

THIS IS NOW... KIERKEGAARDIAN MOMENTS IN THE LYRICS OF HATEBREED

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Abstract

The lyrics of the American metal band Hatebreed seem to be preoccupied with a certain notion of the moment. In this essay it will be shown how this notion can be seen from a philosophical perspective, namely that of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. The lyrics seem to establish dismantling and buildings of Kierkegaardian stages, divided by moments manifested in both lyrics and music.

Introduction

The American metal band Hatebreed is a remarkable constant on the metal scene of today. The band has over the last one and a half decades released six albums that more or less sound exactly the same.

Of course the music has evolved; the songwriting has gained in finesse (as far as this term can be used in a metal context), and the production has undergone slight changes. Overall though, the impression remains of a band, that from early on had a clear vision of how it wanted to sound. And the underlying ethic of the band has not changed either.

This conservatism is, one might argue, quite fatiguing. Critics argue that if you have listened to one of Hatebreed's albums, you have listened to them all. Nevertheless the band seems to stoically continue on its path.

Not only is this determination mirrored in the title of the band's third album *Perseverance* (Hatebreed, 2002), but it can also be found in the lyrics of the band, mainly written by frontman Jamey Jasta.

Furthermore, over the years this determination has given Jasta the opportunity to get involved in various side projects in the metal scene. Thus, he has released a solo-album in his own name and been a creative force in the sludge metal band Kingdom of Sorrow. In addition he has for four years hosted MTV's *Headbanger's Ball* show, as well as he owns his own clothing brand and the record company Stillborn Records. All in all you might say that Jamey Jasta practices, what he preaches. From another perspective this perseverance of Jasta can be seen in a more philosophical sense.

The use of the term *preach* is no coincidence. If you take a closer look at the sort of metal, which Hatebreed excels in, motifs from a Christian framework of understanding become evident. This is not suggesting that Hatebreed or songwriter Jasta is more Christian than the next metal band, but is an indication of how the lyrics of Hatebreed can be interpreted through a Christian and somewhat philosophical/existential framework of understanding.

The metalcore subgenre to which Hatebreed can be linked emerged from the United States around the turn of the millennium with Killswitch Engage and As I Lie Dying at the forefront (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metalcore>). Metalcore is characterized by traits from hardcore punk music, blended with more classic metal influences, but still with some variety in the musical expressions of the bands. Where the music of Killswitch Engage is greatly influenced by Swedish death metal, but still does not shy away from using highly melodic clean sung choruses, the music of Hatebreed is a more brute and direct assault on the listener. Hatebreed uses no melodic choruses and is seemingly heavily influenced by the heaviness and fierceness of the iconic metal band Pantera.

Jamey Jasta himself calls the music of Hatebreed for “Celtic Frost hardcore” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hatebreed>), underlining the band’s connection to the metal scene by name dropping the highly respected metal band Celtic Frost.

Although every Hatebreed song is a fist in the face of the listener, this fist is to be understood as more of a wake-up call than as an actual act of violence.

Especially the performance of the lyrics of frontman Jamey Jasta is linked to hardcore punk music. The repeated use of short and somewhat programmatic sentences with clear and not-to-mistake opinions and predications – as shown in examples below – and the occasional use of so called gang shouts, meaning shouted background vocals from other members of the band, are prime examples of this (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hardcore_punk). Not only is there a clear lineage back to Pantera, but this use of short outbursts of protest can also be found in for instance the music and lyrics of the Brazilian band Sepultura, whose frontman Max Cavalera in lack of English language proficiency early on made a virtue out of necessity by writing short and direct vocal outbursts. This vocal style gives on the one hand the listener the impression of being yelled at, gives the impression of great aggression, but must be understood in terms of a transgression beyond the realm of everyday spoken word. (Kahn-Harris, 2007)

The influence from hardcore punk music is also evident in the gritty urban imagery of the visual side of Hatebreed releases, press material et cetera. What the band has not inherited from hardcore punk is the leftist standpoint of the scene (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hardcore_punk).

On the other hand Hatebreed can also not be placed on the right side of the political spectrum. When CNN in 2012 published the article *Hate with a beat: White power music*, (<http://edition.cnn.com/2012/08/08/opinion/nasatir-white-power-bands/>) listing Hatebreed among several white power bands, the reactions were strong from both band and its fans from all over the world, resulting in CNN editing the article and apologizing. In an interview in the internetzine www.radiometal.com frontman Jasta recapitulates:

“It really showed how die hard our fans are and how our music is not about racism, antisemitism, sexism, homophobia or anything like that. It actually brings people together, people of all sexual preferences, of all races, of all religions, of all works or lives.”
(Sliwa, 2013)

More than anything, the intention of the band seems to be to awaken the listeners. The lyrics are not direct attacks on different institutions, but are ad-

dressed directly to the listener and are telling everybody to cease the moment and wake up. Instead of being political, the music and lyrics of Hatebreed can be described with the same words Niall Scott has used to describe the apolitical in Heavy Metal as such.

“[Hatebreed] shuns politics in the governmental sense of the term, but also in the sense of avoiding conflict that can damage the unity what it means to be metal – a being that transcends political perspectives and identities.” (Scott, 2013)

The Moment

In the lyrics of Hatebreed a certain notion of *the moment* seems to be evident. There is a constant focus on *this moment*, it is *now* the band wants to wake you up, it is *now* you have to take action for your own life. The lyrics are most often situated in one specific moment, where the narrator is reflecting on past, present and future. The lyrics of Hatebreed are therefore not to be considered as descriptions of narratives in a traditional sense, but are more situation-based outbursts of emotions, as again is more common in hardcore punk music. How this notion of *the moment* is a part of the musical expression of Hatebreed too, will be explained later. First up are the lyrics.

If we turn our gaze upon the first verse of one of the band’s most popular songs, namely *This is now* from the band’s third album *The Rise of Brutality* (Hatebreed, 2003) the notion of the moment combining past, present and future becomes evident:

“Another memory and I’m asking myself
How can I let the past be the past.
Once and for all take a hold of the future
And not let it control what I aspire to have.
I see where my decisions have brought me
What’s done is done and it’s time to start again
Can’t let it tear me in two, waste me away
I gotta believe”
(Hatebreed, 2003)

The narrator is placed in the now, not only reflecting on the past and preparing for the future, but he is determined to change the future, to take hold of his life and change his life. The chorus of the song says it all:

“Cause this is now
How can I change tomorrow if I can’t change today.
This is now
If I control myself I control my destiny.”
(Hatebreed, 2003)

This is only one example, but throughout the lyrics of Hatebreed this notion of the moment, where the narrator stops the flow of life to reflect about past, present and future, seems to occur again and again. This notion is not only emphasised by the frequent use of the words *this* and *now* in all of Hatebreed’s lyrics, but also in song titles as *Facing what consumes you* or *Choose or be chosen* (both Hatebreed, 2003), *Healing to suffer again* or *Judgement strikes (Unbreakable)* (both Hatebreed, 2002).

By using *now* or *this* the lyrics are describing turns of events and moments in time, where the past becomes past, and where the future takes on a new meaning. Before these particular moments the past was the present, and it is via these moments the past becomes not only the past, but another past than it would have become, had the moment not occurred.

In the work of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard these moments are of great significance as breaks between two life stages. Kierkegaard claims that when *the moment* occurs, the temporal and the heavenly meet. In *the moment* everyday life connects with the divine, leaving the individual changed. As Kierkegaard puts it, for the individual *the moment* causes a leap of faith. The individual can in *the moment* reflect on past, present and future and therefore consequently make a leap of faith to the next stage of life.

Before diving further into this notion of the moment in the music of Hatebreed, it is necessary to explain, how the stages of Kierkegaard are to be understood in general. Kierkegaard's concept of stages consists of several steps. At first we have the philistine, who lives in eternal ignorance and only is concerned with how to get by in society, how to get a fulfilling job, a good wage, a nice house et cetera. The philistine has not considered his own self, and that is why he lives in ignorance. When the philistine experiences an epiphany, experiences a Kierkegaardian moment, he makes a leap of faith to the stage of the aesthetic. Because he now has discovered his own self, but still refuses to acknowledge it, he will try to escape from his self. This escapism can be exemplified through for instance exaggerated consumerism of all sorts of things, ranging from status symbols to drugs. After the next epiphany the individual reaches the ethical stage, where he acknowledges his self, and an earnest and responsible *I* is born, but this also leaves him with an existential angst grounded in the immense lack of meaning of life, which the leap of faith from aesthetic to ethic has imposed on him. The final stage is that of the religious, which Kierkegaard divides in two, a good and a bad. Religious representations through prayer and rituals are seen as bad, whereas religious representations through passion and spirituality are seen as good. (Lübecke, 1983) At this stage the individual also recognizes that some things are contradictory.

The first verse of *Facing what consumes you* (Hatebreed, 2003) is an example of how this notion of Kierkegaardian stages can be read into the lyrics:

“Facing what consumes you is the only way to be free.
Released from those poisonous fears.
Resurrected once and for all. You want me to hold my tongue
Then why the f**k am I here?
You want me to bottle my rage
Cause you have never had the heart to say what I say.
My life, my body, my pride.
You have no opinion, no right.
I’ve built myself nothing like you.
My refusal is my way of life.

Doubt me, Hate me
You’re the inspiration I need.”
(Hatebreed, 2003)

To understand this piece of lyric in the Kierkegaardian context, we have to break it down piece by piece. First of all, it seems obvious that the lyric is a

monolog from a first-person narrator. The receiver can be any listener. The receiver is being told to face what consumes him in order to be free. In the next two lines the first-person narrator (which must never be mistaken for the singer, just as a first-person narrator of a novel never is the author) explains why he is capable of giving this advice. He, the first-person narrator, has already released himself from the poisonous fears and now has resurrected once and for all, indicating that he once was on the same life stage as the receiver, who has not had his epiphany yet.

Quite interestingly this epiphany is paralleled in the second verse in the lines: "I've used your lack of inspiration. As my awakening, it's my ability to live forever by my own command" (Hatebreed, 2003). This constitutes a vertical conflict, where the first-person narrator from his higher position of insight looks down upon the receiver, establishing a divide between the two characters. The first-person narrator was once down, but has had his epiphany, has now awakened, whereas the receiver still remains on his lower level (Keep in mind though, that Kierkegaard never saw his notion of stages as representing any form of hierarchy). Nevertheless, the awakening parallels a Kierkegaardian leap of faith.

The question remains what stages the two characters of this song can be placed in? If we juxtapose the song title *Facing what consumes you* and the verse line "Released from those poisonous fears" (both Hatebreed, 2003) we might get a clearer picture. The narrator is already released from his fears, which must mean that he has reached the religious stage, because he has left the existential angst behind. The receiver on the other hand is still in the ethical stage. He must therefore face what consumes him; he must face his existential angst in order to succeed in reaching the religious stage. This is why the narrator is giving the receiver such a hard time throughout the song; he wants to force *the moment* upon the receiver, so that he also can make the leap of faith.

These vertical movements are evident throughout the lyrics of Hatebreed. Everywhere you can find examples of movements up and down on this vertical scale. Notions about rising or transcending and falling, tearing down or ascending, are recurrent throughout the lyrics. Constantly these vertical movements seem to be connected to the moment, which seemingly transgresses to the musical expression as well.

"Tear it down now!"

One of the common traits of the Hatebreeds music is the extensive use of so called breakdowns. Although breakdowns traditionally have been widely used in death metal music, in hardcore punk as well as in metalcore too, they seem to reach a new level of meaning in the music of Hatebreed.

"The drums are usually simple, with a four quarter-note ride pattern with the snare on the third beat. Most commonly, the drummer plays quarter notes on the crash cymbal or china cymbal. In some breakdowns where a very slow tempo is used, the drummer will play half notes, to give the music a very heavy, slow feel. The guitarist usually follows the rhythm, or "chugs", (chugs being palm muted strokes on the lowest three to four string of the guitar) on the kick drum. In most cases the drummer will use the kick drum to complement the "chugs" of the guitars. The guitars play a set of rhythmically oriented riffs, usually on lightly palm muted strings to achieve a very high attack noise that decays slowly making the overall sound more thick and "heavy".[...] Many

of the bands that play in the genres of deathcore and metalcore make heavy use of breakdowns; breakdowns usually consist of slow paced strumming on the guitar, or fast syncopated triplet-feel patterns, both of which, are typically palm muted and played on the lowest three strings of a guitar and a bass drop.“ ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breakdown_\(music\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breakdown_(music)))

These breakdowns can give the impression of a song coming to a halt, sometimes even resulting in a moment of total silence, before the song continues, often with a slower and heavier guitar riff. These moments of silence followed by a slower reconstruction of the song narrative leaves the listener with a sense of pause, of stopping, of restituting or even of a restructuring of the song. It is these breakdowns that constitute the way the lyrics and the music of Hatebreed are intertwined.

The first track *Tear it down* from the album *The Rise of Brutality* (Hatebreed, 2003) is in this context exemplary. Not only is the song title indicating a restructuring of norms and standards, but the music itself and the lyrics describe this downtearing. The song opens with a riff that was also the outro riff of the previous album *Perseverance* (Hatebreed, 2002). In a sense the band bridges the divide between the two releases by using the same riff on both records, thereby leaving the actual temporal gap between the releases to be nothing more than one of many breaks in the staccato riffing of the band. In this way the meaning of the music transgresses its own realm and enters the real world, leaving the listener with the impression of a personal urgency to relate to music and lyrics.

Both this opening riff and the following breakdown on *Tear it down* provides the listener with the notion of a new start. On the surface the band makes it clear, that the previous record was yesterday, the new record is now. Below the surface the band indicates a wish for its listeners to make a stop, to have a break in their lives to reflect and subsequently abandon their previous notions of life. In doing this the lyrics are highly critical towards society. The lyrics of the song are as follows:

“TEAR IT DOWN NOW

How much more can you possibly take?
 How many battles can you lose in one day?
 Who is the source of all your pain
 And how do you ever plan to be unrestrained?
 How much longer? How much more?
 Until you gain some self-respect.
 For once, just stand the f**k up and fight!
 Confront and shatter everything that stands in your way.

Every burden every source of strife.

TEAR IT DOWN

Every cage every f**king vice.

TEAR IT DOWN

Distorted notions of who you are.

TEAR IT DOWN

Imposed values and beliefs.

TEAR THEM DOWN

TEAR IT DOWN

TEAR IT DOWN NOW”

(Hatebreed, 2003)

Again the lyrics depict a first-person narrator telling a receiver what to do. Again this narrator is placed on a higher level of insight, trying to force the receiver to tear down his former self in order to become someone else. To make the leap of faith the receiver has to strip himself of all distorted notions of who he is, including all imposed values and beliefs. Only when this is done in the clarity of the Kierkegaardian moment, he can make the leap of faith, he can build himself up again and reach the next stage.

Conclusion

Although it, as mentioned, is strictly prohibited to mistake the first-person narrator of a song lyric for the actual singer or band, it is interesting, how the very uplifting lyrics of Hatebreed are being delivered and received during a live concert. Due to the very confronting performance style of the band, the lyrics in a concert situation transgress their own realm, the text universe, and move into the real world of the audience – such as experienced by this author at the Copenhell Festival in 2010. In the concert situation the band can be perceived by the audience as the narrator, just as the audience can find itself as the receiver.

More than being a manhood ritual, as Jeffrey Jensen Arnett argues in his *Metal Heads – Heavy Metal and Adolescent Alienation*, where a metal concert “represents a declaration of rejection of the ways of the adults in the larger culture” (Arnett, 1996), the concert situation can give the audience a certain notion of being uplifted by a band, who has already made the leap of faith to the next stage, and therefore, almost reaching religious dimensions, preaches how to live according to the unwritten rules of the hardcore/metal scene, and at the same time is making Kierkegaardian representations of the religious stage by living out their passion for their kind of music. Arnett’s point, that “It is all spectacle and no sacrament, it leads not to an embrace of the moral demands of their culture but to a defiant rejection of all moral demands” (Arnett, 1996) is therefore only partly true. Arnett is right that a metal concert (and this goes not only for Hatebreed) does not lead to an embrace of the surrounding culture, but instead it leads to a tight embrace of the metal subculture. Maybe it is all spectacle and no sacrament in the everyday Western meanings of these words, but within the metal scene and in a Kierkegaardian sense something else seems to be evident.

Before the audience can be uplifted, the band has to break down not only the music, but also the audience. Only when broken down, only when the audience has faced what consumes them, is it possible for them to realize, that *This is Now*, that only they, in themselves, can change their tomorrow, if they change today. Only they have the responsibility to seize control of themselves to control their destinies.

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