

METAL'S THIRD WAVE IN THE ERA OF POST-GLOBALIZATION

Deena Weinstein
DePaul University, USA

Will metal become a victim of changes, rather radical changes at that, in the global music industry? Or will it turn out to be rock's last man standing? Something else? The transformation of the climate for rock in the current century involves the decisions, constraints, and profitability of its major corporations, which record, distribute and promote music; related digital technological developments; and alterations in youth's relationship to music. The story is complex and features the oligopoly of the major record labels, now three global conglomerates, deciding at the end of the 1990s, when their profitability was peaking, to invest in pop for short-term profits rather than signing and nurturing young rock bands. Simultaneously, for their own financial interests, the majors' foremost promoters, TV² and broadcast radio,³ were also abandoning rock.

The majors reacted poorly to the introduction of mp3s, failing to embrace a paid download model (letting Apple reap vast profits from this instead) while legally harassing individual consumers, whom they labeled "pirates," with lawsuits. Widespread distribution of broadband internet connections, which came several years after the pervasive switch to mp3s by music fans, generated a model of acquisition in which the single rather than the far-too-long to download album was the unit of choice. As sales had switched from physical to digital form, the income of the major labels dropped more than 50% in the first decade of the 21st century. In addition, the accessibility of the internet and the development of digital technology that allows inexpensive and/or do-it-yourself music production, distribution, and promotion of recorded music, partially sidelined the majors.

As the bottom dropped out of the majors' model for selling recordings, live music, particularly of well known acts drawing large crowds, went in the opposite direction, becoming far more profitable than ever.

This new climate helped to create and in part was created by changes in fans of popular music. Since the early 1990s, post-industrial youth, particularly those from the upper-middle class, have increasingly become omnivores, preferring several rock genres at once as well as other types of music. They have been satisfied with the highly compressed and relatively lo-fi mp3 sound, and since smart-phones became their universal and constant accessory, they are not interested in owning the music they like to listen to, content to stream it.

² MTV, abandoning most music for more profitable programming, had its main music program aimed at tweenagers, featuring many pop stars that were groomed and made popular by Disney. This made a fairly large audience for a handful of acts, allowing those acts to each have blockbuster sales.

³ Radio in the US changed from locally owned stations to major companies owning as many as 1400 stations throughout the country around the turn of the century. Programming nationally rather than locally or regionally was a move made for bureaucratic efficiency, and formatting to attract audiences most desired by sponsors that would work with many of the companies stations, led to a major reduction in rock formats in favor of urban, pop, and Hispanic programming. The major format for rock radio in this century is classic rock.

Those radical changes in the music climate have coincided with metal's second wave. As I see it, metal's first wave spanned its initial crystallization in the 1970s through its fragmentation into subgenres and strong subcultural fan bases. Metal had spread throughout Western Europe and North America, Australia, and to metropolitan areas in southern South America, Japan, and other pockets. The first wave ended around 1992 with the abandonment by MTV (and radio and rock magazines) of what they had called heavy metal, but had become known as "hair metal," in favor of bands playing polished variations of what had been styles of indie rock such as grunge (think Nirvana), all lumped under the term "alternative." Metal's second wave was more formally ushered in by two events. One was the "Black Album, the "Enter Sandman" era Metallica, another one of those once-indie bands now on major labels with commercially polished production. The other was the events surrounding and incidentally serving to promote a newer metal subgenre, black metal, with the murder of Euronymous by his one-time black metal partner. During this second wave, metal's underground blossomed, with a few bands escaping into the commercial sunshine, and most others becoming more extreme in their sound, words, and/or visuals. At the same time, commercial metal styles, or those said to be metal styles, such as nu-metal and metalcore, and the vast popularity of Metallica and a few of the bands that attempted to share in that limelight, gave metal a prominence although it was still widely disdained by most rock fans and rock critics. During the 1990s, metal fully globalized its reach, helped by the rising global economy and diasporic migrants to the West who came back to their home countries for visits, "spreading the disease" of the metal they found elsewhere.

Metal's Third Wave began at the turn of the present century in tandem with the mass use of the internet, the bursting of the dot.com bubble, the adoption of the Euro, and the destruction of the symbolic World Trade Tower in lower Manhattan on September 11, 2001. Globalization was no longer an aspiration, it was a fact. Yet it was not working out the way futurists and pundits had imagined – to unify the world. Instead, the world was fragmenting politically, socially, and culturally. Metal, already a multiplicity, diversifies even more in its Third Wave, although it did not form new subgenres. Rather, it added new constituencies, and its subgenres fragmented in a variety of ways. Nonetheless, metal maintained mutual identification among the members of its fan base.

Third-wave metal seems to be better suited than other forms of rock to thrive in the current climate, and indeed, metal today does seem to be flourishing. There is an explosive proliferation of new metal bands, and new metal releases by new, old, and reunited bands. Yearly there are thousands of concerts and dozens of metal festivals world-wide. Metal has also grown in its sonic and thematic diversity, and in the size of its fan base.

My assessment of metal's prospects takes as its model the discourse of climate science. Its ecological paradigm relates changes made in temperature, rainfall, etc. and determines which species will be impacted, positively by increasing their numbers and range, or negatively by population decrease, even extinction, in the new environment. The issue here is to examine how the new music climate has differentially impacted metal's Third Wave, modern metal. What is it about metal today that makes it so hardy, especially in contrast to most of rock?

A major source of metal's strength, allowing it to swim so strongly against the tide of rock's decline, is its fans and their culture. Loyal to the music and to fellow metalheads, they prefer live music but also collect recordings of current

and older metal, important recordings for them to have in physical format, not only as mp3s. The new model for rock in general is making money from live rather than from recorded music. Metal has always had a strong live presence, and having pockets of fans in so many areas makes touring smaller venues economically feasible. At the same time, having fans willing to spend quite a bit to travel to and buy tickets for metal festivals provides significant revenue for bands generally playing smaller venues. Metalheads probably buy more t-shirts and other merchandise at concerts, beer too, than do other rock fans. Money enters the music business from fans, and metal has an advantage in their fans' willingness to spend.

Metal fans are the same as they've always been in some respects and rather different in others. That is, the traditional young male is a major part of the audience, far more so in the extreme variants of metal. Older metal fans, mainly male, tend to remain loyal, playing their old records, sometimes getting copies of them on mp3. They are also passing along their fandom, along some of their records, to their sons⁴, as well as taking them or going with their buddies, to concerts of older bands. In some cities there are metal nights at clubs where mature metal fans meet up with one another and listen to a dj play metal records.

What is new is the large number of young (late teens through late 20s) female fans of metal. Metal today is definitely not a boy's club. Some women are brought in by their boy friends, but increasingly they come to concerts with female, or a group of mixed-gender, friends. The increasing number of women on stage has encouraged far more women to become metal fans.⁵ The expansion of metal fans in sheer number is, in some part, due to the increasing number of female fans.

The growing global reach of metal has been responsible for another very significant part of the enlargement of metal's fan base. Rising living standards and the penetration of broadband connections are two of the major reasons for globalization in the 21st century, adding more metalheads to the fold. Third-wave metal fans congregate in droves on innumerable internet metal sites. On Facebook alone, there are dozens of pages and groups devoted to one sort of metal or type of fan, some with thousands of members. Here they are not restricted by physical location and are able to interact with fans around the world and around the block, reminiscing about concerts seen years ago, planning to meet up with others at an upcoming event, posting videos of metal songs, and learning of new releases and tours.

There is also a new kind of metal fan in this Third Wave to add to the usual suspects. These are not metalheads in the traditional sense; they do not share the values and norms of the culture, despite listening to metal occasionally on mp3 and in concert. They are omnivores, but of a different stripe than their 20th century forebears. In the 1990s, omnivorous youth, as Bethany Bryson put it, liked "anything but heavy metal!"⁶ No longer is that the case. Metal is now just another one of the types of music they like. Omnivores, at least the American variety, also like older famous rock performers they hear on classic rock radio,⁷ and they are influenced by their parents' favorite rock bands too.⁸ They

⁴ At all ages shows, some parents come with children as young as 7 and their behavior indicates that they know the code of behaving as headbangers.

⁵ Some bands call for women-only mosh pits during part of their set.

⁶ Bethany Bryson, "Anything but Heavy Metal: Symbolic exclusion and musical dislikes," *American Sociological Review* 61, 2 (October 1996): 884-99.

⁷ The main rock radio format today in the US.

listen to a wide variety of styles played by current artists as well. Researchers in the UK find similar trends, as Andy Brown has noted in his paper presented last year in Dayton.⁹ He quotes Mike Savage, who found that “the highly educated middle classes are no longer just fans of classical music. They are now also devotees of rock and jazz and to some extent, of heavy metal.”¹⁰ He also cites another research team which states that “Heavy Metal – which would previously be seen as decidedly beyond the pale of refined tastes, are now consumed more by the highly educated.”¹¹ These upper middle-class young adults are proud of their cosmopolitan tastes.

That an increasingly large number of metal fans do not fully share the culture may turn out to be a mixed blessing for metal in general. It adds numbers, adds money, and might even serve to recruit a very few new metalheads. But the negative impact of these casual metal fans cannot be ignored. Without sharing the values and norms of metal culture, their loyalty to the music and to metalheads cannot be assumed. At concerts they can ruin face-to-face mutual identification, and camaraderie.

Probably worse than being seen as just another genre, metal is currently beginning to be seen as cool by more than these omnivores. The rockcrit establishment, which had damned metal with no praise in the 20th century, has done a U-turn, positioning metal as indie, hip, cool. *New York Times* rock critic Ben Ratcliff wrote of Scion Fest in 2010: “If we’re reading the signs correctly, the festival is subtly attempting to integrate metal into a self-conscious indie culture. It’s a transition of slow degrees: a segment of the metal audience resists being co-opted. ‘Hipster metal’ is currently a term of abuse.”¹² That omnivores now expect to have a token metal set, generally headlining defiantly non-metal festivals, is instanced by Black Sabbath playing at Lollapalooza in 2012, Metallica playing at Reading and Leeds festivals for the fourth time in 2015, and Slayer headlining Bonnaroo in 2015. (When Metallica played Glastonbury in 2014, it was “the first time a metal act this heavy has ever topped what is traditionally an indie- and hippie-leaning gathering”,¹³ some grumbled, or, as the reporter put it, “had their knickers in a twist.”

If metal is seen as just another style of rock music, will metalheads run to the hills of more extreme metal styles? Or will they join in and become omnivores, happy to listen to all types of music? Will the traditional outsider status of metal, despised by the good people of the world, damned by the righteous folk, and looked at askance by those in authority be destroyed along with metal itself?

Metal’s infrastructure was and is nearly as significant to metal’s thriving today as the fan culture. Metal’s support system hasn’t changed in this century as much as it has intensified and expanded. As mainstream rock’s infrastructure

⁸ My findings, from my rock classes, when asked about how students first learned about their current favorite rock (from peers, from mass media, or from parents), have, for the last few years, indicated that parents are their major source.

⁹ Andy Brown, “Revenge of the Metal-Univore or the Rise of the Metal-Omnivore? Exploring Change in the Legitimacy of Having a ‘Taste for Classical Music and Heavy Metal,’” Paper delivered at the Metal and Cultural Impact Conference at the University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio, November 2014.

¹⁰ Mike Savage, “The Musical Field,” *Cultural Trends* 15, 2/3 (2006): 159-174.

¹¹ Alan Warde, David Wright, and Modesto Gayo-Cal, “The Omnivorous Orientation in the UK,” *Poetics* 36, 2-3 (2008): 148-165.

¹² Ben Ratcliff, “Metal Variety: Death, Doom, Black and Cars,” *The New York Times* (March 15, 2010), <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/15/arts/music/15scion.html>.

¹³ Alexandra Rae, “Brits Are Horrified That Metallica Is Playing Glastonbury-- And They Have a Point,” *San Francisco Weekly* (June 4, 2014), <http://www.sfweekly.com/shookdown/2014/06/04/brits-are-horrified-that-metallica-is-playing-glastonburyandnbsp-and-they-have-a-point>.

became more adverse to rock itself, metal had its own means of putting out the music and distributing it, of playing it, and of letting fans know what new recordings, bands, concerts, and festivals were coming up. In part this is because so many fans become part of that infrastructure – intermittently, such as working at annual festivals assisting organizers, or as a career, such as becoming a metal publicist or starting a metal record label.

Most metal, more so today than ever, is released on labels independent of the majors. Metal labels have been around for about three and a half decades. Today they have never been so numerous, so varied in terms of size, in their metal subgenre focus, and in countries in which they are based. Unlike majors that depend on blockbusters selling millions of copies, indies can exist with their top records selling in the few thousands – given their significantly lower costs of promotion and production. In part the proliferation of new bands, albums, and record labels is due to the new main mediator of everything, the internet. (It has also allowed omnivores to be expert poseurs, and has made even the most obscure metal available to all at a mouse click.)

Given the importance of live performances in metal culture, those mediating concerts and festivals are crucial. For smaller concerts, and so many metal concerts are in rooms holding a few hundred fans at most, there are metal bookers who work with metal-friendly venues around the world. Promotion of those concerts is mainly via the internet, aided somewhat by local free weeklies and monthly entertainment publications, and word of mouth. Internet sites for metal concerts, organized by bands or by location by local promoters or fans, augment the social media announcements and “invites.”¹⁴ Larger metal concerts are mainly done within the traditional mainstream rock industry which does not rely on fans as promoters.

Large metal gatherings bring together bands and fans from different countries, and have also burgeoned in number and global reach. In 2013, there were metal festivals in 41 countries and there are at least 46 in 2015. Indie labels are able to reach fans directly at these festivals, as are bands with their merch to sell. But because metalheads identify with one another, merely hanging out is an integral part of the experience that makes the commercial advantages possible. There are also metal cruises with bands playing at night and interacting with fans during the day. It is the fan base and the infrastructure of the social organization that has enabled metal to survive and, indeed, thrive in the new commercial/cultural environment that has degraded other forms of rock. That social organization provides an environment in which the music is continued by new, and old, creators.

So many of the mediators of metal on the net are fans who spend their time and creativity making websites focused on a band or a subgenre of metal, writing blogs, interviewing bands on podcasts, posting videos of live concerts, and constructing visuals to accompany songs and albums posted to YouTube, and so much more.

Least changed in metal’s Third Wave are the musicians. Most have always been rabid metal fans, and are mainly motivated by being able to create and perform the music they love. The pleasure the fans get from the artists’ music

¹⁴ So effective are these cost-free metal promotions that a concert in Chicago this past April sold out months earlier within three hours after tickets went on sale, without significant paid advertisement. The show was attended by far more than the venues’ stated capacity of 1100, and many who bought tickets, including from scalpers both on-line and working outside the venue the night of the show, at far more than three times the listed price of the ticket, were forced to stand in the hallways, barely able to hear and unable to see the stage.

is enhanced because the latter identify with their audience. The major difference from the past eras is that fewer metal musicians today are in it for the money and hoping to make it big, especially those playing the more extreme variants of extreme metal. Most don't make net profits from their recordings and live performances, and hope that their merch especially, and perhaps festival monies, will offset their costs. They hold down day jobs, rarely white collar careers, to help support themselves.

The musicians' infrastructure has changed with the digital revolution. Making records, even in one's room, is now possible, given computer-programs like Autotune and GarageBand. Manufacturing and distribution costs of those recordings are nominal if not nothing at all, since they are uploaded onto any number of free sites like YouTube, SoundCloud, or Last.fm. Costs for better production, playing equipment, and touring support can be obtained via crowd-funding sites like Kickstarter. And social media can be a cost-free means of promotion. Musicians no longer need to work through gatekeepers, like getting professional managers and/or contracts with a major (even big metal) label, if "making it big" is not a key goal of their band. New media have allowed so many more musicians to let others outside their rehearsal rooms hear their music, and the number of metal albums has increased accordingly.

Despite the seeming dominance of legacy bands in metal (and many of those are, it would seem, on their last legs), as in rock in general, metal's Third Wave has produced a huge number of new bands, mainly composed of young musicians, constructing signature sounds coming from all parts of metal's past – new doom bands, new thrash bands, new death metal bands, new black metal bands.¹⁵ Other new bands use those older subgenres as a painter mixes colors – rather than all blue, or in this case all black, colorings from one or more subgenres are modified with tones from others, to form bands' hybrid signature sounds. This is not new – thrash, metalcore, etc. formed whole new subgenres this way. Given a set of academically trained musicians in metal, more bands are integrating elements of classical, jazz, and avant-garde music in moves that are best described in postmodern terms such as pastiche. Though there aren't any new (at least widely agreed upon) genres in metal in this century, it is important to add that naming and having names stick for sub-subgenres is more difficult in the present environment, given the lack of centralized metal critics writing for a few magazines, and the publicists and record stores that used their categories.

Metal has also increased its diverse set of thematic offerings. Pagan or roots metal, showing that the Vikings do not have the exclusive corner as metal's ancestors, claims nearly 2000 bands worldwide. They focus on their ethnic group's past, mythic or historic, and often use ancient instruments, languages, and folk melodies. From horror and mayhem, ancient and current gods and fallen angels, to hymns to battles won and lost, philosophical discourses on nihilism, and so much more, metal fans can satisfy their sonic and intellectual interests without straying into omnivore territory. And it's all called metal!

Metal is in an envious position – doing it all, or at least a hell of a lot of it, its way, and on a global scale. There may not be another megafamous metal band again unless the majors take what's left of their clout to invest in another "Enter Sandman" Metallica. Given the self-sustaining nature of modern metal, it would be just as well that the majors left it alone.

¹⁵ Different areas of the world tend to specialize, but once a metal culture exists, all types of metal can be found, although not in equal number.