

USING WOMEN'S LISTENING PLEASURE TO CHALLENGE THE NOTION OF HARD ROCK AND METAL AS 'MASCULINE' MUSIC

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Abstract

The broad genre of hard rock and metal is frequently characterised as dark masculine (e.g. Walser 1993) misogynistic (e.g. Kahn-Harris 2007, Vasan 2011) music. However, in interviews, women fans presented the music as more complex than that. Far from being exclusionary 'masculine' music, participants used a broad lexical range to describe musical pleasures. This encompassed feelings of travel, romance, and transcendence and contrast with notions of the music as masculine where 'masculine' incorporates values of fierceness, loudness and anger. Women's pleasurable experiences thereby highlight the way that hard rock and metal has nuanced meanings for its listeners.⁶⁷

Introduction

The broad genre of hard rock and metal is often described as 'male-dominated' and 'masculine'. The former is difficult to critique, as the line up of any rock or metal festival or a glance through any of the genre's magazines will show. The latter, however is not so straightforward, even though there is work that highlights the misogyny and exclusionary musical and non-musical practices. Such common-sense and academic ideas about the music bring forth questions of why women would enjoy it; and yet it is clear that some do. In this paper I want to talk to you about what the British women hard rock and metal fans I spoke to for my PhD said about the music of the genre and their favourite bands. From their responses it is clear that the genre has much more to offer listeners than simple expressions or celebrations of masculinity: the music has more nuanced meanings than that and I argue that the women's descriptions mount a challenge to that perceived masculinity.

Heavy metal as 'masculine music'

Rob Walser's work on heavy metal and gender centres around the way that the genre 'excripts' women, writing them out and creating a fantasy world for men in which women don't exist. Musically, he characterises heavy metal as masculine music due to its 'virtuosity and control' (Walser, 1993, p. 108); articulation of 'a dialectic of controlling power and transcendent freedom' (Walser, 1993, p. 108); 'vocal extremes, guitar power chords, distortion; and sheer volume of bass and drums' (Walser, 1993, p. 109). This conception of the music is evident in Keith Kahn-Harris's analysis of fans' descriptions of what they like about the music. He concludes that fans are 'inarticulate' (Kahn-Harris, 2007, p. 54) and that they have limited language available to them. The lexicon they do use

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is bounded by the extreme metal scene which values ‘aggression, brutality, energy, etc.’ (Kahn-Harris, 2007, p. 53). The brevity with which he considers their words suggests that he does not feel it is *very* important to reach a greater understanding of that pleasure, and he moves on to consider other aspects of extreme metal fandom. I do not think, however, that we should leave our understanding of musical pleasure to rest with such fans’ words as ‘I just liked it’ (interviewee quoted in Kahn-Harris, 2007, p. 54). The opaqueness of this speech proves an obstacle to greater understanding and ‘just’ works to foreclose any follow-up questions. But I don’t think we can afford to allow such a wall to remain in place. To do so means relying on received ideas about the music and about women fans’ involvement in hard rock and metal.

In my interviews with women fans I asked how they would describe heavy metal. Like Kahn-Harris, I found that they did employ words that that echoed notions of warrior masculinity and ideas of authenticity. They used terms such as: ‘loud’, ‘heavy’, ‘hard’, ‘severe’, ‘raw’, ‘power’, ‘grunty’, ‘strong’, ‘faster’, and expressions related to anger or aggression such as ‘fiercer’ and ‘angry’ were also employed. Such terminology is reminiscent of the warrior aesthetic in metal (Hill, 2011) in which physical power and intimidation are celebrated. My interviewees also talked about guitars, and those were electric guitars, which Monique Bourdage has shown are constructed as masculine (Bourdage, 2010) and reinforces the symbolic construction of hard rock and metal musicians as masculine. Hard rock and metal was contrasted with pop by a number of my interviewees, with all the attendant language: pop was manufactured, formulaic, throwaway fluff, and it was inauthentic; but rock and metal were real, lyrics were more poetic and meaningful, instruments were ‘real’ and musicians more talented, virtuosity was in evidence, song structures were more complex. These descriptive terms owe much to the way in which pop and the mainstream is feminised, as discussed by Sarah Thornton (Thornton, 1995).

All of these sorts of descriptions parallel the symbolic framing of hard rock and metal, as masculine. In doing so it would appear that my interviewees were rejecting femininity associated with pop music whilst celebrating masculinity. This looks problematic: by asserting rock’s value to the detriment of pop, culture that is associated with women is positioned as being less valuable and women as producers, artists and enjoyers of culture are seen as less important. Thus the idea that only men have something important to say, be it artistically or politically, is maintained, feeding into the endurance of women’s subordination. Furthermore, it positions women fans as involved in the disparagement of their own gender as they align themselves with a masculine culture that writes out the feminine. However, this is a simplistic reading that does not take into account the more complex ways in which women understand their relationships with the music they love. Any assertion that women who like hard rock and metal are traitors to their gender needs to be challenged.

Some feminist readings of rock and metal

Common sense understandings of hard rock and metal as masculine owe much to the way in which certain sounds are *construed* as ‘masculine’. However it is important to remember that ‘masculine’ sounds are only ‘masculine’ because they have been understood as such: they have no inherent masculine qualities. In his description of metal as masculine, mentioned earlier, Walser clarifies his position by asserting that the description is not due to any essential gender qualities of the music. And as Susan McClary make clear, gendered interpretations of music affect our understandings of and pleasure in the mu-

sic, our thoughts and feelings about musicians and about fans (McClary, 1991). This is clear from women's descriptions of the genre that use language which emphasises the masculinity of hard rock and metal. Their gendered hearings of the music were part of their experience and part of their pleasure. However, that pleasure has not been treated as neutral and has been politicised by groups of non-fans.

Hard rock and metal have been subject to feminist criticism, as well as conservative criticism. Jennifer Baumgardner describes how in the 1970s there was a general sense within the Women's Liberation Movement that rock was 'bad for women' because of its negative portrayals of women and its celebration of machismo (Baumgardner, 2005). This was reflected in a comment made by a friend of one of my interviewees, Susan, in the 1970s. He was confused that as a *Spare Rib* reader and feminist she could enjoy the music of Led Zeppelin and other heavy metal bands:

I can remember having a conversation with a friend who said, 'you know I find it really uncomfortable that you like this sort of music'. A male friend. [...] Yes, he said 'because it seemed to me to epitomise everything that you stand against'. (Susan)

Norma Coates describes her confusion at loving the Stones whilst recognising their misogyny (Coates, 1997), and more recently Sonia Vasan has written of her incomprehension about women's love of misogynist death metal (Vasan, 2010). Coates argues that 'false consciousness' is not a satisfactory explanation, but she does not offer another. Sue Wise's (1984) wonderful article on her Elvis fandom, meanwhile, creates the ground from which to start to rethink the meanings of hard rock and metal for women. To think of Elvis, she argues, as some macho sexist pig-god is to take on the patriarchal understandings of Elvis, but this doesn't reflect her own Elvis fandom; the feminist reworking is left undone.

In order to move beyond the women's-hard-rock-and-metal-fandom-as-false-consciousness argument it is vital to consider the other ways in which the women described their musical pleasure. For, whilst the language of masculinity and the ideology of hard rock and metal was prominent in their descriptions of the genre, their explanations of why they liked their favourite bands showed other languages in use. However, as long as social understandings of the genre give primacy to their masculinity and represent women fans' musical passion as incongruent with their gender, there is little room for a consideration of the ways in which that fandom is enjoyed which do not reify the genre's masculinity.

Sheila Whiteley (2006) has done some work on this, moving away from Frith and McRobbie's influential but denigratory discussion of cock rock (Frith & McRobbie, 1978) to rethink the meanings of long hair, high voices and the playfulness with gender that appears in the genre:

In essence, metal is about men being manly, and while Walser relates this to the codes of misogyny, exscription and the fraternalistic culture of bands and fans, problems arise when connecting the sweaty gods to their often androgynous images – the long hair, mascara, spandex, and leather. (Whiteley, 2006, p. 257).

Susan Fast's research with Led Zeppelin fans (1999) also finds a good deal to worry conceptions of the band as wholly masculine, including sexual responses

to the band from heterosexual men. Moreover, considering hard rock and metal as exclusively masculine eclipses women fans' own interpretations that may well challenge the notion that the genre as just an arena for hypermasculine posturing which excludes or demeans women. For this reason I now consider how my interviewees described their pleasure in their favourite hard rock and metal bands in ways that did *not* fit in with the ideology of the genre.

Other kinds of pleasure

When describing their enjoyment of their favourite bands, only five women used the same kinds of language as employed in descriptions of heavy metal. More women invoked 'dissimilarity' between the music of their preferred bands and others. Additionally, my interviewees used quite novel and imaginative descriptors, so that they were able to articulate why their favourite bands moved them in language that often contrasted sharply with the sort of terminology that is associated with hard rock and metal and that they had offered in descriptions of the heavy metal genre. They described the music as allowing transcendence, as enabling shared experiences and also in romantic terms.

Transcendence

Three women described the music as allowing transcendence and travel in the mind. For example, Jeanette described seeing her favourite band, Red Sparowes, and the effect of the political images of China that they were using as the backdrop combined with the music:

[Red Sparowes] actually have, erm, visuals behind them [...] it was visually absolutely stunning, but it was also very disturbing images at the same time. Together, combined with extremely melodic, beautiful music in front of you, so it transports you as well. I mean I certainly didn't, during that show I didn't think political thoughts, but makes you think very creatively, erm. Yes, it just opens up, erm, it lets your mind flow. (Jeanette)

Jeanette was momentarily unable to think about anything else. The beautiful music had the impact of allowing her mind to 'flow' in ways that she considered to be creative. Hard rock and metal is not generally thought of as allowing space for *thinking*. Hard rock in particular is not associated with the intellect. Rather it is often associated with the life of the body: sex, drugs and alcohol. This attitude is epitomised in Hebdige's off-the-cuff denunciation of 'heavy metal rockers' as being distinguishable by their 'idiot dancing' (Hebdige, 1979, pp. 109, 155), in which the movement of bodies in time to the music is the notable characteristic. In Jeanette's remarks there was an impression of images crossing her consciousness as if in a meditative state when images arise without being purposely thought. There was the sense that for Jeanette this kind of creative thinking was not the kind of thinking she could access easily in her daily life. Red Sparowes' music and imagery enabled this and it was extraordinary and central to her pleasurable experience. Furthermore, Jeanette used 'melodic' and 'beautiful', all words that are not usually associated with hard rock and metal: common sense understandings of the genre by non-metal fans sometimes interpret the music as harsh and ugly. The density and pace of the songs can make listening a difficult experience for new listeners and in these cases they may not hear a melody at all. Furthermore, these terms do fit into the ideological language of the genre as they do not refer to speed, heaviness,

hardness or aggressiveness; in fact they are more associated with femininity and with art.

Other interviewees talked about the music as lifting them above of the mundane, especially when doing housework (Susan, Ruby), and others portrayed listening to an album as going on a musical journey through a fantasy land (Aime). All of these descriptions give an impression of pleasure in hard rock and metal that is quite different from those pleasures characterised as masculine, or from the pleasures described by Kahn-Harris. Where Kahn-Harris found 'aggression, anger, violence and brutality' (Kahn-Harris, 2007, p. 52), elements he describes as 'negative' (Kahn-Harris, 2007, p. 52), my interviewees described positive elements that enhanced their thinking and meditative lives.

Music as a shared experience

A number of women described the ways in which listening enabled them to share experiences with musicians. Ruby enjoyed the way in which she could relate to what the musicians were singing about:

It's an affiliation. [...] when I got divorced [laughs, but a little forced], probably a bad example, er, but obviously it was a highly emotional time, I think, you know, that a lot of, a lot of the metal music I listened to at the time was, especially with Killswitch Engage, was about heartbreak and sorrow and it kind of makes you feel like you're not the only person in that situation. It's almost like having a heartbreak buddy there on your iPod. (Ruby)

Ruby's use of 'affiliation' suggests something like sibling-love and friendship, which was again signified through her use of 'not the only person', 'buddy' and 'there on your iPod'. These terms all create a sense of how Ruby felt about the music at the time of her divorce: that the music could provide intimacy, friendship and stability in a time of difficulty. Ruby's vocabulary – which is readily found in pop music culture – brings forth the question of to what extent does vocabulary cross genre boundaries. Ruby called Killswitch Engage her 'heartbreak buddy' as she found that the songs resonated with her own feelings at the time of her divorce. She felt that she was not alone, even when she was alone with her iPod headphones.

My other interviewees described the way in which musicians could transmit their emotions, energy and enthusiasm to the listener, particularly in live performance. For example, Jenny gained happiness from what she saw as the enthusiasm and enjoyment of the band. The joyous performance is therefore very important, and where Kahn-Harris sees 'negative' emotions I would not characterise these in that way. It is happy, communal in the shared element, and overwhelmingly positive. This brings to the fore ideas about music as a communal experience that allows for personal feelings to be explored in musical companionship. These pleasures do not necessarily fit in with the language that echoes the ideology of hard rock and metal. However, the women were not describing a whole-community experience: Ruby and Susan in particular were feeling a quite personal communion with the band.

Romance

Aime told me that her first encounter with Avenged Sevenfold had been via music television. This occurred after having just read a review of the band:

It was just a review of a gig, and I thought, 'oh that gig sounded cool; [I] might go on YouTube and have a find out a bit' and er just before then I was watching Kerrang! on TV and I flipped over the channel and just that second a song of their's came on and it was this kind of like husky bit where he sings and I was like ah! It was just I felt [breathy] that moment and I was like, it was really nice, it was kind of like a fairytale. (Aime)

Aime began by saying 'it was just a review', where 'just' ascribes little importance to her encounter with the piece (it came to have more significance later). The synchronicity of reading the review and then seeing the band on television seems to have suggested a magical or romantic relationship between herself and the band, as indicated by her use of the word 'fairytale' (she seems to have forgotten that she was intending to 'go on YouTube' where she may very well have chosen to watch the same video). The romance came from her somewhat erotic response to the 'husky' quality of the singing. 'Husky' is associated with throatiness and can be read as 'sexy', particularly if used about women. Aime struggled to put her response into words, using instead 'ah!', sighing breathily and intimating a short time of arousal, 'that moment'. The use of 'fairytale' with Aime's narration of the story, which presents it as an encounter like love at first sight, relying on magical synchronicity, work within a discourse of romance language. There is a distinct sense that Aime's musical experience of Avenged Sevenfold was a romantic one.

Conclusion

Although Aime's story-telling might well work to bolster ideas of young women fans as groupies by ascribing a romantic relationship to her attitude towards the band, her response to Avenged Sevenfold is not as 'straightforward' as a passion for particular band members; her previous comments signalled that it was a relationship with the music *and* how she imagined the musicians. It was a complex affection that intertwined her intellectual musical pleasure with her erotic musical response and with her imaginative thoughts about the band. Such descriptions, alongside those of the music as beautiful, as allowing transcendence and the opening of the mind, interpretations of musical performances as joyous, and feelings of companionship between musicians and fans, all challenge notions of hard rock and metal fandom as masculine music. My participants' expressions move our understanding away from a strict notion of the genre as 'masculine' because they highlight how pleasure is also found in aspects of the music that are not associated with masculinity, and some of which are linked to what is considered feminine. This wider consideration of women's pleasure in the music draws attention to the fact that when qualities are ascribed a gender this is a social process: the qualities that are associated with masculinity are not 'essentially' masculine (and similarly those linked to femininity are not 'essentially' feminine). Therefore when hard rock and metal is thought of as masculine this is the result of constructed understandings of gender, not the cardinal qualities of the music. The importance of considering these elements, therefore, is not just a matter of giving a fuller picture to women's rock and metal pleasure. It is necessary in order to challenge the orthodoxy of the genre as masculine and therefore the naturalised hierarchy that places men upon the stage and in the position of the 'real fan' whilst women are relegated to the subordinate role of the groupie.

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