

Suicidal, Longhaired, Satan-Worshippers

40 Years of Metalhead Misconceptions

I believe that metal fandom is the most stigmatized of any genre of music today. During the late 1980's and early to mid-90's it could have been argued that rap fandom was, but this genre's heavy commercialization and assimilation into U.S. culture has changed this. As one of the highest grossing music genres in the world, the negative stereotypes that were previously associated with rap have largely dissipated, although it is still criticized as being misogynistic. Metal, on the other hand, has consistently remained on the outskirts of mainstream music and possibly as a result, has retained most of the stereotypes that were given to it upon its arrival in the early 1970's.

It should be noted that there exists a certain style of music that blends several genres, including metal, and has found its way into mainstream music. So-called "nu metal" consists of bands such as Limp Bizkit, Linkin Park, and Creed and is considered a sub-genre of metal by some. However, the majority of metal fans, myself included, do not consider it metal due to its far removal from the genre and its watered-down style that aims to make it less "offensive" to listeners and maximize profitability.

Asking people what comes to mind when they think of metal fans, I interviewed students on the campus of Swarthmore College as well people I encountered in the town of Swarthmore (aka the Ville). I used two groups of subjects in order to obtain different perspectives on the issue. I then compared these descriptions to real-life metalheads.

Using posts from message boards on the official websites of two popular metal bands—

Metallica and Black Sabbath—as well as examples of several metal fans on campus and an article, I was able to compare them to the testimonies I collected. Although certain generalities of metalheads, mainly those regarding style, seem to have elements of truth, I found most of these stereotypes to be erroneous.

As noted above, some of the ideas regarding the style of metalheads apply to many of them. However, I think that the majority of metal fans don't fit these characterizations. The people I interviewed had similar ideas of the archetypal metalhead: long/greasy hair, shabby/ripped clothing, and tattoos. The fans on campus that I've talked to certainly don't fit these images. Take my roommate for example; he's very polished and wears a dress shirt and tie everyday. And yet he's a big fan of Slayer and neo-classical metal.

The misconception that metal fans have a low level of intelligence is one that has stayed with this genre of music since its conception forty years ago. Metal has always been considered “low” culture, and people point to one's attraction to it as evidence of his or her intellectual inferiority. When I asked one woman from the Ville what comes to mind when she thinks of metal fans, her first response was “dumb”, and three others replied similarly. However, there is now reason to believe that the exact opposite is true: One English study suggests that children with exceptional intelligence identify heavily with this genre. Ian Winwood, a journalist affiliated with the British newspaper *The Guardian* writes, “A study published today reveals that a disproportionate number of members in the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (a body of 120,000 students which represents the top 5% of academic achievement) list heavy metal – or ‘metal’, as its devotees these days know it – as their favourite kind of music.” He

suggests that metal's attraction to highly intelligent students may be due to its musical and rhythmic complexity. This is why I personally like it. But Winwood points out that metal is still considered base, and its fans equally so: "What is more striking, though, is the assumption from outside that anyone associated with the genre is brick thick... What matters is that people who like the Smiths are understood to be smart while people who listen to Slayer are reckoned to be otherwise."

I'd also like to bring in examples of metal fans I've spoken to on campus, so as not to simply discuss this fandom in an abstract sense. First of all, I'm going to suggest that any metalheads at Swarthmore are by no means unintelligent, but I'd like to discuss a few people in particular. They have given me permission include them in this paper and have shared with me information about themselves. One friend of mine is a fan of some of the classic metal artists such as Metallica and Dio, as well as progressive and neo-classical metal artists such Dream Theater and Symphony X. His interests are diverse and very intellectual in nature; he likes to create art, debate politics and philosophy, and is "becoming a huge fan of Jane Austen". In addition, he loves to fence and his Facebook profile picture consists of him posing with the fencing team in full garb minus the equipment.

One stereotype that has stuck with metal fandom is the idea that its fans and musicians are devil-worshipping or otherwise sacrilegious. Although this belief has gone down in recent years, it is still applied to certain sub-genres of metal and was iterated by a few of the people I interviewed. While I always considered this idea ridiculous and even amusing because it gave me the image of some 1970's mother freaking out when she finds her son's Kiss album, I was surprised at the amount of religiousness expressed

by members of both the Metallica and Black Sabbath fan forums—and no, I'm not referring to Satanism. Many had Bible quotes automatically attached to their posts and one even had the following quote: "Being a Christian and being into Sabbath are not mutually exclusive". In all fairness, however, there have been several instances of Norwegian black metal fans and musicians worshipping Satan and also committing horrible acts of violence.

A good number of people I talked to characterized metalheads as aggressive or fixated on violence, evil, or destruction. I actually found some pretty explicit examples of this on the message boards; one person asked if anybody else was a fan of the television series Godzilla and another posed the question, "Which is your favorite Smurf villain?" Not to mention my friend who likes fencing. But in all seriousness, it's not hard to imagine some who is aggressive and violent by nature choosing to listen to a genre of music that contains certain sub-genres that glorify violence. However, the idea that metal incites fans, particularly teenagers, to commit acts of violence has been blown out of proportion since its inception; criminal lawsuits were brought against Ozzy Osbourne and Judas Priest because certain teenage fans had committed suicide. In addition, Marilyn Manson came under heavy criticism because the students guilty of the Columbine shootings had been fans of his. It's possible that some of the older people I interviewed in the Ville remembered these incidents and had used them when they previously formulated their opinions of metal fandom. However, I found nothing in these forums, or regarding metal fans on campus, to support these claims.

Lastly, I'd like to take on the common idea that metal fans are loners, people who have withdrawn themselves from society. The very fact that these online forums exist

suggests otherwise. There are sizable online communities where metalheads can talk about their favorite guitarists or express concern over having to take their cats to the vet—yes, I actually found this. These forums aren't necessarily places for discussing topics pertaining to metal. Rather, they serve as way for people to interact with others who share the same interests, and in my opinion, this is what fan communities are all about.

The purpose of this paper is not to try to debunk these stereotypes. Rather, my intention is to identify the common misconceptions of metal fandom and to show that they do not apply to the typical metalhead. The metal fans that I have encountered on campus and on online forums do not fit these profiles, and yet these characterizations have stuck with metal fandom for nearly forty years and show no signs of being abandoned. I can only hope that society will one day achieve a better understanding and acceptance metal fandom, as it once did with rap culture.

Sources

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