OUT OF THE DARK AND INTO THE LIGHT:
A LOOK INTO METAL MUSIC AND VIOLENCE

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ANALYSIS

Analysis

Introduction

On April 20, 1999, Patti Nielsen made a phone call to 911 at 11:27 a.m.

Patti: [whispering] Oh, God. I'm really...frightened. I think he's in the library.

Dispatcher: What's your name, ma'am?

Patti: [whispering] My name is Patti.

Patti: [whispering] He's yelling, "Everybody get up," right now. He's in the library. He's shooting at everybody.

Dispatcher: Okay. I have him in the library shooting at students and...the lady in the library, I have on the phone. Okay. Try to keep as many people down as you can.

The phone call was made in the library of Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Moments before the call, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered the school and began shooting at students and teachers. The shooting lasted 49 minutes. Harris and Klebold killed 12 students and one teacher and injured 24 others before killing themselves. Nielsen survived.

The Columbine incident still stands as one of the most famous school shootings in U.S. history. It was analyzed in length after it occurred. It seemed to be on every hour on every channel for weeks. A few themes arose from all of the coverage. First, it seems that the students were bullied by fellow classmates. Secondly, as with any shooting, there was a call for increased
gun control. Finally, there seemed to be a new reason that explained what caused the teenagers to commit this crime. It was violent media, and main scapegoat was musician Marilyn Manson. Manson was/is a shock rocker whose music dealt with violence, isolation, and often anti-religious themes. Following this event, Manson's concert in nearby Denver was cancelled after outcries from parents and the public.

Can music really cause someone to commit a heinous act? That was the question that drove this project. Much of the research that has been conducted has found that music does not cause people to act more violently. However, metal music has been, still is, and probably will be blamed by people for causing tragedies and leading to a counterculture. But why? To try to find an answer to these questions, this analysis went to the source of these musical controversies, the musicians themselves.

Smoke and Mirrors

October 18, 1970 "A Manson Motive is Heard at Trial" (All New York Time Articles)

"[Charles] Manson...got his messages from songs written and recorded by the Beatles. 'Revolution 9,' one of the songs by the Beatles, was said to be interpreted by Manson as a reference to the ninth chapter of the Book of Revelations in the New Testament. 'Helter Skelter,' Masons decided was a code name for revolution.

What even is metal music? Metal music is defined by Britannica.com as: "A genre of rock music that includes a group of related styles that are intense, virtuosic, and powerful. Driven by the aggressive sounds of the distorted electric guitar." It also is characterized by intense drumming rhythms and percussive, low-end bass guitar. Vocals can range vary from low gutturals to clean, harmonic singing, and up to high screams. Some subgenres feature a combinations of these styles.
With these characteristics, it's easy for someone who isn't familiar with metal to demonize it. As the accompanying article clips will show, blaming music for certain events is not a new phenomenon. There have been artists that have had their music censored or banned all together. It's not always metal musicians though. Elvis was censored for his hip-swinging, sexually suggestive dance moves. The Beatles had their albums burned when John Lennon said they were bigger than Jesus. However, on a genre-wide scale, metal music seems to get more than its fair share of negative publicity.

Most metal musicians, if not all, are familiar with the backlash from the Columbine shooting. They know they exist in an often criticized genre. Some of them were even on the critical side of the spectrum at one point in their lives.

"I didn't really have a very all-encompassing perspective of the more extreme music at the time [as a youth]," said Nicholas Yeates, guitarist for Torn the Fuck Apart (TTFA), "I had a lot of the same opinions that these people had, that some music was too extreme that I should avoid it for moral reasons."

He explained that he originally believed what the media and other people outside of the metal world were saying about the music. It wasn't until Yeates began playing metal music that his mind began to change about the music that he had once had an aversion to. According to Yeates, metal music has a very esoteric component and people can't see beyond the loud volume and brutal music until they get involved with the music and the musicians.

One thing that is helping pull back the curtains on metal music is the prevalence of the internet. There are several bands throughout the evolution of metal music that have shrouded themselves in mystery for either privacy reasons or as a part of their image.
"In 1995 I seriously believed that Brujeria were Mexican drug lords that murdered white college students and they made metal albums to supplement their drug income," said Jason Keyser, lead vocalist for Origin, "But now we know it's like six British dudes."

It's a lot harder now for bands to keep the secrecy and maintain an image. The Swedish band "Ghost" is known for wearing makeup and masks to hide their identities, but there are images on the internet that show what some of the members look like because they are playing with other bands. The internet also allows for greater access to bands, whether it be through direct access on the bands websites with merchandise and tour dates, or even contact with the individual band members through social media.

Not only is the internet changing how people interact with the bands, but it is also changing how people interact with the music. In the past, people would have to buy the physical albums to hear the music. The albums came with booklets that had artwork and often the lyrics. Now, songs can be purchased in a singular, digital format and a lot of the extra parts are stripped away. People can search online for the lyrics, but they are usually written by someone other than the musicians that wrote the songs. And since a lot of Death Metal vocals are guttural and not easily distinguishable from just listening, people aren't actually getting the accurate lyrics.

One of the most criticized components of metal music are the lyrics. The lyrical content varies from one subgenre to another. Power metal sings about wizards and fantastical worlds. And Death Metal sings about, well, death. Two examples of the lyrics from the bands interviewed include:

1. Origin - "Origin"
"Constantly change evolution, born to be dead, dead to be born - Evolving is in harmony with death - Insuring the progression of all life - All things are born from the universe and all things shall die!!"

2. TTFA - "55 Gallon Crypt"

"I take the bodies with me - The sordid task complete - Disposal of the victim - My work is all complete - Limbs severed, chopped, and bagged - My sordid work is done - I have the bodies with me - A job well done"

Reading lyrics like these alone, and without context isn't fair to artists. "I'm just a fan of horror movies," said Michael Langer, guitarist/vocalist for TTFA and guitarist for Troglodyte, "When I write lyrics, I just come up with a mini-movie in my head. It's strictly fantasy and in good fun. The listeners should take it for what it is."

But as stated previously, most of the time these lyrics are unintelligible and people have to seek out what the lyrics are. This means that people aren't going to understand what the songs are about from just listening to the songs. The people who are seeking these lyrics out are probably more likely to understand that the lyrics are not to be taken literally and are just an expression of the musicians.

If the lyrics can't be understood, why even listen to it? That is another common critique of metal music. After speaking with a few metal musicians, it became clear that the specific lyrics aren't what people are supposed to take away from the music anyway. Yeates said that the topics as a whole and what the bands are expressing musically are what people should remember about the music. Other musicians aren't even worried about their musical legacy at all.

"Forget it, let it go. It's something that went down at this point in time," said John Longstreth, drummer for Origin, "It doesn't have to be remembered for 1,000 years."
Many of the musicians believed that the experience of the music is the most important part of remembering. It doesn't matter what the specific lyrics are, it is the interactions with the music that people should remember.

**Blame and Responsibility**

*April 25, 1999* "The Nation: The Trouble With Looking for Signs of Trouble"

"A pop musician who caters to dark fantasies, Marilyn Manson, always seems to turn up on the list of child shooter tastes. ACTING[sic] on the desires of parent for something -- anything -- to make people feel safer, mayor Wellington Webb asked promoters to cancel the Marilyn Manson show scheduled for Friday in Denver, which they promptly did."

Whenever a tragedy like Columbine happens, there are fingers pointed in all directions. Violent media is blamed and people want to ban guns. In all these situations, these questions are reactionary. However, this research took a different approach and asked bands what they would do IF their music was blamed for a tragedy. There were a few that weren't sure what they would do because, as they said, it's tough to know something like that without experiencing it firsthand. Others had a definite idea of what they would do.

"I would talk to the family. I wouldn't sit there and wait for the tabloids to get a hold of it," Longstreth said," I would be involved with it and try to have boots on the ground as soon as possible."

There were other musicians that shared this sentiment. They felt that it is crucial to be engaged with the people that are suffering the most from the tragedy. There was also a distinction that was made between the responsibility musicians have as individual people versus the responsibility as artists.
"You have a responsibility that you kind of have to take serious. Like ICP [Insane Clown Posse, a rap group] has a rabid fan base that would do anything they said. If he told them to go rob a store, that kid probably would go do it and you have a responsibility with that power. And I don't think we have ever had that responsibility in the genre we're in. No one would listen to Cannibal Corpse and go kill a guy," Keyser said.

For many of the musicians, they felt there is also the responsibility of the parents and guardians. Yeates said there are certain genres and styles of music that do take some level of maturity and being able to understand what is real or not. A lot of metal music deals in more of an abstract world and don't speak to any one thing specifically. The music might have violent overtones and talk about killing someone, but it's rarely about a specific instance like being at work or school. Being able to understand the difference between what is real and was is metaphor is part of what makes metal the genre it is. Metal creates an outlet for people, both as creators and consumers.

"It's maybe too played out saying 'well that's really dark and scary and insane,' yeah well it's in an album or it's in a movie. It's not really being done. This guy's got all this shit in his head and he did it for the sake of 'art,' instead of actually going out and doing this stuff. But that doesn't fly with a lot of people," Longstreth said.

Another overwhelming theme that the musicians touched on was the fact that parental responsibility has nothing to do with censorship. Langer said that even if he doesn't like it, he doesn't care what his son listens to, but he would try to understand why they listen to what they do. What is difficult from a parental perspective is musical tastes grow and change as people do.
"It's not a bad idea for parents to try to listen to what their kids are into, trying to understand what their kids like rather than leaving it at the ambiguity that scares them in the first place," Yeates said.

"The Passionates"

_July 17, 1990 "2 Families Sue Heavy-Metal Band as Having Driven Sons to Suicide"

"Judas Priest and CBS pander this stuff to alienated teen-agers[sic]," said Kenneth McKenna. 'The members of the chess club, the math and science majors, don't listen to this stuff. It's the dropout, the drug and alcohol abusers..."

Metal fans have always been seen as outsiders. The previous clip states perfectly how people outside the metal community view fans. A lot of the criticism of metal music comes from the outside. One of the issues that is prevalent is that the metal represents such a wide swath of music that it is tough to generalize fans. And since there is such large and differentiated metal music selection, it draws in a wide variety of people.

"Which kinds of metal fan are you talking about, the metal fan that drives a pickup truck to his construction job or the metal fan that gets in his Lexus and goes to work and is a lawyer?," Longstreth said. "Which one are you talking about, because it's everybody."

There are so many subgenres that people will argue across metal lines about which type is superior. Longstreth compared metal music fans to scientists that are, "Trying to debunk each other to get to more of a truth." However, the musicians believe there are a few universals among their fans. And those universals have to deal with devotion and community. Metal fans have been compared to Star Wars and Lord of the Rings fans. Part of being a metal fan is being with other people that have similar interests, and arguing with people with that don't share the same viewpoint.
"At the same time it's not real anger. It's the difference between music as background noise and music as something you care about," Keyser said, "That goes for any genre."

The only exception Keyser felt was with pop music. He said pop music is produced to sell as much as possible and because of that you have fanatics, but not true "passionates." Pop music changes year-by-year, but metal bands seem to have more staying power because they don't need large audiences. He also said that this is the difference between liking a certain type of music and actually loving it. Being a metal fan is a large part of some people's identity and while there are crazies in every genre, they are never the standard nor do they gravitate to one music style more so than any other.

"You have the guys over here who want to be extremely metal which mean they're not friendly and they're mean and they hurt people," Longstreth said, "That's not rock 'n roll, that's not metal. That's just being an asshole."

**Conclusion**

From Elvis swinging his hips to bands singing about murdering people, music has always had criticisms about being too something. It's too sexual or it's too violent. Over the years metal music has taken much of the blame. Incidences like the Columbine shooting or the suicides that were blamed on Judas Priest and Ozzy Osborne bring negative attention to metal and caricatures are created of the people that listen to it.

"It does seem that a lot of metal heads, from an outside perspective, have one image provided for them," Yeates said, "Which doesn't seem anywhere near to be what they seem to be from inside the metal scene."

This still persists to this day, and will likely continue into the future. And these assumptions exist in opposition to the fact that a majority of the research that has been done on
the relationship between metal music and violence shows that there isn't a connection. It is naive to say that music doesn't affect people. When someone hears their alma mater's fight song they might be filled with a sense of pride and nostalgia. People will listen to the song that they had their first dance at their wedding and feel some sort of emotion. A song can come on that might remind a person of their ex and they might feel a different set of emotions than they did with the same song in the past. The song is the exact same, but what has changed are the memories that are associated with it. As Keyser said, there needs to be a distinction made between people who listen to music to simply fill silence and those who actually love and engage with it.

While it is entirely plausible that murder might listen to metal music, the metal music didn't make that person a murderer. A lot of metal music fans end up becoming musicians themselves. Yeates believes that this is because people who listen to metal find something that they can connect with, they want to understand it better themselves, and make it into something that is unique to them. This also leads metal fans to be artists in other mediums as well. It can also lead them to academia. Several schools offer courses in studying metal music including: U.C. Davis, DePaul, and even MIT. The international community isn't left out either. There is a summer course offered by the University of Helsinki in Finland and there's even a two year, heavy metal music performance degree offered at New College Nottingham in the UK.

Metal music shouldn't be viewed as something evil. It's one genre among many. When you include the magnitude of subgenres, it's its own musical word. However, it's still just music. Music can save people's lives. It can help them get through tough times and make them feel like they're not alone in their struggles. But it's still just music. For some music is life, but it's music. It's not the beast under you bed, in your closet, in your head.
"Music shouldn't be stifled at all," Keyser said, "You should be able to listen to whatever you want; whether it sucks or not."


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