

HAIR METAL AND AUTHENTICITY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY HEAVY METAL CANON WARS

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Abstract

This essay explores how hair metal functions in popular metal historiography: occupying a place on the “family tree” of metal while regularly being labeled inauthentic. In analyzing works ranging from Deena Weinstein’s *Heavy Metal* (2000) to the films of Sam Dunn, my essay identifies the specific rhetorical function of hair metal: signifying a kind of “pollution” (borrowing a term from gender studies) and serving as metal’s “Other.” Hair metal has helped scholars define the genre—both what it is and what it is not—while assuming a prominent place in the contest over the metal canon in the 21st Century.

Introduction

“To me, metal music is not for the masses. And that’s why I feel like metal heads are so united—they feel like they’re part of a special club.”

Don Jamison *That Metal Show* 6/22/2013

In reviewing more than a decade’s worth of popular metal histories and memoirs, one thing seemingly uniting metal heads in the first decade of the twenty-first century is an antagonism to hair metal. Hair metal was indeed for the masses, and the masses are not always welcome in the “special club” of metal. There are exceptions, of course, but typically hair metal is synonymous with inauthenticity. In fact, Seb Hunter (2004) has recounted that the Manowar fan base regularly wrote letters to *Kerrang!*, “accusing bands like Poison and Mötley Crüe of peddling False Metal” (p. 11). At this point, however, I should emphasize what the present essay is not: it is not an argument about whether or not hair metal is *really* metal. As Deena Weinstein has argued, “it would be ludicrous for scholars to enter such debates” in the age of metal studies (2011b, p. 244). However, such debates did indeed find a home in many popular metal histories and memoirs over the past decade and a half. In a few of these cases, hair metal is a significant sub-genre of the broader category of heavy metal and, in others, hair metal is the “Other” by which ostensibly true metal defines itself.

This essay shares some research into the rhetorical function of hair metal in what I am calling the heavy metal “canon wars” in the years prior to the emergence of metal studies—a moment located in 2008 by Keith Kahn-Harris (p. 251). Hair metal makes many metal fans and writers uncomfortable because it challenges crucial tropes that define metal, including the notion that hair metal’s commercial success—as evidenced by the popularity of hair metal videos on MTV in the late 1980s—is antithetical to definitions of metal as a genre rooted in specific subcultures. In similar ways, the complex gendering of hair metal clearly plays a significant role in the resistance of many metal fans and writers in accepting hair metal within a traditionally masculine subculture.

Following academics in gender studies such as Mary Douglas, Simon Watney and Judith Butler, there is arguably a “polluting” effect at work in how hair metal contributes to twenty-first century metal discourses. Because the stability of any social system is potentially vulnerable, certain practices may be viewed as threatening the dominant order; in my view, hair metal, for many, is dangerously transgressive and frequently threatens definitions of metal. And, yet, the word “metal” is always part of the “hair metal” formulation. Hair metal offers a tension in metal historiography in simultaneously being metal and “not metal”—at least until the moment when, for many scholars, the emergence of metal studies began to “steer clear of definitional battles” and metal became analogous to Lyotard’s “archipelago,” and “metal studies [made] it possible to have some regularized commerce between the islands” (Weinstein 2011b, p. 244). In 2015, hair metal clearly occupies a position on the “family tree” of metal. However, the present essay will explore the variety of ways in which hair metal once signified the kind of “pollution” that gender studies scholars were beginning to consider in the late 80s/early 90s—the very moment when hair metal was ruling MTV and bringing a wildly popular form of metal to the masses.

The “French Academy” of metal

Among the variety of ways in which scholars have defined metal in the 21st Century, Deena Weinstein (2000) has reflected on the function of hair metal and how this sub-genre was part and parcel of the “fragmentation of heavy metal” (p. 43). Although Weinstein’s book is clearly scholarly, the impact of *Heavy Metal: The Music and its Culture* on subsequent popular metal histories makes it a logical starting point for this essay. Later studies would expand the list of metal sub-genres considerably, but Weinstein began the process of making distinctions among forms of metal with attention to “traditional metal,” “thrash metal” and what she referred to as “lite metal.” For Weinstein, lite metal “emphasizes the melodic element” (p. 45) rather than the heavy rhythmic foundation of traditional 70s metal, best exemplified by Black Sabbath. In addition—and more damagingly—lite metal failed a crucial test: “The code of authenticity, which is central to the heavy metal subculture, is demonstrated in many ways. Of all the established heavy metal criteria—highly emotional voice, street [...] clothes, and ‘serious’ themes—lite metal fails the test [...]” (p. 46). What followed in Weinstein’s elaboration of the traits of lite metal raises questions about the accuracy of using “metal” to describe the music. According to Weinstein, lite metal possessed the following traits:

- “ornately cut, moussed and blow-dried” hair
- a “sweet” vocal style “with no growls or screams”
- “sleazy, raunchy blues themes” which are “more concerned with love and lust than heaven and hell” (pgs. 46-47)

Ultimately, Weinstein concluded that lite metal, in foregrounding sexual pleasures rather than apocalyptic battles between good and evil, is simply not *heavy* and deviated from most every accepted trait defining the genre. However, as Weinstein pointed out, “There is no legitimate, established authority, like the French Academy, that decides on the correct name for a musical style or genre” (p. 45). And so Weinstein seemingly discussed lite metal as a metal sub-genre merely because others have attached “metal” to it. Although suggesting that there was no existing metal canon, Weinstein took the initial steps toward the formation of that very canon of metal. And lite/hair metal was,

simultaneously, discussed in a scholarly fashion and excluded. Note, too, that as late as 2011, Weinstein, while on one hand hailing metal studies for “steering clear of definitional battles” (2011b, p. 244), was also using quotation marks around “heavy metal” when discussing the relationship between lite metal and its parent genre (2011a, p. 39). At this late date, Weinstein argued that hair metal was merely “marketed as ‘heavy metal’” (p. 39), once again linking hair metal and inauthenticity.

In the wake of Weinstein’s earlier scholarship (2000), a number of metal histories emerged that were targeted at general readerships. Like Weinstein, David Konow (2002) also pitted “traditional metal” versus “the hair bands” that would “turn L.A. into a beauty parlor” (p. 169). Less a comprehensive metal history, and more a linked series of bios of metal and hard rock bands, Konow’s *Bang Your Head* nevertheless discussed the hair metal era in great detail, which, for the author, began with the “L.A. metal explosion of 1983” (p. 193) and “Heavy Metal Sunday” at the US Festival in May of that same year. The fact that thrash metal band Metallica released its debut album *Kill ‘Em All* in that very same year will become central to the inauthentic/authentic metal discourse that unfolds. In preparation for that hair metal/thrash juxtaposition in his narrative, Konow has focused on the relationship between those “hair bands” and MTV, the American cable network which had launched less than two years prior to Heavy Metal Sunday.

Konow discussed bands such as Ratt, Twisted Sister, and Quiet Riot within the context of MTV’s rapidly growing popularity in 1983 and 1984 and, in the process, adopted arguments similar to Weinstein’s characterization of the metal listener as the “proud pariah.” For Konow, the backlash against hair metal became clear when considering why fans love heavy metal in the first place:

[Metal fans] are usually the first fans to abandon ship when the band finally does become successful [...]. The music helped them through difficult times and made them feel as if they weren’t the only ones feeling this way. So when a metal band became popular with the jocks and cheerleaders, or became too commercial, [...] many of those fans felt as though they had been stabbed in the back. (pgs. 196-97)

To be fair, Weinstein was aware that such generalizations about metal’s audience are an over-simplification, and she made this very point in the “Proud Pariahs” chapter of her book (p. 96). That said, both Weinstein and Konow focused on shared attributes of metal fans—one of which is the shared resistance to the “poseurs” and “poodle bands” of ’80s L.A. hair metal (Weinstein, 2000, p. 137). Weinstein and Konow reasoned that such resistance to hair metal relates to its commercial viability—after all, as Weinstein wrote, “heavy metal subculture is distinctive and marginalized from the mainstream” (p. 139). In other words, true metal is not, and should not be, the music of the jocks, and the prevalence of Ratt and Twisted Sister—and later Poison and Warrant and Whitesnake—on MTV signified what was false about those “backstabbing” poodle bands.

“Look what the cat dragged in...”

If commercial appeal were the sole reason hair metal was frequently deemed inauthentic, then bands such as Judas Priest would need to be excluded from the metal canon, as well. By the 1983 “Metal Explosion,” however, Priest was in the midst of a run of gold and platinum albums dating back to 1977’s *Sin*

After Sin, and the video for “You’ve Got Another Thing Comin’” was in regular rotation on MTV. In addition, Judas Priest shared the stage at “Heavy Metal Sunday” in 1983 with Quiet Riot, Mötley Crüe and others. However, as Weinstein has suggested, many within the metal community resisted additional aspects of the hair metal ideology: namely, the rather complex gendering of artists that, simultaneously, sported “ornately cut” and “blow-dried” hair (p. 46), yet offered lyrics that were “sleazy” and “raunchy” and focused on “love and lust” rather than “heaven and hell” (p. 47). If metal resists a connection to the mainstream in many ways, the complex gendering of hair metal also reveals much about the accepted boundaries of metal. In other words, what Mary Douglas (1969) has suggested about the ways in which bodies are typically defined within an imagined space of cultural coherence applies to the boundaries of metal. Douglas wrote of how particular taboos serve as forms of “pollution” which “inhere in the structure of ideas [...] and which punish a symbolic breaking of that which should be joined or joining of that which should be separate” (p. 113). Hair metal, because of its potentially contradictory messages regarding gender and sexuality, exists on that metal/not metal divide; for many, its aggressive male heterosexual lyrics (think Warrant’s “Cherry Pie,” for one) are coupled with an androgynous visual image marked by teased hair and lipstick, causing a symbolic break with Weinstein-like definitions of metal.

An additional example of this discomfort with hair metal’s gendering occurred in Ian Christie’s *Sound of the Beast: The Complete Headbanging History of Heavy Metal* (2003). According to the author, hair metal was not only *not* real metal, but the musicians who played it were clearly *not* real men, since Christie lambasted many L.A. rockers for sponging off of their female partners (pgs. 155-56). Once again, the issue of authenticity was central to Christie’s description of two specific hair metal bands: “Under their androgynous exteriors Ratt and Dokken were cold and calculating songwriters, crooning sweet nothings from anesthetized hearts—jaded seducers whose lyrics openly admitted they were in it for the money” (p. 155). Also decried for their “ruthlessness” and for being “icy” (p. 155), the androgyny was less a form of genuine rebellion and more of a marketing strategy—thus re-emphasizing the inauthenticity of hair metal, particularly when compared to the thrash metal that emerged in the mid-1980s.

By the late 1980s, L.A. metal had become “diet metal” for Christie (p. 161)—a term not far removed from Weinstein’s “lite metal.” Perceptive readers may note that both of these metal subgenres are clearly gendered terms, given the way that diet products are so aggressively marketed to women. As Christie wrote, “As the hair teased higher and out of control, the Hollywood dream machines created their own clueless rendition of heavy metal” (p. 160), at least until the arrival of Guns N’ Roses. Making L.A. (and the world) safe again for “true” metal, Guns N’ Roses, along with thrash and early 90s grunge, relegated hair metal to one-hit-wonder status for most of the 1990s. However, as the new millennium dawned, hair metal re-surfaced in metal historiography. The difference in hair metal’s position within the metal canon post-2000, however, is that some metal critics and journalists began to lobby for hair metal as a valid metal sub-genre; as a result, the metal canon wars had begun in earnest.

Metal for an “unremarkable” age

As Konow and Christie were drafting their own metal histories, Chuck Klosterman (2001) again foregrounded the discourse of authenticity surrounding hair metal by opening his memoir with the disclaimer, “You know, I’ve never had long hair” (p. 11). Since Klosterman actually referred to Weinstein a few

pages later (p. 14), his reference to his own hair was a likely response to those “proud pariahs” Weinstein once described: “from the beginning the metal hairstyle for males has consisted of one simple feature: it is very long. Long hair is the most crucial distinguishing feature of metal fashion” (p. 129). Klosterman was being playful about the issue of his own authenticity as a metal head, which prepares readers for his ostensibly inauthentic subject: hair metal.

Fargo Rock City has also highlighted a second trope of authenticity: the issue of hair metal and commercialism. Anticipating the argument that hair metal is unworthy of analysis because of its widespread commercial appeal, Klosterman laid a claim for the value of “the popular.” Consistent with cultural critics such as Stuart Hall before him, Klosterman viewed hair metal as a site on which a significant number of people could construct identities—either in identifying with the values of hair metal musicians or in opposition to those values. Hair metal was very real to Klosterman and his social circle in the mid-to-late eighties since it offered an alternative voice in a cultural landscape marked by uniformity: “The single biggest influence on our lives was the inescapable *sameness* of everything, which is probably true for most generations” (p. 22). For Klosterman, hair metal represented creativity—an opportunity for metal to diversify and expand its audience in the 1980s. In a culturally unremarkable era, for Klosterman, hair metal was remarkable at a time when nothing in rock music seemed capable of shocking its audience. To both its fans and detractors, hair metal was able to shock by being glamorous—both “visually and musically” (p. 32). Whereas previous iterations of metal style emphasized denim, leather and t-shirts (Weinstein 2000, p. 104), hair metal, with its Aquanet and eyeliner, glammed things up considerably.

Klosterman’s dialogue with Weinstein—and note here that Weinstein’s obvious influence on popular metal histories is a primary reason for including her work in the present essay that largely focuses on non-academic texts—continued with the issue of working-class authenticity. Weinstein had recognized that the social-class consciousness of metal is a complex issue and that generalizations could be dangerous—especially when comparing the U.S. and U.K.—yet the author ultimately concluded that “the separation of the sexes, the boisterous, beer-swilling, male camaraderie, among other features, are rooted in blue-collar folkways” (Weinstein 2000, pgs. 114-15). In contrast to this “football terrace machismo” (Weinstein 2000, p. 115) of traditional metal, Klosterman painted hair metal as anything but blue-collar: hair metal fans eschewed the “working-class credibility in ugliness” (p. 39) that pervaded his adolescence in North Dakota. Instead, glam metal “latently adopted the Republican persona of the 1980s” (p. 65). What Klosterman has suggested is that, in many ways, hair metal’s commercial popularity might be explained by its alignment with the dominant values of the Reagan/Thatcher era: namely, the benefits of conspicuous consumption and an emphasis on upward social mobility. As one salient example, readers may recall the title and cover art for the debut Warrant album, *Dirty Rotten Filthy Stinking Rich* (1989).

Five years after the publication of *Fargo Rock City*, Steven Blush unleashed *American Hair Metal* (2006). Even though Blush’s previous book had been a study of early 1980s American punk (a genre synonymous with authenticity in scholarly studies), the author did not treat hair metal ironically. That said, Blush never considered hair metal a thriving art form in the new millennium; instead, Blush has described it as “an extinct civilization” (p. 6), one that “the modern media” has regarded with a smirk. To counter this dismissive tendency, Blush provided a lengthy introduction to hair metal, followed by a series of

brief band profiles (from Black 'N Blue to Winger) with accompanying photos. Based on the author's description of the traits of hair metal, it is abundantly clear that Blush never equated hair metal with the aesthetic advance of thrash metal; instead, for Blush, hair metal embraced clichés and, rather than reject establishment values, chose to embrace the self-absorption that regularly characterized the eighties cultural mainstream. In line with other metal scholars, Blush emphasized the artifice of hair metal and even concluded that the androgyny of Poison, Britny Fox and others was merely “pseudo androgyny” (p. 55). Rather than linking to queer culture—something that other forms of metal generally avoided (aside from the occasional leather bar imagery of a band like Judas Priest)—hair metal musicians “were blue-collar uber-heteros who dressed sorta like chicks because that's what got 'em laid” (p. 55).

For Blush, the trope of authenticity surfaced again, but not in ways we have observed in previous metal histories. In the wake of early-90s grunge, Blush blamed the hair bands for abandoning “their sound and style, too [and] in doing so, they alienated their own scene and fanbase” (p. 110). By 2006, it was now possible for Blush to make an argument that hair metal was guilty of a commercial sellout—but not for the reasons other writers had articulated merely a few years earlier. For Blush, hair metal did not betray metal's core values in the 1980s by embracing conspicuous consumption (of both material goods and sex); instead, Blush suggests that hair metal was a form of flamboyant metal ideally suited to the “happy-go-lucky 80s” (p. 20) that lost its audience only when it resorted to the social and individual angst on display in the music of Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and Alice in Chains. In other words, when hair metal strived for authenticity in the early 90s, it immediately became inauthentic for Blush.

The death and rebirth of metal

In the wake of hair metal advocates such as Klosterman and Blush, other metal scholars have continued to wrestle with the legacy of hair metal. Sam Dunn's film series *Metal Evolution: The Definitive History of Heavy Metal and Hard Rock* (2011) included eleven episodes—first broadcast in the U.S. on VH1—and traced the evolution of metal from 19th-century violin virtuoso Nicolò Paganini to the 21st-century prog-metal band Tool. In Episode Five, Dunn focused on “glam metal” and the tone of the episode is established when Dunn's plane touched down at LAX. The filmmaker is whisked from the airport in a leopard-skin limo—scenes that are intercut with clips from Warrant's *Cherry Pie* video. Given that Los Angeles, as a city associated with the film and television industries, is synonymous with artifice, it should surprise no one reading this far that Dunn's exploration of hair metal relied heavily on the familiar tropes of poseurs and the inauthentic. Along these lines, Dunn has investigated the connection between hair metal and the rise of MTV in the early 80s and why so many hair metal musicians emigrated to L.A.'s Sunset Strip.

One significant narrative arc in *Metal Evolution* Episode Five was the ostensible death and rebirth of metal. As an episode appearing halfway through the documentary series, hair metal served as a fulcrum for Dunn: the point at which the decadent lifestyles and musical excess of metal's most popular form threatened to kill off metal for good. In an interview with Warrant's Jerry Dixon and Erik Turner, Dunn posed the question, “Why do you think that so many from that L.A. scene died off?” The answer is less important than the question, since the remainder of the episode made it quite clear that “true” metal—and keep in mind that Episode Five is bookended by episodes devoted to the New Wave of British Heavy Metal and Thrash—needed hair metal to

ascend commercially and then be killed off. What Dunn's film ultimately offered to its viewers is a resurrection story: metal briefly dies, but was then reborn as thrash and other more extreme metal subgenres that offer to redeem the faithful.

In the closing moments of the hair metal episode, Dunn offered both a backhanded compliment and an implicit statement about the hair bands as, simultaneously, metal and not metal: "Despite abuse from die-hard metalers like myself, glam metal is clearly a much more important part of the evolution of metal than I ever gave it credit for." What I would argue is that, as Dunn implied, while hair metal has been a crucial component of the evolution of metal, it is also not true metal. As an example of the artifice of hair metal, Dunn visited the 2011 M3 Festival, merely one of the festivals highlighted in various *Metal Evolution* episodes; the Wacken Open Air festival features in the "Power Metal" episode. Unlike Wacken, however, M3 resembled a giant barbecue rather than a rock festival, with a number of attendees clearly reveling in the nostalgia and kitsch. As such, hair metal now foregrounds its status as authentically inauthentic, a point emphasized when Dunn discussed how readily numerous hair metal artists have adapted to the world of reality television: among them Vince Neil (Mötley Crüe), Sebastian Bach (Skid Row), and Bret Michaels (Poison), all of whom have appeared on reality shows including *The Surreal Life*, *Supergroup*, *The Apprentice*, and *Rock of Love*. Since the "reality" of reality television is such an acknowledged construct (Griffin 2014), such programming is as authentically inauthentic as hair metal itself, which is only one of several ways in which Dunn's glam metal episode has drawn upon the recurring tropes of hair metal inauthenticity.

Conclusion

Heavy metal historiography remains in its early stages, especially insofar as metal's popularity continues to expand across the globe. Defining metal and what it means, as well as the canon of metal, is clearly an ongoing process, even though scholars such as Weinstein consider such debates to be ludicrous (2011b, p. 244). Nevertheless, exploring a decade and a half of arguments about hair metal is instructive. As the present essay has demonstrated, the commercial success of hair metal often makes the sub-genre an uneasy fit within the larger umbrella of metal and has contributed to the discourse of authenticity surrounding it. Additional claims of inauthenticity arise from the complex gendering of hair metal: the "sleazy" subject matter of many hair metal songs, not to mention its androgynous visual style, is at odds with the core definitions of metal offered in several popular metal memoirs and histories.

In addition, the "metal explosion of 1983" was, in part, fueled by the growing popularity of MTV. In a period in which many major record labels were recognizing the promotional power of MTV, the station's "uneasy romance with metal" (Marks and Tannenbaum, 2011, p. 149) began with "heavy rotation" videos by acts later strongly associated with hair metal: Twisted Sister, Quiet Riot and Def Leppard. By the late 1980s, other hair metal acts, such as Great White, White Lion and Whitesnake, "grew more brazen than ever, creating a pantheon of video absurdity [...] involving explosions and cleavage" (Marks and Tannenbaum, 2011, p. 331). As quickly as MTV stoked the metal fire, however, the network also began to offer regular critiques of hair metal excess—once again pitting hair metal versus thrash in a one-sided contest to define true metal. Debuting in 1993, and emblematic of MTV's move away from music video and into original programming, *Beavis and Butt-head* sided squarely

with “true metal.” The contrast between the metal t-shirts of the two title characters and the metal preferences of their un-cool neighbor Stewart offer a visual contribution to the metal canon wars: AC/DC and Metallica (Beavis and Butt-head) vs. Winger (Stewart).

Clearly, MTV bears a significant responsibility for the ways in which battle lines have been drawn in the metal canon wars. MTV made metal, briefly, a form popular music and, by the early 1990s, MTV worked hard to relegate hair metal to “untouchable” status. The specific relationship between metal and MTV surely deserves further consideration within the context of metal historiography and the very definitions of metal that the present essay has explored in some detail.

As I have suggested throughout, histories of heavy metal are appearing with increasing frequency in the second decade of the new century, and this phenomenon offers challenges and rewards for projects such as mine. Martin Popoff (2014) has offered the latest extended study of hair metal and the first study of the sub-genre, to my knowledge, written by someone outside of the United States. In particular, the book has spurred my thinking about the under-explored connections between national identity and hair metal. To be certain, the bands that contribute to Popoff’s book include the likes of European acts such as Def Leppard and Scorpions; nevertheless, hair metal has been regularly regarded as largely American contribution to the metal family tree—and one, once again, with the potential to pollute: “Even before there is a hair metal proper, acts like Scorpions, Rainbow, and Judas Priest are accused of Americanizing their sound—that is adding hooks, lessening the note-density of their riffs, chucking in more party songs and the occasional power ballad—basically dumbing it down” (Popoff 2014, p. 40). It is worth noting, of course, that thrash is also a U.S.-based musical movement and one that is never equated with a musical “dumbing down,” so I am not arguing for any sort of generalized anti-U.S. bias in metal historiography. What I am suggesting, however, is that hair metal is typically cast as a mainstream, Americanized metal—one that aligns well in many ways with aspects of dominant Reagan-era ideology (rampant consumerism, postmodern meaningless, etc.)—and the ways in which hair metal is described in larger histories of metal deserves further consideration within the context of the national cultures credited with “inventing” metal.

In the end, the rhetorical function of hair metal is that it complicates several assumptions that may be reconsidered in the metal histories of the future. For many, metal is traditionally masculine, but hair metal is less so (because of its frequent androgyny). Additionally, metal is typically viewed as part of a sub-culture and out of the mainstream, whereas hair metal appealed to the masses. On the surface, the commercial orientation of hair metal is hard to refute, but given the global explosion of metal in the past two decades—particularly in Asia and South America—metal’s status as “alternative” is becoming less tenable in many respects. Perhaps hair metal—as a distinct metal sub-genre—simply offered the possibility that a much more diverse potential audience for metal existed in the U.S., Europe, and around the globe.

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