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CONFERENCE REPORT

WORLD METAL CONGRESS, RICH MIX, SHOREDITCH, LONDON, 21–22 MARCH 2019¹

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ABSTRACT

This work is a critical report on the world metal congress held at Richmix, Shoreditch, London on 21–22 March 2019, reviewing the panel discussions, screenings of Syrian Metal Is War and Songs of Injustice: Heavy Metal in Latin America as well as the live performances at the event.

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The inaugural *World Metal Congress* (WMC) took place in London at Rich Mix, Shoreditch on Friday and Saturday 21–22 March 2019, and involved a first-time collaborative partnership between Alexander Milas at Twin V solutions (London-based media production house) Josh Retallick of Old Empire

KEYWORDS

World Metal Congress
Rich Mix
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1. The *World Metal Congress* would not have been possible without the funding support from Arts Council England, from Camden Brewery and the Rich Mix venue, London.

(London-based music promotion company), Middle East metal impresario and policy analyst Lina Khatib from the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House), and The University of Central Lancashire metal scholars Niall Scott, Stefano Barone and Tom O'Boyle. An international gathering of artists, music business and industry experts, scholars, journalists and fans of metal music, WMC realized a goal of bringing together these groups to discuss and showcase the global metal scene and the music as an English cultural export. Six panel debates addressed local and global issues confronting metal culture; the premieres of two metal documentaries with talks and Q&A sessions with the directors took place; and an art installation featured a 'wall of metal', presenting over 80 bands from the global metal scene. In addition, live music on the Saturday saw performances from cellist Jo Quail and Birmingham children's doom band HAQ123 during the day and in the evening from Belfast's Unyielding Love; Dawn Ray'd, an antifascist black metal band from Liverpool; South Africa's *Zombies Ate My Girlfriend*; and Singapore's grindcore headliners Wormot.

Over the past decade there have been a run of metal conferences and symposia in academic contexts. Beginning with the Heavy Fundamentalisms series organized by Interdisciplinary.net in 2008 and following the founding of the International Society for Metal Music Studies, such events have highlighted scholarly interest in political, ethical, musicological, anthropological and cultural theory-based themes related to metal music, to name but a few. The Modern Heavy Metal Markets (<http://www.modernheavymetal.net/>) series in Helsinki and the Grimposium events (<http://grimposium.com/>) held in Canada saw an opening up of such conferences to industry discussions and opportunities to extend academic gatherings to a wider audience. The WMC set out to focus more strongly on an opportunity to look outward, providing a space where key actors in the metal community could meet and even provide a template for other such events in the future.

The two-day WMC event aimed at opening up discussion regarding metal culture and its engagement with groups from diverse backgrounds by bringing representatives of various struggling non-western scenes together with western industry representatives and the western media. The aim was to showcase and give voice to new artistic work in metal culture and highlight the socio-political issues those nascent scenes face in trying to get their voices heard internationally. The panel discussions and audience questions centred on the ways in which western music is promoted at the expense of a broadening outlook to the existing and thriving global metal scene. The impact of political issues such as Brexit as well as metal's response to changes in technology made for a stimulating discussion for which there was an evident appetite amongst the audience, with panels often running out of time before they had sufficiently delved into what revealed themselves to be complex issues. This left no doubt as to the veracity of the event and the need for further debate upon such platforms.

The severity of concerns regarding marginalization and marginalized groups lead to challenging, and even at times uncomfortable discussions, particularly around issues of race and gender.

The justification of metal as an English cultural export is largely tied to its oft-debated origin narrative, as expressed in the 2011 and ongoing *Home of Metal* celebration in the Black Country of England (Brown et al. 2016: 2), which focuses on Black Sabbath's seminal role in incubating the genre in 1960s Birmingham; WMC's recognition of this saw each discussion panel

introduced by Toni Iommi of Black Sabbath via video link and a keynote introduction from Napalm Death's Barney Greenway. Five decades later, metal has been recognized as truly global, even if this is a fairly recent recognition. However, the difficult spectre of treating metal as a western export continuing to express a narrative of cultural imperialism still haunts the genre, and this issue was raised more than several times by artists from Afghanistan, Syria, South Africa and Singapore to name but a few countries represented at WMC. One of the main barriers to an egalitarian geography of global metal was often identified in the lack of resources (both symbolic and material) and access to the western scene for those artists coming from non-western countries.

The opening panel, entitled 'Global metal sells, but who's buying?' brought together noteworthy industry heads such as Roadburn and Bloodstock festival directors Walter Hoeijmakers and Vicky Hungerford, X-Ray touring co-founder Steve Strange and Music For Nations Label Head Julie Weir. Their discussion acknowledged the need for increased investment in non-western scenes whilst highlighting fundamental systemic issues impeding that process. Technological innovation was lauded as well as criticized, the Internet in particular providing a viable platform for increased exposure whilst having a proven negative effect on local scene formation. This chimes with existing analysis of the impact on technology in places like Lebanon. Lina Khatib in a *Metal Hammer* interview with Tom O'Boyle commented on the change in the metal scene in Lebanon since the 1990s, when heavy metal was banned by the Lebanese government but was still available in Syria (it was eventually banned in the latter in the early 2000s). She described how in 1997 she:

went to Syria to buy bootleg cassettes as metal wasn't banned there. I would hide them in the taxi; the driver would give small bribes to the Syrian and Lebanese checkpoints in order not to search the car. Today things are different – the internet has had a huge positive impact.

(O'Boyle 2017, *Metal Hammer's* July 2017 issue [issue 297])

Where on the one hand, the Internet has liberated Lebanese metalheads, on the other it has fractured the scene, making it insular. In the same article, Patrick Saad, founder of lebmatal.com, one of the earliest Lebanese metal websites explains that the Internet at one point came to override live music as local bands shifted their focus to trying to attract the West: '[o]lder metalheads tell me the scene was more passionate, events mattered more', ... '[t]o be recognized as part of the global Metal press is one of our most important ambitions' (O'Boyle 2017: n.pag.). The opinion upon conclusion was unanimous: there is great music out there to be found, and we need to make more effort to find and support it.

The following panel, entitled 'The new mob rules' gave voice to three non-western metal representatives – Sahil Makhija, frontman of Indian death metal band Demonic Resurrection, Zaher Zorgati, vocalist of Tunisian power metallers Myrath and Flower KC, founder of the Nepalese independent metal festival Silence fest. Their testimony qualified and expanded upon the issues raised earlier – the difficulty in obtaining visas to tour, joining international festivals, and simply travelling to the West. The financial cost involved, not to mention in places such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iran the societal condemnation of their activities, lack of access to instruments, venues and even electricity made the obstacles faced clear. These difficulties reveal the issues of visibility of 'peripheral' bands and present the condition of a closely tied transnational

community that cannot fully overcome global social divisions. These divisions are magnified by nation state borders making movement such as touring extremely difficult and expensive. Interestingly, the problem of acquiring visas and permits also emerged from the prior conversations of UK industry personnel regarding the looming consequences of Brexit. This greatly worried participants, as it would make European tours, and intra-European exchanges generally, even more complicated.

Another paradox inherent to metal has to do with non-western bands having to participate in a 'global division of metal labour', and to circulate as commodities through media and the market. Representation of global metal in western media remains, thus, a problem. The final panel of the day, 'Spreading the metal disease' raised the controversial point that if a band is good enough, they will inevitably get exposure, and that bad music – no matter its nation of origin – will never find success. This point, though, fails to take into account the inequality non-western bands face when trying to find exposure in a crowded market of western bands appealing to predominantly western tastes. Such challenges, are evidenced in director Travis Beard's 2018 documentary *RocKabul*, in which the band District Unknown are stoned in the streets, arrested, threatened and ultimately driven to separation, as various members leave for the West, escaping the persecution of their homeland. This is held in tension with the controversial critique of bands in need of a gimmick, something to make them stand out: that of non-western artists now residing in western countries continuing to play on the tragedies of their homelands – press-worthy material that coalesces to create the metal scene's very own incarnation of misery tourism. It further underlines the need for events such as the WMC to not reduce itself to a mere paying of lip-service to these issues from a perspective of western privilege. Heather McLaughlan has articulated the problem of media exposure well regarding Burmese metal, where she challenges western media to treat metal properly in terms of its context rather than a preconceived western notion of what it ought to be like (McLaughlan 2016: 401–02). This issue related to treating global metal as an exotic cultural product for western consumption became a key topic of discussion.

Two premiere screenings gave voice to these issues, as well as the difficulties faced by artists who continue to produce metal under very challenging circumstances. The documentary *Syrian Metal Is War*, directed by Monzer Darwish (2018) and Nelson Varas-Díaz's 2019 *Songs of Injustice: Heavy Metal in Latin America* support Catherine Hoad's recognition that the heavy metal documentary has matured from disdainful representations to becoming significant documents of cultural value (Hoad 2019: 132), as well as continuing debates on how the genre circulates 'beyond Anglo American contexts' (Hoad 2019: 132). Both documentaries gave first-hand accounts on metal scenes in politically troubled countries, and the conditions of existence of those scenes. *Syrian Metal Is War* illustrates the devastating impact of war on a reality in which the metal scene was already troubled and disadvantaged. The documentary showed (and the following Q&A developed) the situation of running a metal scene amidst bombings, and in the constant risk of death and incarceration. The Syrian guests shared the unique, complex sensation of listening and playing songs about war in an environment that is *truly* torn by war. In such a context, metal was represented as 'shelter' (as described by Damascus band Maysaloon's frontman Jake Shuker in the Q&A), and the very activity of keeping the metal scene alive has been discussed as a way of contrasting the impact that war has on people lives and mindsets. *Songs of Injustice*:

Heavy Metal in Latin America demonstrated the wide-ranging struggles Latin American bands face in the pursuit of their musical art, covering locations in Chile, Argentina, Mexico and Peru. In the film, metal musicians express a spectrum of fascinating accounts of producing music under the conditions of dictatorship, drugs, class divisions, poverty and the challenges of access to scenes. The music is interpreted as a reflection of the context that the artists live in and where such artist face life or death situations, the film's tag line 'We are not here to entertain you' is brought into meaningful contrast with the privileges enjoyed in western living. Hoad's recognition of such documentaries and their presentation of otherness give rise to the critical controversies surrounding metal as a liberatory product of 'the modern democratic left' (Hoad 2019: 140) and challenges the very idea of whether metal can ever be a-political.

The themes of marginalization and inclusiveness were central to the two Saturday panels, entitled 'United Forces' and 'Fighting the Powers'. They shone light on the plurality of subjects who find themselves excluded, marginalized and repressed in metal scenes. Panel discussions also dealt with the different ways in which such dynamics of marginalization play out in the West and in non-western contexts. A guest from Singapore, for example, pointed out how local metalheads are 'outnumbered' by Singaporean public opinion, which can, at times, result in the persecution or censorship of the scene itself.

Accounts from distant countries such as India and Tunisia also shed light on the ways in which broader social exclusion shaped local metal scenes. To be specific, not everybody in such societies can access metal as a form of consumption, and the simple availability of instruments, venues and facilities is limited to the privileged echelons of society. Cultural factors also make metal appealing to a limited part of society – usually, a cosmopolitan, culturally anglophone middle class.

Some forms of marginalization cut across the global metal geography. Scenes are usually not very welcoming of social groups such as children and disabled people. Several factors contribute to their exclusion: from practices such as mosh pit aggression, to architectural barriers of venues (see Carew 2013), to specific cultural practices such as drinking alcohol, broadly speaking. Some are well-researched transgressive practices (see Kahn-Harris 2007; Overell 2016), which complicate the possibility for the scene to be inclusive to children and families. A much-studied aspect of marginalization discussed in the Saturday panels concerned the presence of sexism and the marginalization of women in the metal community and its culture, including scene access and safety. The panels, oriented to a fan base audience, led to deep discussion of these issues. There is no doubt that this continues to be an area that needs to be addressed in relation to the lived experience of fans. Metal scholarship has identified and captured problems regarding sexism and misogyny and the participation of women in metal scenes. Gaby Riches has argued that 'heavy metal scenes should be considered spaces of equality and potentiality' (Riches 2015: 263) but the difficulty in realizing this illustrates that it still requires much work. An example of building a scene that is positively responsive to these problems is found in Amber Clifford's 2015 study *Queerness in Heavy Metal Music: Metal Bent*. The question of how one polices metal scenes was recognized as problematic, in that such terminology goes against the perceived values of free self-expression, autonomy and freedom boasted proudly by metal music culture. For this reason, the task of policing the scene

was, by different participants, attributed to the community itself – musicians, their friends offstage and fellow concertgoers.

Overall, speakers and the audience confronted themselves with a central dilemma: to what extent is metal a genuine force for change and rebellion against existing forms of exclusion and oppression, and to what extent is it, instead, a simple mirror of societies, reproducing some of their inherent power relations?

The need for future events of this type became increasingly evident over the course of the weekend, as did a mandate from a passionately vociferous fanbase to give a platform to marginalized elements of the scene – be they marginalized by geographic location, race, gender or sexuality. That the weekend's panels felt like mere introductions to the issues was appropriate given the amount to be discussed; any future WMC will need to devote time to discussing the potent and visible concerns regarding equality and inclusivity. Given metal's status as a music of rebellion and transgression, a growing attitude of inclusivity shows the continued exciting future potential for a form of expression capable of confronting injustice. A future WMC may diversify the manner in which it presents its discussion, utilizing traditional panel formats for veteran voices to espouse their experiences, and more debate-orientated sessions in which audience members can interrogate the issues with a panel of voices as they see fit. Whatever happens, it is important that the issues of the marginalized are heard and not then quickly forgotten, and that WMC takes positive steps forward to provide a sustainable platform and opportunities for those struggling to find them.

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