

INNOVATION AND STANDARDIZATION IN CHRISTIAN METALCORE: THE CULTURAL INFLUENCES OF CHURCH AND MARKET

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Abstract

Drawing on interviews with musicians, fans and industry insiders involved with Christian metalcore and related subgenres in Australia, Britain, South Africa and the United States, this paper analyses the sources of innovation and musical standardization in Christian metalcore. It is argued that greater engagement with secular popular culture amongst conservative Evangelical Christians, combined with the commitment to developing the musical talents and interests of churchgoing youth, allowed the subgenre to flourish in the 2000s. It is also argued that the influence of a single record label, combined with a culture of religious conformity, led to rapid standardization of the subgenre.

Introduction

Christian metalcore is a somewhat obscure subgenre of modern heavy metal and of contemporary Christian music that, in spite of its modest beginnings in North American hardcore punk scenes in the 1990s, achieved significant commercial success in the twenty-first century. Christian metalcore combines the aesthetic elements of hardcore punk and various subgenres of heavy metal and utilizes the emergent form to communicate and perform Christian beliefs of an abidingly Evangelical – often Pentecostal – variety. This paper is concerned with critically analyzing the cultural influences on Christian metalcore, in particular those influences emerging from Evangelical churches and the commercial Christian music industry, that promote innovation and standardization in the subgenre. Although this study situates the tension between innovating and standardizing between the influences of the church and the market, neither is wholly responsible. Rather, this study will demonstrate that Christian metalcore's association with Evangelical churches is a source of both innovation and standardization. Equally, the influence of the commercial music industry on Christian metalcore has increased production quality as it has lifted the expectations of audiences, whilst at the same time imposing a limited vision of success for the subgenre that has encouraged repetition.

Data for this study was primarily obtained in research conducted in 2010 in Australia, Britain and the United States, including interviews with 46 past and present musicians, fans and industry professionals associated with various subgenres of Christian punk and heavy metal, including metalcore, in addition to observations of live performances and the analysis of subcultural media. This data has been supplemented with interviews conducted in South Africa in 2014 with eight current and former Christian metalcore, death metal and hardcore musicians, as part of a broader study of popular music and youth culture in South Africa funded by the Academy of Finland. Although musicians are the most visible participants in the metalcore subculture, the nature of the subculture and subgenre, as well as proximate popular music-based subcultu-

res, is such that one often transitions back and forth between being a musician, being involved in other aspects of subcultural life, and being primarily an audience member, such that interviews with musicians offer multiple perspectives on cultural practices. All participants actively involved with bands or other projects were offered pseudonyms, and all declined. Having adopted public personas, participants desired to be associated with their creative endeavors (Moberg, 2009, pp. 13–14). However, several South African participants who have not been active in the metal or punk scene for some years, whose creative activity is limited to churches, are identified by pseudonyms even where they were not requested, in order to keep the identity of their churches private.

The paper begins by offering a brief overview of the emergence of the subgenre of Christian metalcore as an Evangelical articulation of the subgenre. The paper then analyzes the sources of innovation in Christian metalcore, arguing that the cumulative effect of greater engagement by Evangelicals with secular popular culture, combined with a commitment to developing the musical talents and interests of churchgoing youth, allowed the subgenre to flourish in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It is also argued that the cautious nature of church culture which, despite relative liberalization, still displays wariness about unorthodox forms of popular culture, combined with the paucity of diversity in record labels serving the subgenre, led to rapid standardization of Christian metalcore.

The emergence of Christian metalcore

Metalcore is a cross-over genre, emerging from the confluence of hardcore punk and various forms of heavy metal, notably thrash metal and death metal. As Waksman (2009, pp. 6-10) argues, in practice heavy metal and punk exist along a continuum, even though they rhetorically exist as “counter-genres” that critique and correct what they view as deficient in the others. Thus, metalcore adopts some of the vocal techniques of thrash and death metal, such that the familiar death metal growl is common in metalcore, but so too is the “scream” of hardcore punk. Metalcore takes from heavy metal an emphasis on technical proficiency and musical complexity that is less commonly found in hardcore. Lyrically, one can locate tropes common to both heavy metal and hardcore punk, illustrating the extent to which expressions of individual alienation and angst are common to both genres (Arnett, 1995; Azerrad, 2007).

Christian metalcore developed in the United States in the 1990s, initiated by a small number of bands that referred to their music as “Spirit-filled hardcore”. The name indicates both the origins of the music in hardcore punk scenes, and the specific religious orientation of the young musicians, Pentecostal Christianity. Pentecostalism is a form of Evangelical Christianity that emerged in the early 1900s within marginalized communities in the western United States whose enthusiasm for intense religious experiences (encounters with the Holy Spirit in Pentecostal belief) contrasted with the rise of the United States as a modern, industrial superpower. Despite emerging from dissatisfaction with modern life, Pentecostalism emphasizes a form of modern individualism, adopting the language of experiential self-discovery familiar within secular ideologies, such as Romanticism and mass consumerism. As Charles Taylor (1989; 2007) argues, Pentecostalism’s emphasis on embodied belief over sophisticated doctrine, and the rhetoric of individual spiritual autonomy, is the basis of its appeal to contemporary youth. Added to this is the willingness of most Pentecostal churches to engage contemporary cultural practices, such as pop-rock style church services.

The bands that made up the Spirit-filled hardcore movement were equally at home in Pentecostal churches and in underground hardcore scenes. These scenes were thoroughly secular inasmuch as they lacked any shared religious orientation or regulation, beyond the personal beliefs of individual participants. Insofar as these early Christian metalcore artists were equally comfortable in secular and Christian environments, they were somewhat pioneering because when Christian metal and punk emerged in the early 1980s, bands largely focused on churchgoing youth, offering an explicit alternative to secular popular culture. When early Christian metal bands did move beyond exclusively Christian performance spaces, they would often engage with non-Christian audiences in a confrontational manner that suggested their intended audience remained Evangelical Christians who might be impressed by daring forms of proselytism (Luhr, 2009, pp. 111-143). In contrast, because these early metalcore bands emerged from within secular scenes, they were willing and able to engage with non-Christians in a more egalitarian manner, as subcultural peers, rather than merely as the objects of proselytism. Thus, of the two examples of Christian bands in the extreme metal scene that Kahn-Harris (2007, pp. 144, 155) offers, collaborating with non-Christian artists and maintaining a separate, autonomous scene, it is the former rather than the latter that most accurately describes the situation of Christian metalcore.

In addition to playing alongside non-religious bands, these early Christian metalcore bands also frequented Christian music festivals, the largest of which was the Cornerstone festival organized by a remnant of the Pentecostal faction of the hippie counterculture. Chad, a former member of Strongarm, one of the foundational Christian metalcore bands, likened Cornerstone to a religious revival:

I'd been in '92 and we [Strongarm] went back in '94 with our demo. [...] There was an influx of other hardcore bands: Focused, Unashamed, Six Feet Deep, there were all these different bands and it was like this one summer there was an awakening that coined the term 'Spirit-filled hardcore'. [...] It was literally like an awakening for the music scene. After that, all the bands were really on fire and there were a lot of people – kids – who were into it, and they were giving records to their friends who weren't Christians but were in the hardcore scene.

The mid-1990s also saw the emergence of the record label Tooth & Nail. Its founder, Brandon Ebel, envisaged Tooth & Nail as a Christian analogue of secular independent labels such as Rough Trade, and it soon became the focal point for Christian metal, punk and alternative rock (Thompson, 2000, pp. 175-176). In 2000, the Christian subdivision of the transnational record label EMI purchased a fifty per cent stake in Tooth & Nail, providing the label's artists with access to the secular music market. Tooth & Nail also established subsidiary labels, most notably Solid State which focusses specifically on metalcore and other heavy metal subgenres.

This secular market access allowed for the emergence of commercially successful Christian metalcore artists in the latter years of the 2000s. By the mid-2000s, half of all Tooth & Nail releases were sold through Christian retailers, and half through secular retailers (Beaujon 2006: 59-60). One might suspect that in the intervening years, informal downloading would have reduced the share of non-Christian fans formally purchasing Christian metalcore albums, but Christian youth demonstrate rather similar approaches to accessing music

according to the only available study on the topic (Barna Group 2004). Regardless of how their music was accessed, a small number of American Christian metalcore bands achieved remarkable commercial success. Most notably, Underoath's 2006 album *Define the Great Line* which debuted at number 2 on the Billboard 200 album chart, The Devil Wears Prada's 2011 album *Dead Throne* which debuted at number 10 on the Billboard 200 album chart, and August Burns Red's 2013 album *Rescue & Restore* which debuted at number 9 on the Billboard 200 album chart. Several other Christian metalcore bands have released albums that ranked lower on Billboard album charts, including Blessthefall, The Chariot, Haste The Day and Norma Jean, and it is worth noting these albums consistently debut at their peak position indicating a committed fanbase that purchases the albums upon release, but comparatively modest follow-up sales based on limited airplay.

Sources of innovation in Christian metalcore

Unlike many earlier forms of contemporary Christian music which were often criticized as derivative and inferior to secular popular music (Powell, 2002, p. 9; Beaujon, 2004, pp. 50-51), many of these Christian metalcore artists are critically well received in the secular music press and are even regarded as innovative within the genre. Many Christian metalcore bands play what might be called "difficult" music, even within the metagenre of heavy metal; complex changes of time signature and unusual song structures are common, demonstrating affinities with the hardcore subgenre called "mathcore". This is a source of pride amongst younger and underground Christian metalcore musicians and overturns established notions of contemporary Christian music. Members of the South African band Versus The Wolf spoke with vicarious pride about the perfect reviews Underoath had received from the secular press, for example. Joel, from the Australian metalcore band The City HE Loved, explained that in contrast to popular attitudes to earlier Christian artists, "with bands like Underoath, all of a sudden in the hardcore and metal genre, Christian bands started leading the way [...] it wasn't quite cool to be a Christian, but we didn't have dudes out there making us look bad." The two most commonly cited explanations amongst Christian musicians for the success of Christian metalcore are the existence of influential pioneering bands in the Spirit-filled hardcore scene, and the musical culture of Evangelical churches. I would add to this the involvement of the secular commercial music industry, and the liberalization of American Evangelical attitudes towards secular popular culture.

This liberalization occurred gradually amongst Evangelicals in the latter decades of the twentieth century, as many shifted from being avid opponents of secular frivolity to being critical consumers discriminating between artists and products on religious grounds. For Bruce (2002, pp. 140-150), such changes in cultural consumption are a part of contemporary religion's general "regression to the mean" and come as a consequence of greater affluence. A related phenomenon is the closer connection between specifically Christian cultural products, notably contemporary Christian music, and the secular culture industry, which intensified its modest investments in Christian popular culture in the 1980s and 1990s, increasing professionalization and commercial pressures in the industry (Howard and Streck, 1999, pp. 86-98). As Taylor (1989, p. 318) argues, in late modernity "religious groups have been forced to take on board bits of the secular humanist culture to survive." One therefore finds an increasing commitment to high production values in Christian popular culture, analogous to secular commercial popular culture, since religious orthodoxy is no longer sufficient to attract an audience.

Within contemporary Christian music, this increased acceptance of secular culture has led to greater competition for Evangelical audiences who are no longer a captive market for their co-religionists. In the past, Thompson (2000, p. 89) argued, contemporary Christian music catered to an audience whose antipathy to secular popular music made them naïve consumers, in turn allowing comparatively poor quality Christian music to sell disproportionately well. What Gormly (2003, p. 257) labels the American Evangelical “parallel culture” is more porous today. Consumers of contemporary Christian music still seek products that reflect and strengthen their own beliefs; they are still weary of artists who depart from Evangelical orthodoxy; and they are still weary of what they might encounter in secular popular music; but most Evangelical consumers are actually engaged with secular popular music, which has necessitated innovation amongst Christian musicians.

In addition to changes in the social and commercial outlook of Evangelicalism, changes within Evangelical churches encouraged innovation in Christian metalcore, with churches often providing assistance to metalcore musicians and other creative artists in their congregations. For all the good will that is usually behind this support, church support creates obligations as well as opportunities, which I will discuss in future. The motivation for church support falls into two categories: the pastoral, which involves nurturing intertwined spiritual, creative, and professional lives of young Christians, and the missional, which involves advancing a particular religious-based endeavor. These mirror the two basic functions of contemporary Christian music, to provide analogues of secular culture that reflect Christian belief, and to proselytize to non-Christians (Howard and Streck, 1999, pp. 98-103). Churches are sometimes responsible for introducing people to Christian metalcore, since salaried or voluntary Evangelical youth workers are professionally acquainted with the diverse genres of contemporary Christian music. For almost any popular music (sub)genre a new church member might name, several Evangelical artists can be provided. Churches are also often responsible for cultivating the relationships that develop into Christian metalcore bands. Most of the bands I have interviewed have formed in church contexts but never under their own direction. Evangelical churches bring together, or create, spiritually and musically like-minded young people and provide them with a space to socialize and often practice and perform.

Opportunities for practice and performance are centered around the contemporary rock-pop style Sunday morning worship services that many Evangelical, and most Pentecostal, churches feature. Joel, from The City HE Loved, explained the advantages Evangelical church involvement has on young musicians:

These are kids that have had instruments shoved into their hands since they've been able to walk, and they've had stage experience, so by the time you're fifteen or sixteen and you're ready to play in a band and gig around you know your instrument, you know how to play in front of people, you have a real head start.

This is one of the key reasons Evangelicalism dominates Christian punk almost to the point of exclusivity; such churches usually feature worship bands with all the basic instruments of a rock band. Some larger Evangelical churches have also embraced the performance aesthetics of popular music in church services, including sophisticated light and sound systems, exhaustive rehear-

sals, and even a space in front of the stage for young worshippers to dance. The influence of growing up in an environment that promotes such professional forms of musical practice is profound. As Simon from the South African band Versus the Wolf, formerly of the metalcore band New Altum, commented on the skills of young people playing in church bands, “guys that are sixteen or seventeen years old have been playing six or seven years to the point that they’re up on the platform playing to a thousand people because they are that skillful.”

Sources of standardization in Christian metalcore

Some of these sources of innovation in Christian metalcore are also the sources of its rapid standardization, however. As soon as Christian metalcore bands achieved commercial and critical success in the mid-2000s, a large number of Christian metalcore bands formed and released similar music to the point that Christian metalcore seemed to saturate the Christian metal and punk scenes by the end of the decade. Its popularity faded in the 2010s, with only two significantly commercially successful bands remaining, August Burns Red and The Devil Wears Prada. In interviews conducted in 2010, Christian metalcore musicians and those from associated Christian subgenres were equally enthralled by the popularity of Christian metalcore and critical of the ubiquity of the subgenre in the Christian metal and punk scene as many new bands with similar sounds and style competed for attention.

There are two key reasons for standardization in Christian metalcore; commercial pressures and pressure from churches. Both church and market encourage conformity with existing creative practices in the subgenre. Focussing on secular commercial popular music, Peterson and Berger’s (1975) well-known study argued that a lack of diversity in popular music content is associated with the lack of diversity in record labels; if a small number of labels dominate an industry, fewer innovative artists are cultivated. Lopes (1992) dissented somewhat by noting creative diversity exists at the lower end of popular music charts, but he supported Peterson and Berger’s (1975) claim in situations in which record labels seek close control over the production and development of artists. Although the subgenre of Christian metalcore has its own peculiarities, this analysis broadly holds.

Christian metalcore is commercially dominated by a single individual, Brandon Ebel, owner of Tooth & Nail records and its subsidiary labels such as Solid State. Thompson (2000, p. 177) argued that by the late 1990s, the label was so dominant across various “alternative” Christian genres that it left “little room for anyone else.” As Beaujon (2006, p. 70) noted, in the mid-2000s when Christian metalcore was reaching its peak, Tooth & Nail issued “an inordinate number of releases for a company its size,” approximately one album per week in a variety of alternative genres. This is unusual for a small label, which would typically work within the limits of a small customer base, but it is a familiar approach for a major label which has the capacity to compensate itself for speculative losses on unsuccessful releases with revenue from successful releases. This behaviour also demonstrates Tooth & Nail’s position of dominance in the Christian market; it could seek to saturate it and behave as if it were a major label. Indeed, many artists were quickly dropped by Tooth & Nail, Ebel made it clear that it became harder for small bands to make it on to the label (Beaujon, 2006, p. 71), and the roster of artists in the Tooth & Nail stable is smaller today than in the previous decade. Notably, only one of Ebel’s bands achieved the sort of commercial success of earlier metalcore bands in the 2010s, August Burns Red.

The power of Tooth & Nail was not and is not absolute, of course. Some of their artists would sign with secular major labels, other popular genre artists were signed to secular labels, and a rival Christian label emerged that specialized in hardcore and metal, Facedown Records. The 2000s also saw the emergence of the internet as the principle medium for distributing music in Western Europe and its settler colonies, moreover. In recent years, the website NoiseTrade was developed to distribute contemporary Christian music free of charge. If we look at the period of Christian metalcore's greatest success, between 2005 and 2010, we can see that Tooth & Nail's market dominance also rested on ideological factors, not strictly economic or material factors.

Unlike the major labels studied by Peterson and Berger (1975), Tooth & Nail could not totally control distribution of Christian metalcore, nor could it control airplay of the music. Rather, I would argue that Tooth & Nail's dominance lay in the particular concern for adherence to Evangelical belief and values amongst a sizable portion of Christian metalcore's audience. This is a foundational concern within contemporary Christian music, that Evangelical audiences are purchasing "wholesome" products by like-minded artists (Howard and Streck, 1999, pp. 98-100). This example furthers Ross's (2005, p. 483) argument that, building on Peterson and Berger (1975), innovation in popular music cannot be merely measured by share of commercial success but by innovation or standardization in content; there is little diversity if multiple artists achieve success through releasing similar products.

In regards to Christian metalcore, despite attracting a significant secular fanbase, the concerns of Evangelical listeners are important. Francois, a South African born guitarist, was critical of the limitations placed upon Christian music in some Evangelical churches:

It's hard to find a decent Christian band, and just when you do find them, someone will say, "I heard the singer's not a real Christian," or, "I heard one of the band members thinks it's alright to be gay so we can't listen to that." So the church is a place where culture gets filtered.

Bands seeking church support or acceptance would have to ensure their performances and the content of their lyrics did not undermine or contradict the church's teachings. Because it is not always easy to know precisely what a particular church's position is on a contentious issue, the reputation of bands as reliably uncontroversial becomes important. Some British musicians felt that American bands signed to recognizable Christian labels – the Tooth & Nail stable above all – had a religious legitimacy in the eyes of British Evangelicals that no local band could possibly achieve. Signing to a recognized American Christian label functions like an *imprimatur* in the Catholic Church, therefore, it certifies that material is free from doctrinal error. Moreover, signing to a major American Christian label is arguably the key measure of success amongst Christian metalcore musicians, and even amongst some of the Australian musicians that I interviewed, it was the ultimate goal.

This desirability of signing with a small number of American labels means that, in addition to the ideological concerns discussed above, Christian metalcore is also subject to the same musicological restrictions more familiar to studies of the secular music industry. For example, two Seattle-based American musicians, Cameron and Ryan, criticized the pressure on a particular

Christian metalcore band signed to a Christian label to reproduce a profitable sound at the expense of creative development. Cameron explained:

[They] signed a four album contract [...] They gave them a huge sign-on bonus. [...] The small print is, if you don't sell enough records we drop you and you still owe us for the entirety of that four album contract, and the sign on bonus, and everything else. So they put out their second record. It didn't perform very well compared to their first record [...] it's really interesting and different [...] they did something that was more creatively honest, and they got dropped.

Ryan contextualized this anecdote within broader tendencies in the commercial music industry:

Record labels have about ninety per cent of the blame for the lack of creativity in the music scene today. Think of that story; you sign a four record deal but if you don't sell you're in debt. What are you gonna do? Write music that you hope sells a lot which means appealing to as many people as possible, not taking any risks, not saying anything subversive. [...] You'll listen to bands that sound like you but are bigger than you, and do the same thing.

This, in fact, was observable in earlier trends in alternative Christian music. As Thompson (2000: 230) wrote, "every third band between 1995 and 1999" seemed to be a ska band, and yet, as Ryan told me, a few years later the boom in Christian ska was over.

This amounts to a version of the system of cultural production that Tschmuck (2006, pp. 218-223) labels "controlled creativity", in which the influence over creative self-expression by a small number of institutional actors stifles innovation. Gormly (2003) argued that this logic dominates the entire commercial contemporary Christian music industry, which he views as structurally indistinguishable from the secular, commercial music industry. However, the specific religious concerns that animate contemporary Christian music, despite the fact that Christian metalcore artists, at least, attract non-Christian audiences as well, creates a different dynamic. Fitting in to the formula established by successful artists on prominent American Christian labels is not merely an attempt to share their creative and commercial success, but it is an attempt to share their religious legitimacy. The result is musicological standardization as well as ideological standardization.

Conclusion

This paper seeks to demonstrate that key sources of both innovation and standardization in the subgenre of Christian metalcore can be traced to Evangelical churches and the contemporary Christian music industry. It is shown that, in contrast to earlier forms of Christian metal, Christian metalcore was able to establish an audience beyond the Evangelical "parallel culture" (Gormly, 2003, p. 257). This occurred at the same time as the ongoing liberalization of conservative Evangelical attitudes to secular popular culture. This combined with investments in Christian popular culture from the secular culture industries to lead to an increase in quality in the production of Christian popular music. It is argued that, in addition to the increase in quality of Christian music that emerged from these developments, the commitment to nurturing the creative capacity of young people in Evangelical churches contributed to the emergence of talented musicians able to embark on innovative music careers. However, it is also argued that the residual culture of religious conformity within these Evangelical churches promoted the standardization of Christian metalcore.

Moreover, this paper seeks to argue, based on interviews with musicians, fans and industry professionals, that the lack of diversity in record labels catering to Christian metalcore fused with the culture of religious conservatism to promote musical and ideological standardization within the subgenre.

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