bones will build my palaces, your eyes will stud my crown.
For I am Mars, the god of War, and I will cut you down.

Hypocrisy and deceit are seen as the true evils in society, not Satan, black magic, or even violence. They are considered the chief causes of human misery and of manmade disasters, including war, that are so often the subjects of speed metal songs. A poignant example of this worldview is this passage by Metallica's bassist, Cliff Burton, who was killed in a tour bus accident in Europe shortly after he wrote it:

When a man lies he murders
Some part of the world
These are the pale deaths
That men miscall their lives
All this I cannot bear
To witness any further
Cannot the kingdom of salvation
Take me home?

("To Live Is To Die," from *...And Justice for All* [1988])

Themes of Suicide and Despair

Adolescence is a time when death holds a high degree of fascination...Yet to the rest of us it seems to be the most tragic age to die. Actually the statistics are reassuring; suicides in younger adolescents (twelve to seventeen) are exceedingly rare and usually occur within the context of severe mental illness. The exceptions are those children who kill themselves out of defiance, usually without meaning to...Even in older adolescents the national suicide rate is well below half that of the population at large.

(Blaine 1966: 109-110)

In the twenty-six years since the above passage was published, the suicide rate for teenagers has risen 300% (Sagel 1992: 82). Suicide has become a conspicuous part of American youth culture; what was once unthinkable has become a legitimate option for unhappy adolescents. Speed metal bands were among the first to address the issue of teenage suicide in their music.

Speed metal songs often deal with themes of despair and resignation in the face of injustice. Songs like "How Will I Laugh Tomorrow (When I Can't Even Smile Today)"(1989) by Suicidal Tendencies are unflinching depictions of hopelessness and emotional desolation. However, practically every one of these songs ends with a message of personal empowerment, usually conveyed through a musical, rather than lyrical, transformation from slow and sad to fast and aggressive.

Perhaps the most famous of these songs is Metallica's "Fade to Black," the 1984 masterpiece narrated from the point of view of a person about to commit suicide (Selection 6).

Life it seems to fade away
Drifting farther every day
Getting lost within myself
Nothing matters, no one else.
I have lost the will to live
Simply nothing more to give
There is nothing more for me
Need the end to set me free.

Donna Gaines describes her first exposure to the song, which was recommended to her by one of her "burnout" informants.

First it makes me sick, I cry. It's tender, hurtful.
I start playing "Fade to Black" almost every day.
This is such a beautiful song, so morbid, insidious.
The hour-of-darkness lamentations of a dying human
soul. Alone, defeated, depleted, hopeless and
stranded but for one last exit. Fade to black
and kill the pain. "Death greets me warm, now I will
just say goodbye..."After a while, though, when I
play the song, in the last minute, after almost six
minutes of morphine agony, the rescue guitars come in.
This song goes to the bottom, but comes back up. It
gives you the will to power, to triumph; it's cathartic,
it's killer. (Gaines 1991: 204)

"Killer" is a word used by metalheads to describe things they really like. Donna Gaines's use of the term to describe "Fade to Black" thus does not mean she thinks the song causes kids to commit suicide. Quite the opposite: the song's cathartic release prevents the surrender to utter hopelessness. There are no vocals at all in the last minute of the song, only an extended guitar solo played over an impassioned wall of guitar riffs, but the transformation from hopelessness and fragility (melodic, acoustic guitars) to empowerment and strength (distorted guitars) is clear to those within the subculture. Donna Gaines is one of the few adults who understands that.

Creative Inspiration and Speed Metal Artists

The subject matter for speed metal songs points to an interesting attitude shared among speed metal musicians regarding artistic expression. Sean Killian from Vio-lence explains, "Basically every song on the album represents things that piss me off" (Chirazi 1990: 20)" Mille Petrozza, lead guitarist and singer of the German band Kreator comments, "I like to write about things that piss me off" (Wawro 1989: 53). Similar sentiments abound in interviews with other artists.

Speed metal musicians reject the conventional quasi-Romantic ideology implicit in most kinds of rock music. They see themselves as reacting to things in the outside world rather than creating from an inner drive for self-expression. "Living in the times we do," opines Tom Araya of Slayer, "you don't have to make anything up. You got to admit, what goes on in the world is pretty fuckin' bizarre"(Sagel 1992: 127).

Songwriting is a collective endeavor for most speed metal bands. While there are some bands where one member does all the writing, it is more common for bands to write democratically and for songs to be

created out of group improvisations. Many speed metal bands also have more than one member who writes lyrics.

Ethnomusicologist John Blacking, in his book *How Musical is Man?* writes "There is evidence which suggests that, although human creativity may appear to be the result of individual effort, it is in fact a collective effort that is expressed in the behavior of individuals"(1973: 106). This view is consistent with the musical practice of rock bands of all styles. The collective effort of speed metal bands to create songs about the integrity of the individual is consistent with the public expressions of self-assertion which form an integral part of metal culture.

The image of the songwriter as interpreter rather than creator and as one part of a total musical ensemble fits well with the low-key, down-to-earth image speed metal musicians project to the public.

Image and Anti-Image

The three most common elements of Metallica's promo photos are half-full beer cans, shit-eating grins, and other bands' shirts.

---Marc Weidenbaum, *Pulse!* magazine

Most speed metal musicians are indistinguishable from their fans. They wear the uniform of a member of the metal subculture--T-shirt, jeans, leather jackets, and long, unstyled hair--even when they are performing on stage. Metallica was one of the first speed metal bands to embrace this idea of "anti-image."

Image? You know, I don't think about shit like that. What's an image? An image, to me, is the way people look at you. The reason we don't think about that is because we always present the real side of us, and that's all people will ever see.
(from an interview with Lars Ulrich, Higby 1988: 33)

Speed metal musicians are expected to be unaffected and down-to-earth in interviews and in person and to treat their fans with the utmost respect and appreciation.

In thrash, the artist is much less a culture hero than a specialized member of the subculture, providing an element of the concert experience rather than being its *raison d'etre*. Thus, thrash bands try to "hang out" with the fans before and after the show. Other metal musicians do not follow this practice, nor do their fans expect them to.
(Weinstein 1991: 230)

It is to speed metal's loyal fans, "the kidz" as the musicians call them, that we will turn next.

The "Kidz": The Subculture of Speed Metal Fans

In this section we examine who constitutes speed metal's audience. At a typical concert, we see a crowd composed primarily of long-haired males dressed in black T-shirts, many of whom are "moshing" and "stage-diving" in the "pit," a more-or-less defined space in front

of the stage where such behavior is encouraged, making it possible for those who do not wish to participate in the dancing rituals to steer clear and avoid being slammed or jumped upon. Moshing is a behavior that developed from punk "slam-dancing," which is exactly what its name implies.

Shirtless boys and fearless girls, fourteen, sixteen, twenty years old...skip aggressively counterclockwise, cherubs in the inferno, gathering speed, shoulders cocked, elbows crooked like linemen, grinning, grimacing, laughing, crying, bouncing and ricocheting like agitated electrons, like pinballs trapped between bonus bumpers. (Sager 1992, 84)

Speed metal concert behavior has been ritualized to a great extent. Moshing and stage-diving are de rigueur at speed metal shows, and the more violent and outlandish the crowd's actions are, the better. I have seen audience members leap from balconies and from atop tall speaker cabinets onto the stage and then hurl themselves into the crowd below.

I have been to many speed metal concerts and been in the pit for some of them, and I still find myself wondering what is making these kids so angry that they indulge in this violent, self-destructive ritual behavior. Of course, the nature of the music makes one wonder how else it is possible to dance to it, for moshing is a form of dance: the participants move in time with the music, and when the band plays a slow or quiet section of a song, the moshers do not collide with each other but instead move sullenly around the circle waiting for the inevitable fast part to kick in. Moshing activity is unsurprisingly at its most frenzied when the band plays its most popular songs.

Even though moshing is a form of dance, or at least a kind of ritual movement, the sight of an enthusiastic pit can still resemble a full-scale riot in progress to an outside observer. A 1990 speed metal concert in Sacramento was shut down by local police who mistook the audience's behavior during the band's set for a huge brawl raging out of control ("J. Cassanova" 1990: 12).

The truth is, very few serious injuries tend to result from moshing. Steve Clausman, the manager for the band whose show was cut short by the police, told a local music paper, "Some people have been physically hurt, but it is usually not intended. Athletes suffer a lot more physical damage each week than slam-dancing, a freedom of expression, has done in five years" (Ibid.). Even audience members who make frequent dives off the edge of the stage usually come out of a show relatively unscathed. The reason for this is that audience members closest to the front of the stage accept their role as human cushions for the divers, and after catching one in their collective arms, they will often pass him or her around over their heads until they tire of it. The most serious cause of injury at many speed metal concerts is getting beat up by overzealous security guards.

Even if moshing and stage-diving are not as dangerous and self-destructive as they may first appear, this does not invalidate the question I posed in the above paragraph. Clearly the audience members are angry about *something*, otherwise they would not be risking injury in wild movements expressing enthusiasm for a music practically unrivaled in its negativity and rage-filled content. The most common theory about the source of all this aggression and symbolic violence involves the psychological notion of catharsis. Leonard Berkowitz (1962: 198) writes:

The expression of aggression provides an outlet for the destructive impulses...however it is done, the performance of a hostile act presumably lessens the intensity of the aggressive excitation within the individual...we can say that aggressive actions drain the internal reservoir of aggressive energy for a short period of time.

Berkowitz goes on to offer the possibility that such a release of aggression can actually be pleasurable (Ibid: 200). Billy Milano, lead singer of Stormtroopers of Death and Method of Destruction, shares his hypothesis concerning the function of concert rituals as a cathartic release:

What music basically becomes is a filter for them [the audience]. They filter everything out into this and it doesn't come back into them when they leave, so everything is left in this big empty room with sweat all over the place...Just echoes of pain; it's over with and they go home and they feel great. (quoted in Gaines 1991: 213)

But it's not really over with. As Berkowitz notes, the sense of release and gratification that immediately follows catharsis is short-lived if the underlying source of the original anger is not eliminated by the aggressive outburst (1962: 211). Many speed metal fans are angry at a great many things that do not simply go away.

In many cases, a significant part of the anger and frustration felt by metalheads can be traced to the repressive, conformist nature of their primary social environment: suburban public high schools of the 1980s and 90s.

As Donna Gaines (1991: 107) has mentioned, participation or non-participation in scholastic sports is used as an arbiter of social categories in high schools where boundaries of social class are indistinct (which is the case most of the time). Assumptions are made about a student's character based on appearance and associates, and a reputation of "loser" is hard to shake. The term "loser" is often used to describe serious members of the heavy metal subculture.

The distinction between winners and losers in life is itself an analogy taken from athletic competition. Since the early 1970s some social commentators, many of whom fell under the discipline of the "sociology of sport" have argued that a sports mentality, literally a "jock culture," has crept into Americans' ways of thinking about the world to an extraordinary degree (see Isaacs 1978, Lipsyte 1985). Jock culture is actually the original youth culture, as Frith (1981: 189) points out, dating from the 1920s campus culture which then found its way into affluent 1950s high schools. Modern high schools are composed of three main social categories which are represented by rather extreme stereotypes. I have made no attempt to document the following descriptions, as these stereotypes are common knowledge among those who have been in high school and are commonly portrayed in the mass media. I have shown these writings to various classmates, none of whom disagreed with any of them.

Jocks are popular, usually participate in organized sports, and are known to be intense "partiers" on the weekends. They tend to be very conformist in their orientation, partly as a result of the socialization of athletes by coaches and parents emphasizing respect

for authority, fair competition, and extreme disdain for those seen to be weak or different. This socialization starts very early. It is not unusual for male children as young as five years old to participate in competitive athletic leagues; young athletes who show some promise are strongly encouraged to pursue their interest in sports.

The jocks as a category are inherently conservative; the values and behavior of this group have changed very little since the 1950s, except that now excessive drinking and drug use (which by the late 1980s was mostly confined to weak marijuana) have become more popular. Jocks also tend to have very conservative and mainstream tastes in music. Although musical preferences are obviously subject to a degree of regional variation, most white jocks listen to "classic rock," rock music of the 1960s and 70s played on numerous commercial radio stations that cater to nostalgic members of their parent's generation. This music is largely irrelevant to today's youth--what was provocative twenty years ago is mainstream and even reactionary now--and the songs are usually used as party music for driving and drinking. Its primary themes are male virility, hedonism, and mystical nonsense. More recent bands that resemble classic rock bands, including some lite-metal bands, are also played on some "classic rock" radio stations and are also popular among high school jocks. There is now some evidence that so-called "alternative" music is catching on among the jocks, but this new music is used in the same utilitarian manner as the ever-popular oldies from the baby-boomer generation--as background music for athletic competition and partying.

Brains are also sometimes called "preppies." They dress in expensive, conservative clothes (sweaters and ties, for instance) and (stereo)typically have stunted social lives as a result of constant studying. They are portrayed as complying with adult expectations and authority. Brains tend to get into the best colleges, with the exception of talented jocks with acceptable grades who are recruited by top schools for their athletic prowess. Brains are not stereotyped as listening to one style of music. They are, however, considered the most likely to be enthusiasts of "serious" adult music--classical and jazz, for instance.

Burnouts do not go to college. They dress in dirty proletarian garb--flannel shirts, old jeans, and T-shirts--and are in low-level or remedial classes. They smoke cigarettes and are assumed to do many drugs on the weekends and in the school parking lot during classes. Burnouts are also called "dirtbags," "stoners," or "dirtballs" and are considered to be "losers" by the majority of the high school population, both kids and adults. Burnouts tend to have a lower socioeconomic status than jocks or brains, which often has a greater impact on their social position in the high school than does their academic performance. For the most part, though, parental income and level of scholastic achievement are directly proportional in most suburban and urban high schools. The musical tastes of burnouts tend toward either classic rock or heavy metal, though in less metropolitan areas country music is also a popular genre.

The irony of this strict classification scheme is that all three of the labels are pejorative, as all stereotypes tend to be, and that most high school students do not comfortably fit into any of the categories. Also, the jocks and the brains are the only categories that are given much respect by the adult authorities while burnouts are routinely harassed and disparaged. In the words of one nineteen-year-old high school dropout:

When I was in high school, nobody was impressed with me. The teachers were only impressed with certain kinds of people--the jocks, who played all the big sports, the achievement freaks, who got straight A's and the people who more or less did exactly what the teachers said--and that wasn't me, you know? (Snedeker 1982: 77)

There is a fourth group of high school students that originated in the 1960s and has many names. For the purpose of this essay I will call them "rebels." They are the non-conformists, from the hippies to the punks to the metalheads. They are rebelling not only against repressive adult authority, but against the shallow, unquestioning conformity and vacuity of mainstream youth culture as well.

Kids who listen to speed metal can be classified either as rebels or burnouts, depending on their social status. If they follow a burnout lifestyle and do not seem to be college-bound, they are usually classified as such. The category "metalhead" or "headbanger" is often used as a synonym for burnouts by high school students who are outside the subgroup. However, if the student in question gets good grades and is obviously college-bound yet resembles a burnout in appearance, he or she is often considered a "rebel." It is much easier for boys to rebel in this way. Most middle-class rebels who join music-based subcultures choose to become ardent fans of "alternative music," a rather vague category that encompasses punk and so-called "college rock," rather than metal.¹²

Most metalheads tend to be classified as burnouts, but in actuality some high schoolers who have long hair and wear heavy metal T-shirts are really "brains" who have chosen to rebel against the role chosen for them by their good grades and lack of participation in sports. I have known many people fitting that description who have continued to do well in school and gone on to college despite often adverse treatment by some teachers due to their appearance, which is equated with being a "troublemaker" or a dunce--the normal adult interpretation of someone in the burnout style of dress. Even though these kids certainly are a statistical minority among metalheads (they are much more prevalent among speed metal fans than any other metal subgenre), they are significant in that they have the potential of joining the "metal intelligentsia" in college and beyond by taking on the roles of metal deejay or music critic. This intelligentsia has been crucial for promoting speed metal records in local music magazines and college radio programs. However, very few metalheads who stay in college become heavy metal musicians.

Adults and conformist youth tend to dismiss both burnouts and rebels as being "stupid" because they misinterpret the two groups' alienation from and rebellion against the school institution as a more general lack of intelligence or motivation that causes lowered achievement levels among them. In fact, many students who choose to reject high school life are actually quite intelligent but feel that they are unappreciated and repressed by the school system. Alex Skolnick, Testament's guitarist, discusses his experience in school in the following exchange, an excerpt from an interview with *Face It!* magazine:

Q: What do you do when you're not involved in music, Alex?

A: Literature. I read *Crime and Punishment*, I'm just finishing

Moby Dick.

Q: All the stuff they wanted you to read in high school.

A: Exactly. In high school, everybody was so against my being involved in music, all it did was encourage me. Now these books are looking interesting to me. Gives me something to think about when I'm working on music, increases my vocabulary, helps with writing lyrics, and I can do it because I want to, not because I have to.

Q: I think that makes a big difference. If you have to write a ten-page essay on it, it's not nearly as fun.

A: That's right. I have a friend, a Cal student, who's turning me on to new books. I'm reading Faulkner after *Moby Dick*. Sometimes I wish I could write an essay, but if it was getting in the way of my music, I would hate it and would throw the whole thing away.

Q: It's too bad that it's so easy for kids not to be interested in this when they're given it in school. Some people never do find out that it's interesting.

A: Oh, but the way it's presented in school--I don't blame myself at all for not being interested. All I knew about was the stuffy classroom, and being forced to wake up early.

(O. 1989: 13)

A Tale of Two Subcultures: Punk and Heavy Metal Kids

It's not how you wear your hair, it's what's inside your head.

---Stormtroopers of Death, "United Forces"(1985)

Speed metal fans are a combination of traditional metalheads and punks--two youth subcultures that had previously been divided along social class boundaries.

In the first half of the 1980s, punks and metalheads did not get along at all. Although both kinds of music probably sounded identical to the average adult listener, as they both revolved around distorted guitars and pounding drumbeats, significant musical and philosophical differences between the two subcultures remained. I remember being a neutral observer at a "punk/metal war" between two punks and three metalheads at a New Jersey summer camp in 1983. We were sitting at a picnic bench in front of the bunks with a portable cassette player which alternately played selections chosen by one party or the other. The gulf that separated the two groups' taste in music seemed unbridgeable. The metalheads played bands with names like Iron Maiden and Judas Priest, while the punks played bands with names like the Dead Kennedys and the Germs. The metalheads were critical of the punk bands' complete lack of musical sophistication--"Where are the chord changes?" they kept asking. They also laughed heartily at the self-deprecating names of the bands and their coarse, shouted vocals. The punks were less articulate about their objections, but it was clear they were not impressed by the complex guitar solos and operatic wailing of the heavy metal singers that the metalheads pointed to with such enthusiasm.

Punks had always had the same strong objections to heavy metal. They decried heavy metal fans for their lack of social awareness, political apathy, and celebration of what they saw to be mindless macho hedonism. Many also objected to the "corporate" nature of heavy metal music's distribution, which had been done mostly by major record labels. In contrast, American punk in the early 1980s was produced and distributed by small independent record labels that seemed to be less motivated by profit and consumer exploitation.

In America there has also been a significant class element in the punk-metal conflict. Unlike in the United Kingdom, American punks tend to come from comfortably middle-class backgrounds, while the ranks of the heavy metal army are filled with lower-middle-class and working-class enthusiasts. While some punks run away from home and try to drop out of society, most end up in college. Such differences in socioeconomic orientation have resulted in countless confrontations considerably more violent than the "war" described above between long-haired and crew-cut white males on every sort of suburban and urban terrain.

By the late 1980s, hardcore punks and metalheads were no longer rival factions in many areas. "Sadie O.," a music critic in the San Francisco Bay Area, writes about the convergence of the local metal and punk "scenes":

[I]t used to seem as if thrash [metal] had the hair and dumb, demonic lyrics and hardcore [punk] had no hair and angry social ranting. Now it's getting so they all have long hair and "Important Things To Say"...and that's jes' fine by me.

Donna Gaines attributes the fusion of punk and metal music to two main factors, first, due to the scarcity of underage venues for concerts, both groups had to share space (Gaines 1991: 195, 200-201), and second, due to the repressive, conformist high school social structure, these two groups became "united against a common enemy, the jocks"(Ibid.).

Another reason for what Gaines calls the "Great Crossover" between the two subcultures was that speed metal music was so powerful that it inevitably drew in the once skeptical punks. She writes, "Emotionally and intellectually provocative, thrash was a harsh, healthy combination of social outrage and personal remorse. By exposing, lyrically and musically, how society ate people up alive, thrash ultimately brought people together from traditionally oppositional class cultures"(Ibid.: 203). Simon Frith concluded from his study of a sample of British students that membership in music-based subcultures was most prevalent among adolescents who rejected their class cultures, "whether middle class pupils who rejected success or working class pupils who rejected work"(Frith 1981: 223).

Both the lower SES metalheads and higher SES punks in America were able to identify with speed metal as an expression of their rebellion against adult expectations of them. Furthermore, as non-conformist youth subcultures became increasingly marginalized by a mainstream youth culture that stressed total social conformity, boundaries between the different groups began to blur until it was no longer a contradiction to wear a mohawk and listen to Metallica.

Non-Whites and Women

Speed metal brought together the heavy metal and punk subcultures. This was a significant accomplishment, though arguably these two groups are not as different as they may first appear. After all, they are both composed mostly of young white males. It is frequently assumed that speed metal has very little to do with non-white and female youth. This is a mistaken assumption--although these two groups are certainly minorities in the ranks of avid speed metal fans, they are far from absent.

From the very beginnings of the speed metal subgenre on the West Coast, non-white male musicians have been instrumental in creating the style. After all, California itself has a multi-ethnic population, quite unlike the more ethnically homogenous northern British industrial towns where traditional heavy metal was born. The influence of non-white musicians in the development of speed metal is not confined to relatively obscure bands like Zknowite, which at one time was entirely composed of African American musicians except for the singer, a white woman(!). In fact, non-white band members are the rule rather than the exception among the most successful speed metal bands. Mike Muir, the singer for Suicidal Tendencies, is of Mexican descent, the band's lead guitarist, Rocky George, is African American. Tom Araya, Slayer's bassist and lead vocalist, is Chilean. Chuck Billy, lead singer of Testament, is Native American (Pomo Nation). One of the most critically acclaimed new speed metal bands, Sepultura, is from Brazil. Another well known band from the Bay Area, Death Angel, is made up of five Filipino cousins. It is not surprising, then, that speed metal has many fans among Asian and Hispanic youth. When I saw Slayer play in Los Angeles in the summer of 1988, I estimated that about 25% of the audience was Hispanic or Asian--a minority to be sure, but a significant one. Until recently, African American metalheads were much less visible. This began to change somewhat in the 1990s, although there still seems to be more black musicians in speed metal than black audience members.

Nevertheless, the large number of prominent non-white musicians in speed metal suggests that the music's central messages of maintaining personal integrity in the face of a repressive social order is accessible to non-white as well as white males. The music not only has integrated two white youth subcultures partially separated by class divisions (punks and metalheads) but also has attracted a sizable following among male youth of different ethnic backgrounds that identify with speed metal's portrayal of "how society eats people up alive."

There is less evidence that speed metal's central messages can include women as well as men. There are practically no prominent female musicians in speed metal and the audiences for speed metal shows are overwhelmingly male, though again, women are rarely completely absent from such events. Simon Frith has written that "[i]t is boys who form the core of the rock audience, become rock critics and collectors (girl rock fanatics become, by contrast, photographers). The rock'n'roll discourse constructs its listeners in sexually differentiated terms--boys as public performers, girls as private consumers"(Frith 1981: 228). This statement sheds light on Donna Gaines's observation that among the burnout kids she studied

[T]he girls are a little different. They're insular; they mostly hang out in pairs, rarely

more than trios...You have to be a best friend to get really close. Their conversations tend to be more local, personal, private. The girls are a subculture within a subculture.

(Gaines 1991: 63)

In addition, "when the guys go to see Slayer, for the most part, the girls will stay home" (Ibid.:118). However, there remains a large number of women actively involved in the speed metal subculture, not as photographers, but as journalists and critics. The editorial board of *Industrial Metal*, a quarterly magazine that covers speed metal and the various metal subcategories it spawned, is half men and half women. The articles contained within the Fall 1991 issue of the magazine were evenly divided between male and female authors. One of the most gifted and prolific rock critics in the Bay Area writes under the name "Sadie O.," and proudly tells her readers that she brings her two small children to speed metal concerts. Practically every musical publication that covers speed metal has at least some female contributors, despite the fact that there are no prominent female performers of this music. In addition, I believe it is not a coincidence that the authors of the two best academic treatments of the metal phenomenon, Donna Gaines and Deena Weinstein, are also women.

Despite being somehow excluded from the musician role in the subculture, women make up a sizable part of the metal intelligentsia; they are concerned with evaluating and promoting this style of music for which they feel a strong enthusiasm. This enthusiasm can be explained in at least two ways. First of all, girls growing up in the United States are taught to identify with male protagonists in a way that boys are not taught to identify with females, who are instead seen as a distant "other." Women therefore have less trouble identifying themselves with male musicians performing on stage and feeling included in the cultural messages projected by their music. (Conversely, there are few female speed metal musicians because too many males are not capable of identifying with female performers and therefore cannot appreciate their music.)

The second reason why women could become fans of a predominantly male musical form is that they find the image of masculine strength and personal integrity projected by the performers to be attractive. All of my women friends who listen to speed metal have admitted to me that they are often attracted to a band's lead singer or another prominent personality in the group and that that attraction facilitates their enjoyment of the band's music.

Conclusions

It would be almost redundant to spend a great deal of space refuting the familiar old argument about mass culture that maintains that meaningless, mass produced items are forced upon a passive, manipulated mass audience by profit-seeking capitalists. This argument has been constructed in various forms by a wide assortment of dogmatic Marxists and unabashed cultural elitists since the 1860s (see esp. Adorno 1976). It has been effectively countered by practically every writer in the field of popular culture/subculture theory since the fifties and we need not concern ourselves overmuch with its narrow-minded logic. Peter Wicke writes, "To see young rock fans merely as passive puppets dancing on the economic and ideological apron strings of the capitalist music industry is a gross oversimplification of the

problem. This thesis refuses to recognize the cultural potency of class conflict and the struggle over meaning and value in relation to the popular arts which results from the social contradictions of capitalism"(1990: 25).

Speed metal culture is an example of capitalist-mediated musical forms that have taken on a significance that transcends mere entertainment and passive consumption. Speed metal is a complex music that reflects complex social realities. It articulates the central values of the subculture that has grown up around it, and speed metal concerts are a potent ritual expression of these values.

The idea of "subculture" tends to be influenced by Marxist thought (cf. Brake 1985). As the above quote from Wicke attests, youth subcultures are often viewed as ways by which young males address contradictions in the social structure (Ibid.: 3). While this argument is persuasive and can clearly be applied to speed metal culture, it can also reduce a colorful, multileveled social phenomenon to a black and white snapshot.

Throughout this essay I have proceeded on the assumption that "culture" is a response to the immediate social environment, composed of elements that predate the immediate social situation, similar to Levi-Strauss's theory of *bricolage*. Of course, "beyond syntax there is meaning" as Attali writes in the introduction to his book. It is not enough to say that the structural and syntactic elements of the metal subculture resemble a "bricolage" formation, as Weinstein is content to say; instead the significance of the elements chosen to be part of this bricolage need to be examined in their new social context.

This paper has attempted to create an anthropology of subculture arrived at through an ethnomusicological analysis of the music that forms the core of the speed metal ethos. This is in contrast to the more conventional, strictly sociological studies that are most prevalent in the study of music-based subcultures. I do not believe these two approaches are mutually exclusive or in opposition to each other, however. Marxist theorist Janos Marothy writes, "but sociology itself, taken in its full sense, is a kind of anthropology that concerns itself not only with the conditions of human life but also with the human types, attitudes, and relations developed under these conditions"(Marothy 1974: 7).

So what have we learned about speed metal and its sociocultural significance? In *The Ethnomusicologist*, Mantle Hood states that, in American society, "aside from a certain entertainment and commercial value, the arts...are regarded as nonessential recreation or as ornamentation befitting an affluent mode of life" (1982: 15). Though this statement is largely accurate, to certain youth subcultures, music is *crucial* to everyday life. Speed metal music is essential because it fulfills deeper needs in its constituency than mere entertainment.

John Blacking, writes in the conclusion of *How Musical Is Man?*, "Music is not a language that describes the way society seems to be, but a metaphorical expression of feelings associated with the way society really is. It is a reflection of and response to social forces, and particularly to the consequences of the division of labor in society"(1973: 104). Speed metal is music that expresses the horror and disillusionment of adolescents who reject their surroundings. It is dissonant, complex, and challenging, and its portrayal of the irreparable ugliness of the outside world is offset by a powerful sense of the worth of the individual who must not submit to the dehumanizing forces of a corrupt society. Speed metal is the focus of a music-based subculture which regards speed metal songs almost as sacred texts,

since they alone can provide moral guidance in a world where adults absolutely cannot be trusted. Donna Gaines has even likened speed metal music to a "kid's religion" that has replaced the morally bankrupt traditional role models and institutions in the lives of adolescents (1991: 175). She writes of attempts by adults to discredit the music of contemporary young people, "It's a sad irony--because the only place where taboo subjects like sex, death, suicide, loneliness, and terror are discussed is in their music" (Ibid.: 208).

According to Levi-Strauss, ritual "conjoins, for it brings about a union (one might even say communion in this context) or in any case an organic relation between two initially separate groups, one ideally merging with the person of the officiant and the other with the collectivity of the faithful"(1966: 32). This is exactly the way a successful speed metal concert develops, as it forges a bond between audience and performer and between fellow audience members. This bond is created by the musicians' expression of a shared set of core values which define the subculture.

Such values provide a crucial basis for self-worth that many in the audience are unable to obtain from parents, teachers, and other adult authority figures. Such authorities often fail to provide young people not only with recognition but also credible rites of passage into adulthood, leaving them in a state of ambiguity and confusion (Raphael 1988). Instead, self-esteem comes from one's peers and from the music which combats isolation and despair by publicly portraying the anomie and alienation felt by members of the subculture. The music is a vehicle for the collective recognition of personal pain as well as a therapeutic release of pent-up frustrations and aggressions. In conclusion, then, speed metal is not only a testament to the power of music, but also the vitality and resilience of youth.

Notes

1. Bangs, Lester, "A Reasonable Guide to Horrible Noise," included in *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung: An Anthology* (1987), p. 301.
2. Attali 1985, p. 11.
3. In the mid 1980s, speed metal was most often called "thrash." Since then "thrash" has become something of a floating signifier; music journalists now use the term to describe any style of rock music that is loud, distorted, and abrasive, not just speed metal.
4. For a helpful description of bebop's musical characteristics, see Tirro, Frank, *Jazz: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977) pp. 268-269.
5. Santoro, Gene, "Titan of the Tenor," *Pulse!* No. 64 (September 1988), p. 59.
6. The origin of the term "heavy metal" is obscure (see Weinstein 1991: 18-21). The shortened term, "metal," is similar to "rock"(a shortened form of "rock'n'roll") in that the shorter form is

often used as a more general classifier. Other than that, there is little semantic divergence between heavy metal and plain "metal."

7. "[T]he focus on death in Mexican and Brazilian culture resonates with speed/thrash imagery in particular, especially with that variant known as death metal" (Weinstein 1991: 120). Death metal is the most extreme form of speed metal. Unfortunately, I lack the space to delve into it further in this essay.
8. The protagonists of two enormously popular recent movies, *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* and *Wayne's World*, are metalheads. Wayne Campbell, the protagonist in *Wayne's World* played by comedian Mike Myers, explains, "As I see it, Heavy Metal can be defined as the following: wailing guitar chords and a guy behind the drum kit going mental (with the parameters being speed and loudness, emphasis on the latter)." From *Wayne's World: Extreme Close-Up* (New York: Hyperion, 1991), page 43.
9. The author of the remark is a "middle-class, suburban" 1982 high school graduate. The quote is from Weinstein 1991: 120.
10. "Saturday Letters," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 February 1987, Part VI, p.2.
11. "Metallica," *The Tribune* (Oakland, CA), December 7, 1988, p. E-8.
12. The overriding theme in alternative music is ambiguity. This ambiguity exists on a variety levels: sexual, emotional, and semantic. Lyrics tend to be obscure, esoteric, or absurdist. The alternative music press is obsessed with what can be considered "hip" at the moment. One of the reasons it took so long for rock writers to recognize the importance of speed metal is that heavy metal has always been decidedly "unhip" to the upper-middle-class devotees of alternative music. (Rap, in contrast, was hip almost from the start). For an excellent analysis of a very representative band in this genre, see Julian Stringer, "The Smiths: Repressed (But Remarkably Dressed)," *Popular Music*, volume 11 no. 1 (January 1992), 15-25.
13. A large number of African American musicians play in "thrash funk" bands. This is a fairly recent subgenre that combines speed metal guitars, slapped electric bass, and rhythms derived from militant rap songs. An example of thrash funk can be found on the supplement tape (Selection 7). Thrash funk combines the social conscience of both rap and speed metal with laid-back, 1970s-style hedonism and humor. Many bands are multiracial, while others are all African American. Mike Muir of Suicidal Tendencies recently started a thrash funk side project called Infectious Grooves.

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