

UNIQUE ROOTS OF FINNISH METAL? NATIONALITY AND COMMERCIALITY IN THE HISTORY OF FINNISH METAL

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Abstract

Using articles from Finnish music magazines *Soundi* and *Rumba*, this paper examines the development of Finnish metal from 1979 to 2013. Throughout its history, the genre has always been dependent on global trends with uniform style and aesthetics. Initially, Finnish media gazed upon metal with a disapproving eye, however, this lessened over time as Finland produced its own metal and as the genre diversified. During the 1990s, Finnish metal became recognized across continental Europe and its commerciality has since then been recognized as a mark of its quality. Critique has not disappeared altogether; nonetheless Finnish metal as a commercial export has been accepted in its homeland.

Introduction

From obscure underground culture into the musical mainstream, metal in Finland has gone through many phases in its road to global recognition. During the early 1980s with a mere handful of bands striving to achieve any lasting success, hardly anyone believed Finnish metal would ever become a significant phenomenon. However, the “heavy boom” during the mid-2000s proved them wrong, with metal bands making headlines and appearing on national television every week.

In recent years, metal has established a solid place for itself in the field of Finnish cultural life. With the biggest metal names, such as Nightwish and Children of Bodom, selling out concert venues around the world, in the 2000s Finnish metal established a globally-renown brand for itself. This brand, however, was not born in a day. Most of the studies and literature examining Finnish metal (e.g., Nikula, 2002) often depict it as a continuous success story, overlooking its humble beginnings.

A study of Finnish metal's history shows that various bands were either supported or dismissed in the media based on how they fit the cherished image of ideal Finnish metal. Even though Finland boasts a wide variety of bands from different subgenres of metal, the public image of Finnish metal appears somewhat consistent over time. Various sources shed light on the public image of Finnish metal. Uniqueness, skillfulness and artistic integrity are attributes most commonly tied to the romanticized image of Finnish metal, as is the idea that Finnish metal music is somehow representative of the country and its inhabitants (e.g., Juntunen 2004, 15-17; Kuusniemi, 2009; Nikula, 2002: 6-7,14; Riekkö, 2004: 139-142 and 2007; Tuomola, 2007: 61; Schildt, 2011). Many of the most prestigious metal studies (e.g., Weinstein, 1991; Walser, 1992; Kahn-Harris, 2007) have claimed that part of metal's ideology is its

avoidance of commercial success. In this regard, Finnish metal appears different. The concepts of commerciality and internationalism have been concepts of great importance ever since Finnish metal's early years.

In this paper I look at the historical development of Finnish metal and how concepts of nationality and commercialism have affected the reception of various bands. I approach the subject through several examples. Much attention is given to the thrash metal band *Stone*, whose short heyday in the late 1980s paved way for the extreme metal boom of the early 1990s. Next, I consider the metal bands of the early 1990s, Amorphis, Sentenced, and Waltari, who all turned their "Finnishness" into a key ingredient of their image. Finally, I examine the power metal band Stratovarius, who were first dismissed in the press but finally won public opinion as they became massively successful in Japan and continental Europe.

Finnish metal from 1979 to the early 1990s – a short overview

The late 1970s – the dark age of metal

Upon its arrival to Finland in the late 1970s, an appreciation of heavy metal was at an all-time low. Most metal pioneers from beginning of the decade had vanished from the map, and with the punk rock movement making hard rock aesthetics of the early 1970s seem old-fashioned, newer metal bands were having a hard time finding an audience. Negative opinions concerning heavy metal were visible in the press around the world. Timo Korjus's 1979 article, "A short expedition to the essence of Heavy Metal", manages to compress much of the negativity and fears held towards heavy metal: musical insignificance, social maladjustment, drug abuse and even alleged Satanism.

It's generally naïve to think that rock is the folk music of our time, but especially so, when it comes to heavy metal. [...] At its most stereotypical, heavy rock is like stupefying the listener with a sledgehammer. Gaining a hold of this sledge makes the person an elitist star who sleeps all day, dresses up like a peacock at night and wastes half of his earthly possessions [...] by sniffing white powder in his nose. (Korjus 1979: 17)

Whenever foreign metal bands rarely made it to the pages of Finnish music papers, they were treated with open hostility (see e.g., Doug, 1980a and 1980b). The widespread disapproval of heavy metal was indeed a global trend, causing many of the seminal metal bands, such as Motörhead and Iron Maiden, to reject the title heavy metal, preferring their music to be called "hard rock" (Doug, 1980a and 1980b; Wallenius, 1981).

When looking for the first Finnish heavy metal band, the one most commonly mentioned is the Helsinki-based *Sarofagus*, whose first LP *Cycle of Life* was released in 1980 and was commonly advertised as "Finland's first heavy rock LP" (*Soundi* 2/1980). Musically, Sarcophagus was more related to the heavy-progressive movement of the late 1970s than to the more contemporary metal styles. Visually, however, Sarcophagus was undeniably metal. Led by the metal enthusiast Kimmo Kuusniemi, Sarcophagus's leather-and-studs image was far from the bohemian/hippie styles worn by its peers and shocking enough to raise some eyebrows. Kuusniemi appeared as the spokesman for heavy metal in many public television and radio interviews, answering such common questions as whether heavy metal was promoting violence and Satanism (Yle,

1981). Still, the band failed to achieve success and soon disappeared from the public eye after the release of their third album *Moottorilinnut* in 1982.

Heavy metal fever – metal in Finland in the early 1980s

Despite the continuous resistance by the media, many heavy metal bands, largely of British and American origins, managed to make a successful career in Finland. In March 1984, the entire top five of the *Soundi* album list was held by heavy metal bands, led by Whitesnake and Judas Priest (*Soundi* 4/1984). In September of the same year, the magazine already reported of the “heavy metal fever” (*Soundi* 9/1984) raging in Finland. The same was happening all over the western world. In 1984, heavy metal already counted for 20 per cent of the record sales in the United States (Martin and Segrave, 1988: 232).

However popular worldwide, Finland's own metal scene remained very modest for most of the 1980s. The few bands to achieve any success were limited to Tarot and Zero Nine, the latter was often labelled the “number one band” in the Finnish metal scene (e.g., Juntunen, 1986a and 1986b). Despite never achieving major success in their home country, much was expected of the band in international markets, and the band's few visits outside the national borders were notably publicized in the press (Juntunen, 1986a and 1986b). However, by the end of the decade, the band's time was already over. The more popular pop and thrash metal styles had stolen the crowd of traditional metal bands like Tarot and Zero Nine, putting many established bands out of business. Tarot frontman Marco Hietala discussed the situation in an interview a few years later. “They (the record label) gave us two options. They preferred the ‘Final Countdown’-style. The other options would be to have to start doing thrash metal. We had to start walking.” (Mattila, 1993).

During the early 1980s, the Finnish hard rock, or *jytä* as it was often called, became more popular than actual metal. Bands like Peer Günt, Havana Blacks, Backsliders, and Gringos Locos took the heavy aesthetics and the visual look of metal but still made a clear point of not being heavy metal. Likewise, the press also treated them as a separate phenomenon (e.g., Sourander, 1986; Juntunen, 1986a; Wallenius, 1986). Whereas heavy metal was seen as a commercial musical genre, the aesthetic value of hard rock still drew from classic ideologies of authenticity and integrity, often overlooking any demands for technical expertise. “*Backsliders's* playing might be shaky at times, but the truthfulness and the integrity of their rock and roll make up for it” (Juntunen, 1986a).

Stone and metal's public acceptance

Having been a minor curiosity for nearly a decade, Finnish metal finally broke from the underground in 1988. Two young thrash metal bands, Stone and Airdash, arrived on the scene somewhat simultaneously, immediately making a significant impact in the press (e.g., Njassa, 1988; Kemppainen, 1988a and 1988b). Despite not releasing any records, the bands were immediately treated as Finnish metal's brightest stars and the best hopes for the country's musical exports (Kemppainen 1988a). Out of the two bands, Stone soon gained the unofficial position of “Finland's number one band”, leaving Airdash the self-acclaimed runner-up (Juntunen, 1988b; Kemppainen, 1988b).

The biggest band of the global thrash metal movement, Metallica, had been strongly favoured by the press ever since its 1983 debut album *Kill 'em All* (Mattila, 1983). Combining aggressive technical music with the “down-to-earth” visual aesthetics of rock was a cocktail well-fit for journalists both in

Finland and abroad. Metallica itself repeatedly called the thrash metal genre “European”, referring to its exquisite and complex structures that created a contrast to pop metal groups and their commercial “American” hard rock sound (Pillsbury, 2006: 25-26). Largely due to Metallica's hard work for critical recognition, “the best hard rock performance” was added as a new category in the 1989 Grammy awards, marking a clear milestone in metal's public acceptance (Christe, 2004: 252–253). The same sort of acceptance happened in Finland, as well. The arrival of thrash metal was seen as a much-sought-after counterforce against the “increasing poppiness of light metal” (Njassa, 1988), despite the genre's name having translated into “speed metal”, or the more familiar *spiidi*. Not surprisingly, Stone's eponymous first album was met with enthusiastic reception, with *Soundi*'s Juho Juntunen (1988a) praising the band for having single-handedly revived rock's rebelliousness.

Thrash metal quickly grew to be a global trend with a uniform style and aesthetics. Whereas in traditional and pop metal, many bands were wearing flashy outfits and big hairstyles, in thrash metal the bands tended to favour more casual looks. Jeans and t-shirts became the thrash metal uniform for both fans and performers. Stone had no problem directly copying the look of their American counterparts, nor had they any interest in appearing unique or Finnish in any way. “What pisses me off in Finnish rock is exactly it's Finnishness: all the bands are trying to be so special and Finnish”, stated the singer Jiri Jalkanen (Kemppainen, 1988b). Whereas Finnish metal bands had been blamed earlier for copying their foreign counterparts (Sourander, 1986), the press now held no ill thoughts towards Stone's “Americanization”. Stone's international potential far outweighed its flaws.

On the tide of the growing thrash metal boom, many other Finnish speed metal bands including A.R.G., Dirty Damage, and Dethrone released their debut albums during the late 1980s. However, the commercial expectations of Finnish speed metal's internationalization were ill-fated, as thrash metal proved to be another short-lived trend. In the early 1990s, the biggest thrash metal bands, such as Metallica and Megadeth, were already moving away from their thrash origins, achieving massive success with their new, more streamlined sound. For many smaller bands, this meant a return to the commercially marginal position. Such fate was met by most of the Finnish speed metal bands as well. Stone soldiered on, releasing a total of four studio albums until disbanding in 1992. Even though the band's success had been in decline for many years, Stone's importance in the music scene was still so strong that the news of the band quitting had some reporters asking whether Stone's disbanding meant the disappearance of metal from Finland (Juntunen, 1992).

New wave of Finnish metal

Even though speed metal had flopped, the Finnish metal scene did not stay down for long. In the early 1990s, the Finnish music underground started filling with various black and death metal bands. The commercial disappointments with speed metal, however, had made Finnish record labels lose their interest towards metal, and thus many new bands ended up signing with foreign record labels. Sentenced signed with the French company Thrash, Amorphis with the American label Relapse, and Impaled Nazarene with the Italian company Nosferatu.

Whereas none of the Finnish heavy bands of the 1980s had ever reached the kind of international success expected of them, the new metal bands actually

managed to achieve considerable success abroad. A major milestone was reached when Amorphis went on to sell more than 200 000 copies across the globe with its second album *Tales from the Thousand Lakes* (Nikula, 2002: 128). Sentenced, too, managed to make a name for itself by touring extensively in continental Europe in the early 1990s. The highest expectations, however, were held for the alternative metal band Waltari, who became the most hyped band of the Finnish metal scene with the release of its second album *Torcha!* (1992). The foreign media attention given to the album's release was previously unseen for a Finnish band: *Metal Hammer UK* and *Rock Hard* both chose *Torcha!* as the album of the month (Jortikka, 1992), causing the Finnish media to greet Waltari as Finland's new number one band (*Soundi*, 1-2/1996).

The internationalization of Finnish bands was seen as both a possibility and as a threat. Even though the press held high expectations toward their commercial potential, it also wanted to hold on to the thought of Finnish music's uniqueness and national distinctiveness. When discussing a band's new album, it was often pointed out how their music greatly differed from the genre's typical practices, and how the music was undeniably "Finnish" (see, e.g., Säynekoski, 1992; Österman, 1995). In Sentenced's case, the source of uniqueness was the harmonic guitar melodicism atypical for death metal, and in Amorphis's music, it was their use of keyboards and occasionally cleanly sung vocals.

The bands themselves also made a point of their Finnishness, utilizing their national heritage as an important part of their image. Amorphis brought out their nationality by drawing their song lyrics from the national epic *The Kalevala* (1835). Sentenced filled their lyrics with a certain Slavic melancholy and self-destructive romanticism, generally considered typically Finnish in mood. Waltari, in particular, made a big deal about their northern home country. In the early Waltari albums, one can hear covers of popular Finnish *schlager* songs and even Sami-style *joiku* folk singing. The continuous inclusion of these Finnish elements was no accident. In an interview, band leader Kärtsy Hatakka spoke of how an inclusion of some "Finland perspective" was demanded of them, and how they constantly had to show proof of their nationality (Eerola, 1997). "With every album you have to prove that you're Finnish - not American or anything else, but exactly Finnish". Nationalism was a key ingredient in the newborn metal scene.

Stratovarius – power metal outcasts

Although the press was generally very favourable of the new Finnish metal, not all bands were well received. Stratovarius, whose musical style romanticized the traditional, melodic metal of the early 1980s, was an outsider for much of its career. The band's first 1987 demo-release was met with a poor reception. As Mattila reviewed in 1987: "And then some more American style guitar hero metal. [...] I just don't happen to like this kind of music that much, it's so clinical and sterile. It lacks balls." Stratovarius's lightning-fast guitar playing, high vocals and flashy stage antics were deemed superficial and widely "un-Finnish" (see, e.g., Mattila, 1987; Österman, 1996a, 1996b and 1996c). The band, founded in 1984, did not release their first record until the end of the decade. With the Finnish speed metal boom at its height, the 1989 debut album *Fright Night* was neglected in the press and sold poorly.

Due to the poor sales of the first album, the label CBS soon dropped Stratovarius, forcing the band to fund the production of the follow-up album themselves (Juntunen, 1992; Yle, 1992; Nikula, 2002: 109). The gambling paid off

handsomely, as *Stratovarius II* was a surprise hit. The album was picked up for two global reissues, and with the album's name changed to *Twilight Time*, it went on to sell 30 000 copies in Japan alone (Mattila, 1994). From there on, the band's success only grew, with the fourth album *Dreamspace* achieving 50 000 copies sold in Japan (Mattila, 1995).

For a band making a successful global career, Stratovarius remained seemingly unnotable in their domestic market. For a long period, a Finnish Stratovarius fan could only find the band's albums as expensive import editions (Juntunen, 1994; Mattila, 1994). Although the press was well aware of the band's achievements abroad, in Finland rather little was written about the band. Whenever Stratovarius was present in the media, the most commonly touched topic was money and the band's financial success (Yle, 1996). The fact that Stratovarius made no particular effort about bringing out their nationality, resembling more the bands of continental Europe, also hurt the band's artistic image in Finland (Österman, 1996a and 1996b). Whereas bands like Waltari and Amorphis were viewed as culturally important and musically interesting while having commercial potential, Stratovarius was viewed as interesting only from the financial viewpoint.

Although an outsider in the Finnish media, Stratovarius was not the only band embracing the melodicism and neoclassical influences of classic metal. Such bands as Sweden's Hammerfall and Italy's Rhapsody became successful with their combination of modern sounds and 1980s-influenced song writing, eventually forming a metal genre later referred to as power metal. Finnish media was generally looking to the United States and the United Kingdom for new musical trends, and therefore was they were long dismissive of the emerging European power metal movement and bands growing popularity.

The negative attitudes held towards Stratovarius finally started to shift with the release of the band's fifth album *Episode* (1996), which was the first Stratovarius album to chart moderately well in Finland. *Soundi* especially took a fresh, supportive attitude towards the band. "Finland is a metal country and we have the dream band" read the title in *Soundi*'s interview (Juntunen, 1996). Stratovarius's follow-up album *Visions* (1997) was an even bigger success, charting at number 5 at their native country. As Stratovarius's success grew too big to ignore any longer, the media took another approach in legitimizing the band's music. Instead of the folk music references used in the music of death metal bands, the value of Stratovarius's music began with the discourses of classical art music. The press soon forgot about its complaints of Stratovarius's lack of originality, instead praising the group for its technical expertise, professionalism, and internationality. "Visions is exactly the kind of record one would expect from Stratovarius. Safe quality work is always valuable" (Säynekoski, 1997b). The band, whose music had previously been neglected as unimaginative and unoriginal, was now the poster child for the skilfulness and professionalism in the Finnish music business. For the rest of the decade, Stratovarius was arguably the most highly-publicized band in the Finnish metal scene and was generally viewed as the best hope for Finland's musical exports.

The early 2000s – metal's breakthrough and growth

In the beginning of the new millennia, the Finnish music scene faced unseen growth. With the heavy recession of the 1990s finally over, the economy took a major boost, also greatly affecting the music business. Between 1999 and 2001,

Finland's musical exports grew rapidly from 4 million to 12 million euros. (Mäkelä 2011: 206). At first, dance-pop artists Bomfunk MC's and Darude brought the biggest international success stories, but soon the attention started turning to rock and metal. Bands like HIM, Apocalyptica, Nightwish, and Sonata Arctica burst rapidly onto the scene, and all proved popular both in Finland and abroad. In the more extreme metal department, the Espoo-based Children of Bodom turned melodic death metal into a golden sales phenomenon, and were generally greeted as the highest hope of the newborn metal scene.

On the verge of the new commercial breakthrough, attitudes towards metal had shifted completely from what they were a decade earlier. The earlier kinds of national representation and musical uniqueness were no longer demanded of the bands. Instead, the bands were valued for their professionalism and technical musicianship, much as it had been with Stratovarius. The commercialism of the new metal scene was taken for granted. A special remark must be given to the Helsinki-based band HIM, who made their commerciality an integral part of their self-labelled love metal. "We're only trying to sell ourselves. We're as commercial as a band can be" stated the band leader Ville Valo ironically (Säynekoski, 1997a).

More success followed. The fifth Nightwish album *Once* topped the European 100 chart in summer 2004. A year later, HIM fulfilled the long-lived dream of American conquest by going gold in the United States with the album *Dark Light* (2005). On top of the growing metal boom, shock metal band Lordi finalized Finland's status as a metal country by winning the Eurovision Song contest in 2006 with the song "Hard Rock Hallelujah", shifting the band's sales into hundreds of thousands. On the heels of this phenomenal success, Lordi went on to release an exhausting amount of tie-in merchandise, ranging from candy bags to a violent horror motion picture, all sporting the band's logo. Heavy metal had truly become the entire nation's business.

Summary and conclusions

The appreciation of metal and its various subcategories in Finland has undoubtedly always been dependent on global trends. During the early 1980s, the Finnish media was – in accordance with the global trend – disapproving of generally all hard rock and metal. When the first Finnish metal bands arrived on the scene, these negative connotations started to lighten, and the media cautiously approved of the music. Still, metal was not seen to have any particular importance; early bands like Sarcophagus were viewed as little more than a curiosity. Later on, when metal started booming in popularity, expectations towards the bands also heightened. Even though metal still was not favoured by the critics, high hopes were set on the commercial possibilities of such bands as Zero Nine and Tarot.

The arrival of thrash metal and the inception of Stone marked a major turning point in how the press treated metal. Even though Stone's influences were obviously brought from North America, it had no problem maintaining its artistic credibility while being commercially interesting. This was supposedly due to thrash metal's achieved critical acclaim in the United States and was therefore valued in Finland as well.

During the early 1990s, Finnish metal experienced the rise of a certain kind of musical nationalism, when bands like Sentenced, Amorphis, and Waltari brought in their national heritage as a part of their image. Stratovarius, whose

music differed from these values, was made an outsider and was viewed as unoriginal and unrepresentative of Finnish metal. However, when Stratovarius became massively successful in continental Europe, this negativity was soon forgotten, and the bands commerciality was now viewed in a purely positive light.

Finnish metal and its commerciality maintain a particular relationship. Even though commerciality in music criticism usually refers to being banal and unoriginal, in regard to metal it appears to be the opposite. The commercial success of Finnish metal has, in its homeland, served as proof that Finnish metal is of high quality and capable of competing with foreign peers. The commercial ventures of such bands as Lordi have also not caused the uproar one might expect. Even though some criticisms have been heard, the "open commerciality" of metal has generally been accepted, or at least it has been received with humour.

In recent years, the metal boom of the last decade has long faded, and other styles of popular music have challenged metal's popularity in the musical mainstream, but Finnish metal retains a strong status. Go to any Finnish band competition and the critics will be looking for the "new Nightwish". Metal bands still stand as symbols of successful cultural exports. In a country where music exports have tended to be somewhat modest, the international success of metal has acted as a source of inspiration. The romanticism of Finnish metal therefore appears very understandable. After all, the canonized image of Finnish metal greatly resembles the romanticized stereotypes Finnish people hold of themselves. Attributes of integrity, skilfulness and a certain moodiness also fit the ideological discourse of metal as they fit the nation's own image.

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