

Metal Music and Gender

A sociological analysis

By: Adam Fortney

Warning: some possibly offensive imagery ahead.

History

Metal burst into existence in 1968 with the appearance of Black Sabbath. Musically, it was an abrasive step away from the hard rock and psychedelic rock of the 1960's. Traditional Metal went from the late 1960's to early 1990's. From the mid 1980's until now, Extreme/Experimental Metal has been the dominant practice, although it's never been mainstream (Pearlin, 2014).

Metal culture was an extension of the counterculture movements of the 1960's. Metal culture was born from the discontent of young, blue-collar, white males who were increasingly disenfranchised by a de-industrializing society and were interested in expressing social disdain through non-conformity (Weinstein, 2000). The two emphasis points of societal angst and young white male domination run the course of metal history. A capitalistic economy with eroding middle-class privilege intersected with white male hegemonic socialization and the emerging counter-culture movement to give rise to the metal world.



Black Sabbath, 1970



Birmingham, England, a once industrial powerhouse, is long tied to multiple movements in metal history.



Power

- Traditional metal is explicit with masculine themes of macho-ism and power. Metal is about *power*, argues Dr. Deena Weinstein, the first sociological voice on metal. (Weinstein, 2000).
- Many community members see metal and metal culture as empowering and a safe space for transgression-based exploration and affirmation. Metal is generally seen as offering a unique sense of affirmation and empowerment, something that people's immediate social contexts do not always allow or provide. Live events connect fans and musicians to by affirming a sense of belonging through the concert ritual.
- Metal culture is largely populated by white men. Sociological research reveals that the sense of camaraderie and solidarity is not as easily extended to women.
- The metal culture reflects larger societal hegemony and structure- this reflects a contradiction in the ideal ethos of subcultures ("we are the forsaken ones, let's create a new equitable space").



"Gods of War" by *Manowar*



Many of the bands in metal carry themselves with stoicism and exude a sense of macho-ism and power. The general cultural value of transgression and social disdain makes it harder to detect misogyny because the *hardness is also interpreted as a type of earned chip on the shoulder toughness*, one that signals being on the *outside of the mainstream*- it's not normally attributed to male power from the point of most male fans (my observation). Although symbolically, we see a dominant masculinity, therefore we should expect an emphasized femininity.

Misogyny in the newer eras of metal (past 30 years) has shown up as graphic album covers and lyrics that detail extreme sexual violence towards the animated corpses of women (bands like *Cannibal Corpse* or *Devourment*). The practice is understood as a sort of a detached spectacle that is not associated with explicit attitudes of misogyny. More can be seen [here](#) if you're interested, but a warning- *it's extremely graphic*.

From left to right: *Pantera*, *Zakk Wylde*, *Slaughter to Prevail*

The Perceived Embodiment of Male Metal Power

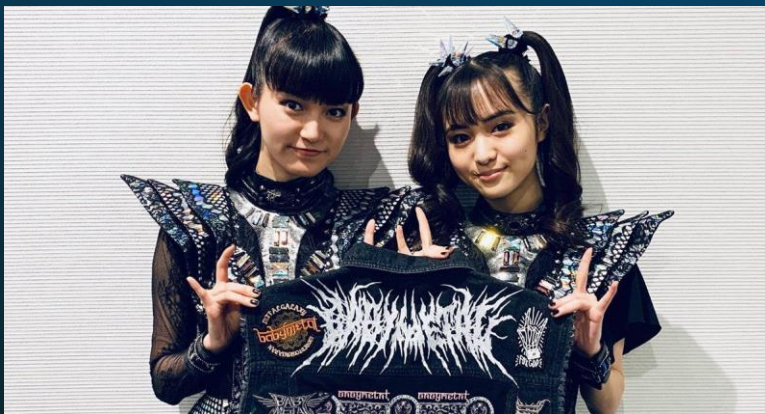


Pictured is Ian "Lemmy" Kilmister, vocalist and bassist of the band *Motorhead*. Known widely for his endless drug consumption, sexual promiscuity, and anarchistic rock n' roll attitudes, Lemmy has become metal legend amongst metal fans. There are no female "Metal Gods", especially ones who are revered for their sexual promiscuity or general recklessness (Weinstein, 2000).

Rob Halford (lead vocalist of *Judas Priest*, and from Birmingham) came out as gay in 1998. As the original "Metal God", he made somewhat of an impact on homosexual acceptance in the metal world. He also originated the classic black leather and studded metal aesthetic from the gay club scene in London (Pearlin 2014). Sabbath created metal, but JP crystallized the genre into *heavy metal*.

Variation

Not *everyone* in the metal community tries to project macho-ism or reflects that gender socialization. Like all social institutions, the overarching culture cannot totally define every person, form, or interaction. In fact, the metal community is showing signs of a cultural reckoning that is promoting the variation amongst its community members while reflexively analyzing some of its problematic practices (more on that later).



From top down: *Periphery*, *Tosin Abasi*, *Babymetal*, *Devin Townsend Project*

Early Female Appearances



Birtha, a psychedelic rock/metal group from the early 1970's. Check out their powerful live energy!



The Runaways, the most famous (along with *Heart*) of the earlier female musicians/groups.



Fanny, another psychedelic group from the early 1970's.



GirlSchool, rode the wave of new metal coming from England in the 1980's.

There are loads of awesome female musicians in metal- *they just never get talked about.*

Explicit Misogyny of the 1980's

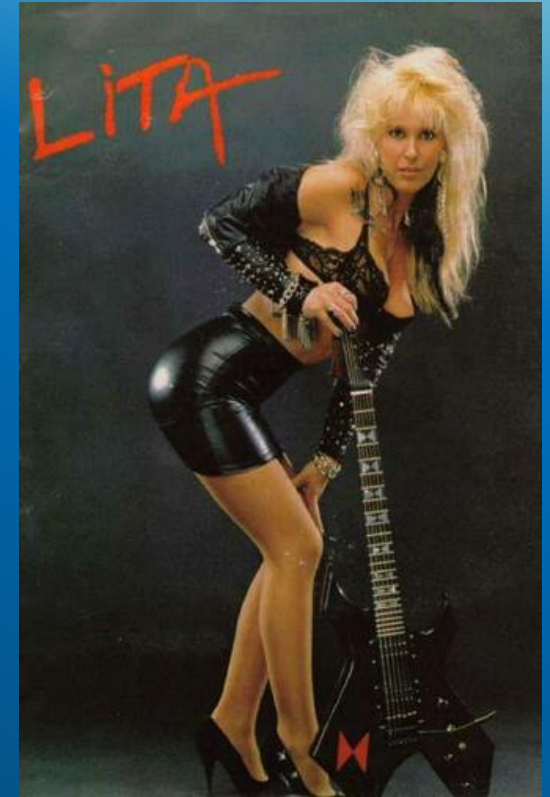
The heavy metal aesthetics of the 1980s were reflective of the intersecting sociocultural forces of the time. There was no intention to expand beyond binary definitions of gender; the intention was to assert the conservative gender binary. Dr. Chelsea Watts argues that the misogyny of hair metal was a symbolic re-assertion of male dominance that reflected the anxious insecurity underlying American masculine hegemony (Watts, 2016).

Masculine identities were threatened by the larger feminist movements that were asserting women into larger spaces of masculine dominance, like the workforce. The disastrous end to the Vietnam invasion also served to symbolize a dying sense masculine American efficacy (Watts, 2016).

Dressing androgynously was mostly a transgressive expression of that disdain and anxiety. The culture of excess and wild partying also communicates a disdain for a decaying social order. Dr. Watts also argues this music appealed to young men in crisis with no viable place to assert their hegemonic masculinity (Watts, 2016).



Motley Crue (above), Twisted Sister (below)



The lyrical content and behavior of the male musicians inflicted extreme misogyny towards women, the most notable expression of this being the objectification of the “groupies” (Watts, 2016). The most famous female hair metal guitarist (Lita Ford, formerly of *The Runaways*) had to negotiate within sexism and male metal culture to assert success with her musical talents.

Watch [this](#) clip about sexism and hair metal from the movie *Spinal Tap* (1984). This movie was a satirical commentary on the excess and hollowness of hair metal.

From left to right: *W.A.S.P.*, *Warrant*, *Lita Ford*

“Subtle Sexism”

The sexism inherent in the metal scene is not as pronounced as it was in the 1980's, but male hegemony still defines the interactions for the emphasized feminine.

“Glam Chick” and “Metal Wench”: These are two archetypes of emphasized femininity noted in the ethnographic research of Leigh Krenske (2000). The “Glam Chick” is the more emphasized and objectified female fan who is seen as “looking to sleep with a band member”. The “Metal Wench” is seen as more “authentic” by wearing more androgynous and metal-aestheticized clothing. She can possibly gain respect from men by moshing or knowing about the music.

Sexual Assault/Harassment (both physical and verbal) from men. This is done upon musicians and fans. (Lucy Hill, 2018; Krenske & McKay, 2000)

Above: *Amon Amarth*. They're stereotypical of most of the musicians on stage- “some big daddies” as my friend likes to say. To the left: mosh pits are a cherished ritual, but it's mostly a boy's club.





I can't find pictures relating to explicit sexism so here's a few pictures of some of *my* favorite female musicians in metal *right now*. If you read comments on any video or media site, you will at some point see comments revolving around looks rather than talents...or talents that are *surprising* because of looks (this doesn't really happen with male performers). I know *I'm* being somewhat sexist by mentioning them based on gender assumptions, but it also illuminates the variety of expressed and gendered forms in the genre.

From left to right: Reba Meyers from *Code Orange*, Madison Marshall from *Cloud Rat*, Emma Ruth Rundle from *Marriages and Thou*, Gina Gleason from *Baroness*, Courtney LaPlante from *Spiritbox*, Kristin Hayter of *Lingua Ignota*, Chaney Crabb from *Entheos*

“Pretty good..for a girl”

“Proving yourself”: Women are questioned about their interest in the music while men are simply embraced for being there (Vasan, 2011). Women can “gain the respect” of male metal fans by being in the scene and participating in the mosh (Krenske & McKay, 2000).

Spatial Dominance: Men overwhelm the concert floor area and move freely while women feel restrained (Krenske & McKay, 2000). The mosh pit is privileged to men who out of sheer size and force intimidate most women from entering. (Lucy Hill, 2018). If they do, it is usually respected by men as an act of transgression.

“Pretty good..for a girl”: Female musicians reveal that male metal fans don’t take them seriously and only consider them for their looks. Skilled musicians are often approached for their gendered identity as woman first, and musician second. The endless harassment and “proving” also exhaust female musicians from going upwards in their career, to the point where they don’t want to try (Savigny, 2015; Berkers & Schapp, 2015).

Much of this goes unheard of as misogyny and is swept under the rug as justified judgements/behaviors under “equality” and “individualism”.



“I’ve had 500 people scream, “Show me your tits!” at Ozzfest at the same time. I used to let that have power over me and I used to think I had to be really tough and scream at the crowd like a boy, to be taken seriously. It was all bullshit!” (Müller-Hansen, 2014).

Maria Brink, mastermind behind *In This Moment*. Her performances sometimes reach into themes around her experiences as a gendered female in metal.

Metal Reckoning?

The meta-value of the metal community is *transgression* (Kahn-Harris, 2007). This means having dialogue with the tension of social boundaries, pushing them to new places, and even breaking them.

Connecting to socialization, *metal is a space designed to have an inflammatory discourse around social norms* through its combined media forms (Kahn-Harris, 2007). This includes lyrics, visual art, abrasive sounds, and stunning performances. In essence, metal is also very analytical with many of the themes explicitly revolving around social issues and abstract ideas. Example: some bands have whole albums on the subject of artificial intelligence or the brutality of war.

Are the larger social discourses around inequity manifesting in the practices of the metal community?

Extreme metal is argued by Dr. Keith Kahn-Harris to partly be a symbolic exercise of *control and domination* by a masculinity that is afraid of an emerging femininity and a decaying capitalistic structure (Kahn-Harris, 2007). Some are taking these exercises of control into their own hands.



Ragana, a black metal duo from Olympia who are very open about their feminist, queer, anarchist, and anti-racist values.



New Blood

Although bands and musicians receive resistance, there are more boundary pushing acts than ever-before, many with the explicit intention to use the genre to push social boundaries for personal empowerment and critical cultural discourse (Varaz-Diaz, 2017). These performers I'm highlighting are more underground- they make a point of re-socializing metal as gender-inclusive. Since the year 2000, this trend is growing.



Djamila Azzouz of *Ithaca* revealed she tried to gain respect in the scene by wearing masculine-associated clothing. Now she embraces wearing skirts and makeup and feels more comfortable presenting herself as “hyper-femme” while being a metal vocalist.



Divide and Dissolve infuses doom and drone metal over symphonic arrangements. Their lyrics and song titles are generally focus on systems of oppression and indigenous rights.

New Blood



Larissa Stupar, lead singer of the death-grind group *Venom Prison*. Recently, she has become an emerging voice on sexism in metal.

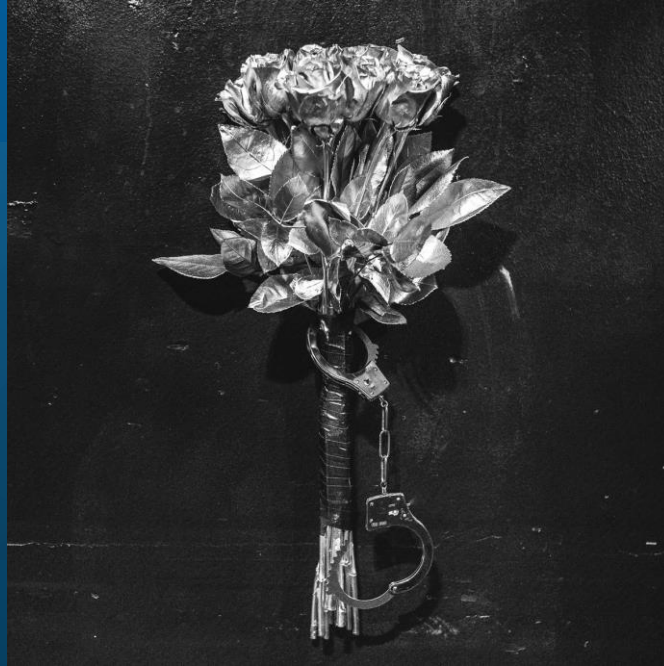
It is not just the female-identifying who are breaking into metal; non-binary identifying people are also identifying metal as a powerful point of expression and empowerment. Check out this [feminist/queer metal record label](#) running out of Portland, and this [collection](#) of feminist bands/performers who are challenging the gender boundaries in the extreme scene.



Kayla Philips from *Bleed the Pigs* questioned the supposed inclusivity and camaraderie boasted by the metal community. She points out that *her* expressions of anger and lyrics of racial injustice are received with discomfort from white men, but this same anger is cherished when it's performed by other white men.

New Blood

Lisa Mungo fronts the Seattle hardcore group *Filth is Eternal*. Lisa uses the metal space and symbols of gender to transgress norms through her performance.



Check her out her live [performance](#). These performers are *arguably the most metal musicians out there right now*. They are fully realizing the promise of the metal ethos by using metal itself as space to challenge and transgress boundary tensions in the metal community and the world at large (Jocson-Singh, 2019). I personally like how Lisa uses the space to provoke and get in the space of men and the audience at the show. As lead vocalist, she controls the situation, using her body in space to provoke dissonance and embody new power.

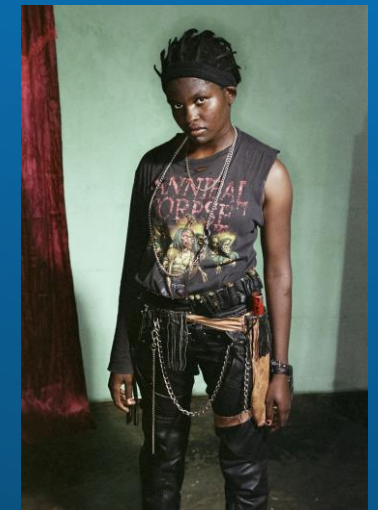
Where is Metal Going?

Metal and its history is uniquely reflective of the larger patterns of masculine hegemony in our society. It still has a lot to be accountable for, but some musicians are driving that conversation in the metal space. Metal is contradictory- it's also growing and diversifying. Check out this awesome [list](#) of 100 female metal vocalists. The internet is also helping female musicians to effectively negotiate and display their musical talents on their own terms (Berkers & Schapp, 2015).

One of the things that got me into metal was a perceived sense of abrasive honesty in the music that I experienced as liberating, empowering, and affirming. I think many other fans agree with or share this disposition and I'm hoping that progressive social values will continue to play a role in the identification, development, and enjoyment of metal music. \m/



Danica Roem, a metal musician who was the first transgender person to be elected to the Virginia State government.



There is a growing underground metal culture in Botswana, showing how metal is translated among contexts all over the world.



References

Berkers, P., Schaap, J. (2015). YouTube as a virtual springboard: Circumventing gender dynamics in offline and online metal music careers. *Metal Music Studies*, 1(3), 303–318. https://doi.org/10.1386/mms.1.3.303_1

This article illuminates how women are using the internet to launch their talents into the metal scene as masculine metal spaces are argued to be impenetrable in real life. This article showed me how sexism was re-created in online spaces and how that sexism impeded on their ability to get feedback on their vocal skills because it was focused on looks.

Hill, R. L. (2018). Metal and sexism. *Metal Music Studies*, 4(2), 265–279, https://doi.org/10.1386/mms.4.2.265_1

This article illuminated the “subtle sexism” in metal spaces. Interviews with female metal fans reveal the tacit harassment they receive in the metal scene by showing up gendered as a female. This article also details how the sexism and harassment goes unnoticed or perceived by female fans as a joke or not to be taken seriously. It implies that female fans hold their metal identities in contradiction with their female status. This showed me how sexism operates covertly in metal and how to understand the dynamics that drive it.

Jocson-Singh, J. (2019). Vigilante feminism as a form of musical protest in extreme metal music. *Metal Music Studies*, 5(2), 263–273. https://doi.org/10.1386/mms.5.2.263_1

This article details how the band *Castrator* uses metal as a vehicle to relentlessly challenge masculine hegemony with their graphic symbolism and lyrical content. They deem it “vigilante feminism”, forcing their presence into the masculine space and abrasively showing how women can play and appreciate brutality in music as good as they can. This article’s analysis helped me to interpret and understand the power of Lisa Mungo’s transgressive performance in the context of other symbolically transgressive performances.

References

Kahn-Harris, K. (2007). *Extreme metal: Music and culture on the edge*. Oxford Publishing.

This book is a great, in-depth sociological analysis of extreme metal. It helped me to outline the idea of transgression and how transgressive practice is the underlying discourse in the metal ethos. Dr. Kahn-Harris also identifies how extreme metal is defined by pushing boundaries, which is relevant to my socialization argument.

Krenske, L., & McKay, J. (2000). 'Hard and heavy': Gender and power in a heavy metal music subculture. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 7(3), 287-304. <http://doi.org/10.1080/713668874>

This article details ethnographic research that observed women in metal spaces. This article outlines the archetypes of emphasized femininity in metal spaces and illuminates how men dominate the space. This article also helped me illustrate the innate sexism underlying the dynamics of the metal scene by fleshing out gendered archetypes in practices around mosh pits.

Müller-Hansen, N. (2014, December 2). In This Moment's Maria Brink: 'When I Walk Out On Stage Now, I'm Confident'. *Blabbermouth*. <https://www.blabbermouth.net/news/in-this-moments-maria-brink-when-i-walk-out-on-stage-now-im-confident/>

Maria Brink's commentary on her experiences of sexism bring life to the more detailed observations in the academic literature. Her comment captures the dominance of men in the audience and how this sort of sexism impacts the performing female artists. It captures how women artists are given less seriousness and respect.

References

Pearlin, J. (2014). A brief history of metal. *MIT Heavy Metal 101*. <https://metal.mit.edu/brief-history-metal>

This article captured all the main points of history in the metal timeline. With the dates of certain movements in metal music and culture, I was better able to understand and connect the shifting cultural dynamics to the changes in the metal genre. Specifically, it gave me more insight into the collapsing social dynamics that gave way under hair metal as metal went underground.

Savigny, H. (2015). Postfeminism and heavy metal in the United Kingdom: Sexy or sexist? *Metal Music Studies*, 1(3), 341–357. https://doi.org/10.1386/mms.1.3.341_1

This article further illuminated the dynamics of sexism in metal scene, specifically the contradictions that female metal fans have to navigate in the space. This source helped me to understand how the relentless sexism of the scene actually exhausts female musicians from going up any further in the scene, which related to the larger point of women only being emphasized for their looks. This article also showed how sexism in metal reflects the normalization of sexism in larger society and how it can be explained away with notions of individuality or equality.

Varas-Diaz, N., Rivera, E., González, O., Mendoza, S. & Morales, E. (2017). Heavy Metal as a vehicle for critical culture in Latin America and the Caribbean: Challenging traditional female gender roles through music. In B. Bardine & M. Elovaara (Eds.), *Connecting Metal and Culture: Unity in Disparity*.

This article also helped me flesh out the concept of metal as a place of empowerment for women and serves the point that people are using metal for empowerment all over the world. The women in this article used metal as a vehicle for gender-related empowerment in their cultural context in Puerto Rico, which deepened my understanding of how an international art practice can be applied in different contexts to empower people in different situations. This inspired my thinking for metal as empowerment.

References

Vasan, S. (2011). The price of rebellion: Gender boundaries in the death metal scene. *Journal for Cultural Research*, 15(3), 333-349. <http://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2011.594587>

This article also helped me illuminate the logic of sexism in the scene. The author framed it in terms of needs for group membership and entry into the dominant group by contingency of emphasized participation. This helped me understand how men have leverage in social situations and how it's used to create and reinforce sexism. *These sources on sexism were invaluable because I am not privy to the experiences of women at metal shows, as I am a tall male.* The fact that there is much research on the subject is telling.

Watts, C. A. (2016). *Nothin' but a good time: Hair metal, conservatism, and the end of the cold war in the 1980s*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of South Florida]. University of South Florida Graduate Theses and Dissertations. <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/6601>

This was a great resource because it illuminated the social dynamics that gave rise to the hair metal phenomena. The author's argument showed how hair metal fit in line with the logic of metal origins, as a space to express camaraderie against decaying masculine dominance as it related to social position and capital privilege. Her argument makes sense and explains the anxiety underlying the androgyny and the extreme misogyny.

Weinstein, D. (2000). *Heavy metal: The music and it's culture*. Da Capo Press.

This is considered the first big resource and sociological analysis for the metal world. It details how the music was brought into life from the counter-culture movements and masculine angst. It also details the masculine symbols, themes, and experience that are pervasive through traditional metal, an understanding which lays a great foundation for the interpretation of extreme metal in the context of its origins.