

## Heavy Metal Music and the Communal Experience: An Introduction

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To the unfamiliar eye the relation between metal music and community might seem like a contradiction. After all, how can community emanate from practices that to outsiders seem to foster loudness, extremity and violence? Those individuals that have enjoyed this musical genre at some point in their lives will probably have a very different appreciation of metal music and its culture in terms of community. In fact, many aspects of metal music point towards the importance of community as part of its practices. Some salient examples can be provided just to illustrate this argument. These include shared experiences (e.g. concerts, listening to music together), dress codes (e.g. use of recognizable band shirts), behavioral expectations (e.g. protection during mosh pits), use of collective information outlets (e.g. magazines, websites), and jointly discussed significant events (e.g. death of a musician). The central idea is that when these experiences are shared and valued by many persons, they can provide individuals with a sense of meaning and purpose that allows them to come together as a community. Although this may sound simple enough, it is actually quite a complex process. Beyond being a mere association of people, the complexity involves processes that concern exploring the expanse and the limits of the metal community and even dealing with paradoxes where although the music may be held in common, values such as political, artistic and ethical ones can be extremely diverse. Yet these are all held together under the banner of ‘metal’.

Defining community is difficult and full of challenges. Scholarly work has addressed a plethora of concepts to define what a community is and how it functions for the individuals that compose it. For example, scholars have addressed the role of geography in community formation.

This perspective fosters the importance of physical closeness and face-to-face interaction in the process of building a collective narrative or identity. Other scholarly work has focused on the functions of the community. These approaches tend to highlight individuals' investment into a collective group depending on how that experience works for their benefit and well-being. Academic work has also addressed how communities are "imagined" or conceptualized in order to provide its members with a sense of longevity and historicity that transcends their current moment. Finally, scholarly work has also highlighted the importance of shared values or worldviews, emotional connectedness and social support in bringing people together as a community. What these approaches have in common is the underlying notion that community, in its many interpretations, is the final output of collective consciousness and collaboration. In this process, individuals usually identify some benefit in belonging to a group that at times surpasses their quest for individuality. The formation of communities in relation to metal music echoes this proposition. This volume not only builds on interdisciplinary research on community, but also offers some new insights into community formation and cohesion in metal music culture that on the surface as mentioned above, resists straightforward treatment in terms of community.

Scholars who study metal music as a social phenomenon have begun to systematically address the issue of community in their research. This research has addressed how communities are formed (e.g. musical scene formation) (Wallach and Levine 2012), their diverse manifestations throughout the world (Riches and Lashua 2014), interpretations of their communal practices (Scott 2014), inclusion of diverse members (e.g. women, members of the LGBTT community) (Hill 2011; Snell 2014; Clifford-Napoleone 2015), and variables that predict their cohesiveness (Varas-Díaz et al. 2015), among other issues. These research ventures are a reflection of the importance placed on the communal experience in metal music. Just as

important, research has documented how on many occasions the idea of community can clash with the notions of individuality and resistance to social conformity that are so important to metal music (Venkatesh et al. 2014). It should come as no surprise that for some individuals enmeshed in particular metal sub-genres the notion of community seems like an uncomfortable contradiction. How can individuality and community be simultaneously celebrated? This is just one example of the challenges of understanding the notion of community in metal music.

In this edited volume we aim to delve even deeper into the notion of community in metal music. We do so by highlighting that community formation is not a mere outcome that individuals aspire to achieve in order to feel cohesion with others, but rather a life-long process full of contradictions, negotiations and tensions. In this scenario, community is not always equivalent to the unproblematic sense of togetherness that seems to permeate most conceptualizations on the subject. It is in fact a constant process in which such a sense of togetherness is present, but simultaneously challenged by issues of inclusion/exclusion, changes in the demography of its members, uncomfortable practices of those already on the inside its borders, and constant interaction with other groups in which metal communities coexist. Part of this challenge occurs in the boundary changes of the metal community that are influenced by negotiations concerning musical genre, while other challenges concern the ruptures and coalescences occurring within metal culture.

We have divided the book into five sections. Taken collectively the chapters focus on how the communal experience in metal is conceptualized, positively experienced by many, fraught with tensions for others, and how it is constantly expanding and proposing new challenges for its members.

## Entering the Communal and Conceptualizing Collectiveness

In this first section of the book the authors address how the notion of community in metal music can be theoretically conceptualized. This is done with a clear understanding of the importance of the communal experience and its potential benefits, but without neglecting the implications of communal idealization frequently found in research on community. Furthermore, they delve into the process through which communities centered on metal music are formed from an early age, their potentially protective function for young people, and the process through which a sense of togetherness is frequently achieved via simple acts like hanging out.

Deena Weinstein addresses the complexity entailed in conceptualizing communities in general, and the metal community in particular. She provides a definitional and conceptual framework to approach the possibility of metal and community, supplemented with her phenomenologically grounded insights in the metal music festival event. She highlights how communal formation is guided, among other things, by shared values, mutual identification, interaction, solidarity, and boundaries. For her, depending on how these factors are combined, metal communities can be labeled as ideal, diminished or mythic. The differences are important since they allow individuals within the community to conceive and describe the collective from different perspectives ranging from very realistic conception of their self-selected group, to more idealized versions that sometimes border on the unreal.

Niall Scott addresses the apparently paradoxical constitution of the communal in metal music. Using Aristotle and Kant's work as theoretical cornerstones for his analysis, he examines the tension of the communal experience as one that highlights our constitution as social entities, while simultaneously exploring those individualistic instances in which the communal is

unwarranted. Through an analysis of music videos, song lyrics and musicians' speeches rooted primarily in the works of the bands Slipknot and Machine Head, the author argues how the issue of community in metal music is better understood as an ongoing paradox rather than a simple process of togetherness and harmony.

Esther Clinton and Jeremy Wallach explore the process of communal formation via a phenomenological approach, focusing on the idea of "hanging out and talking metal". Using examples from their research in Indonesia they focus on the concept of "Nongkrong", which is used to describe the process of being together and hanging out. Although they highlight this regional idea, their argument applies to a very common experience for fans of metal throughout the world that frequently share spaces (e.g. concerts, bedrooms, schools) and use their time to talk about metal music. Their phenomenological approach allows them to place this process in perspective by highlighting the importance of the subjective experience of those that engage in it. Their beliefs and emotions become central aspects of the process of being together and exchanging ideas about music, and the world in general, while developing collectivity.

### Strengthening Community

In this second section of the book authors explain how the communal experience in metal music is strengthened via shared experiences that can bring together individuals across the world. Specifically, they describe how the musical and visual narrative created by international bands can serve as a bonding agent for the communal experience. They also explore how young metal fans use community as a protective strategy and the complex process through which their safe havens are formed. One analysis explores more tribal association of fandom exemplifying

cohesion, whereas the other brings out themes of metal community providing a response to alienation and exclusion from other social groups.

Toni-Matti Karjalainen documents the process of community formation in metal via fans' identification with the Finnish band *Nightwish*. Through acquired narratives from fans from 30 different countries he describes how the music, lyrics and overall aesthetics developed by this band allow individuals from different parts of the world to have a personal connection with the ensemble, while also fostering collective experiences which are essential for community formation. Particular attention is provided to the formation of the communal experience via appreciation of one particular album in the band's catalogue: *Imaginaerum*.

Paula Rowe's contribution to the book addresses the formation of metal communities at an early age. Her qualitative work with adolescents in South Australia highlights the processes through which young people who appreciate metal music begin to establish notions of collectivity in relation to the music. This process, which begins with the simple act of listening to music, can subsequently turn into a sense of belonging to a collective that provides some sort of protection from outside threats (including bullies). She emphasizes how social exclusion from other more traditional adolescent groups plays an important part of community formation among young metal fans. Her work exemplifies how metal music, and the communal experience surrounding it, can be a strategy for survival in a very difficult developmental stage.

### Communities in Contextual Interaction

In this third section of the book authors explore how metal communities are contextual. That is, they are in constant interaction with their surroundings and other communities. The researcher presented here challenges the notion that metal communities are socially isolated entities.

Nelson Varas-Díaz, Sigrid Mendoza and Eric Morales document the process of community formation in the Caribbean region via ethnographic research in the islands of Cuba and Puerto Rico. They use a multi-method approach with qualitative interviews and lyric/image analysis to explore how communities in the region interact with their context. Their results show how musicians in the Caribbean have examined their racial, ethnic and national roots to transform their traditional interpretations and reveal their darker and morbose sides, which are more directly linked to metal music expectations. Their work is an example of how metal communities, although closed to some outsiders, are in fact porous and in constant interaction with other groups and their environments.

#### Tensions within the Communal Experience

In this fourth section of the book authors explore tensions within the communal experience. Some of these tensions emanate from discussions over subjects that are addressed in the music and by members of the community, which are deemed as extreme and in some instances as hate speech. Other tensions arise from critical conceptualizations of the metal community that question essentialist notions of collectivity and focus on how it can be a byproduct of myth and storytelling. With a strong focus on black metal the authors use their insights to move the metal community towards critical boundaries that delineate possible normative limits to the collective group: what ought not to be tolerated.

Vivek Venkatesh, Bradley J. Nelson, Tiejia Thomas, Jason J. Wallin, Jeffrey S. Podoshen, Christopher Thompson, Kathryn Jezer-Morton, Jihan Rabah, Kathryn Urbaniak and Méi-Ra St. Laurent address the issue of online hate speech in the black metal scene. They do so via an

innovative methodological approach that aims to fuse the social sciences and humanities. Using corpus-assisted critical discourse analyses the authors document the presence of specific keywords in black metal related discussion boards. They document how participants frequently tackle and discuss issues related to racism, nationalism and hate speech in these forums. Their findings are important as they shed light on how communities are sometimes fraught with tension over hate speech towards particular groups and how these are challenged/tolerated/fostered.

Karl Spracklen addresses the imaginary aspects of community formation within the black metal scene. Applying Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory to his analysis, he specifically explores how the 'second wave' of black metal in Norway, made infamous/famous for church burnings and murder, has become part of a narrative among metal fans that serves as a myth-making process. The constant telling and re-telling of the stories surrounding this 'second wave' of black metal serves as a key component of a sense of belonging among the members of the imagined community. Spracklen challenges the more essentialist notions of community by addressing how it can also be a product of storytelling and myth-making.

### Expanding the Community beyond Previously Thought Borders

In this fifth and final section of the book authors explore the ever-expanding nature of the challenges faced by a growing community. As metal music continues to develop and be an ever-present staple of underground culture, members of the community will age and become ill. Exploring how their fans and peers will address this growing sector of the community is an important endeavor for the future of metal. Finally, as the metal community continues to grow

and more diverse actors co-exist within its borders communication between them is important. Both issues highlight the changing nature of the metal community and the challenges posed for its members.

Keith Kahn-Harris explores the concept of care within the metal community. This might seem contradictory in light of metal music's more individualistic and transgressive tendencies. Still, he proposes that care is an important aspect in metal music and provides examples of how members of the community have shown support for others who have become terminally ill. The proposed reflection gathers importance as he explains how the aging process of members in the metal community (e.g. musicians) will inevitably foster new considerations on how they care for each other in times of need.

Finally, Brian Hickam provides us with an in-depth analysis of how the metal community has grown to include a wide variety of actors that go beyond musicians and fans. Through the use of Systems Theory he explains how these actors, including now scholars in Metal Music Studies, interact with each other to form the larger metal community. He proposes that in this ever-growing and pluralistic scenario strategies must be developed in order to communicate with each other for the benefit of the larger metal scene. The use of metaphors is proposed as a mechanism to establish a conversation on shared meanings between all members of the metal community.

We hope that the chapters included in this book serve to continue a vigorous discussion on metal music and community. For those who are part of the metal music scene, both locally and globally, the importance of community related issues has been ever present. We expect that the chapters included here echo the experiences of long time metal fans, while highlighting both the benefits and tensions entailed in community formation. We are hopeful that academia will

continue to expand its views on metal music and those who enjoy it. Finally, we would like to thank Sigrid Mendoza, Kadriel Betsen and Kayra Fuster for their help in the final process of developing this collection, and the University of Puerto Rico for supporting the academic conference that shares the title of this book in 2014.

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