

# Locality, Social Class and Religiosity: An Attempt to Reassess Black Sabbath and Birmingham, England, as one “Origin” of Metal Music<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction : Black Sabbath, one “hard rock” band of their time

As Simon Poole shows, a classic historiographic problem arises when both popular media commentators and academics attempt to pinpoint the “origins” of metal music. These attempts can take different forms :for example, in geographical terms, with Birmingham, UK, or Detroit, USA, as the most frequently accepted birthplaces ; or in terms of earlier musical style, such as “the psychedelic music of the end of the 1960s”.<sup>2</sup> But this kind of analysis, it is often argued, is flawed by design because it assumes that, behind a musical genre, there must necessarily be one unique source, from which its history flows, or, to use his Poole’s words, ‘a proud mother and father at the head of the rock family tree’.

Instead, drawing on Foucault and aspects of literary analysis, Poole argues in favor of a ‘palimpsestuous imagining of heavy metal’, in which ‘there can be no origin, no birth, no miraculous metallic conception of the genre, only multiple and equally miraculous conceptions of metal goddesses and gods’, ie. a multiplicity of diverse origins and influences that can coalesce and recompose continuously to constitute what becomes known a ‘metal’. This type of argument points to works such as Fabien Hein’s ‘phylogenic tree’ of metal.<sup>3</sup> which identifies at least 15 parallel, converging or diverging lineages of styles.

And even this, it can be argued, could do more to take into account the more or less visible or acknowledged influences of other sub-genres of rock (such as the ‘conflicts and crossovers’<sup>4</sup> between punk and metal explored by Waksman, 2009) or the wider popular culture at large, for instance, the rising presence of occultist or gory imagery in cinema and other forms of art at the turn of the 1970s. As Smialek and St-Laurent demonstrate, some metal artists have gone to great lengths to instill an erudite and sophisticated knowledge of classical music into metal<sup>5</sup>. Generally, key tropes of metal musicality, esthetics and lyrical themes, and their ever-diversifying influences, have kept on accumulating and morphing throughout the decades.

In addition, one should add the role of geographical variations, or the impact of national or regional socio-economic, political and cultural contexts in which locales scenes emerge. To quote from Guibert and Sklower:

It is not the intrinsic characteristics of metal culture which eventually make it into a form of cultural resistance, but their interaction with a context in which these strategies will deploy and become relevant. In fact, if metal in Britain has often been claimed by working-class pride, this is only rarely in explicitly political terms. In the USA, the community of metal fans is often the bearer of “conservative” values, et does not reflect the “populist/working class” dimension of UK metal.<sup>6</sup>

Once all of this is taken into account, it is our contention that is so happens that Weinstein, Berger, and others do remain broadly correct when they analyze the history of metal music, at least the first decades of the history of genre, as a history of working-class alienation in the face of their economic, social and cultural disempowerment from the late 1960s to the early 1980s in Western Europe and North America. Whether there was a more less direct linkage between so-called ‘blue collar’ ethos and esthetics and rock music, in our case its “hard rock” or “heavy metal” declination, or whether this linkage should be understood as a reconstructed and imagined, as would most likely the case of many 21st century metal bands, we would argue here that in all cases that there is

something at work in metal music that is at least reflects to some degree a reconstructed and imaginative throw-back to modernist, self-consciously primitivist and mechanistic esthetics that are often viewed as having working class identity connotations, which themselves were first spectacularly apparent in some of the music of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

This is why it is not unnecessary to revisit some chapters of metal history that are already well known, and that may seem to many as out of date, because they refer to a time when the notion of “metal” was non-existent, and even the notion of “heavy metal” was uncertain and generally conflated with that of “hard rock”. Bands such as Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, The Grand Funk Railroad, Kiss, Blue Öyster Cult, Budgie, Black Sabbath, and many others, whilst already quite diverse and each with their own idiosyncratic style, were all more or less viewed as part of the same trend of rock, and, I would argue in retrospect, constitute the historical origins of later developments in what quickly came to be understood as ‘hard rock’ or ‘heavy metal’, and, later from the 1990s onwards and just for some of them, as just “metal”.

If any, Black Sabbath can legitimately be construed as such a band, even though there is always risk with this band of overstating their influence, especially in their early years. In particular, Gérôme Guibert has shown that Black Sabbath in the early 1970 were merely as one among several other bands that could fit what were then loosely applied terms such as “hard rock” or “heavy metal”, the latter term only sparsely engaged formation and lyrical themes that, arguably, all became staples of later generations of metal bands, notwithstanding other and diverse additions to the history of what has been called “metal” since the 1990s.

## The case of Birmingham, England : the local scene as a locus for style development

While, obviously, there is need for much caution when trying to pinpoint a particular local scene as the original incubator of a musical style, Birmingham can at least lay claim to being one among a variety of local scenes from which the genre historically emerged, even if perhaps not quite “the” birthplace. This is largely because both Black Sabbath and Judas Priest originated from there (although in the case of Judas Priest, one should more accurately speak of the West-Midlands, or the Birmingham metropolitan area, than Birmingham itself). Black Sabbath guitarist Tony Iommi played a key role in producing other key British bands hailing from other parts of the UK, such as Budgie (from Cardiff, Wales). In a broader sense, Birmingham is also an interesting place because it serves as a shorthand for the notion of a British post-industrial city of the Centre or the North of England, from which many NWOBHM metal later originated – for example Saxon (formed in Yorkshire, or Venom or Tygers of Pan Tang, both formed in Newcastle), and many others that came from typically declining industrial towns in English regions. Birmingham is also presented in Andrew Cope’s book as influenced by Liverpool, while geographically standing halfway between London and the urban centers of the north of England such as not just Liverpool but also Manchester (and, one might add, Yorkshire cities such as Leeds). Later, in 1985, another innovative and influence metal band, Napalm Death, hailed from Birmingham as well. Bolthorwer, launched by the Earache label that was also responsible for the beginnings of Napalm Death and of Carcass (formed Liverpool), was formed in Coventry, a stone-throw away from Birmingham in the West Midlands.

It is in this context that there have been attempts to make Birmingham “the” official birthplace and would-be world capital of metal. In particular, the organization “Capsule”<sup>11</sup> tried to create a “Black Sabbath and metal music museum” in Birmingham. As its director noted about Black Sabbath:

I know it’s a cliché, but you look at Liverpool and how they celebrate The Beatles, you look at Manchester and how they celebrate Joy Division and the other bands. There’s such a great music scene here, but there isn’t a confidence about shouting about what we’ve given to the world, and it’s not the lack of talent, it’s the lack of confidence to celebrate that talent.<sup>12</sup>

While Capsule’s endeavors have not come fully to fruition, they did organize around the early 2010s exhibitions in Birmingham about Black Sabbath in Birmingham, which were well received and attracted support from local institutions such as the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, as well as local politicians – One of the Members of Parliament for a Birmingham constituency at the time called for Ozzy Osbourne to receive a knighthood.<sup>13</sup> Black Sabbath also played for the closing ceremony of the Commonwealth game ceremony in Birmingham in 2022 (even though only two members of the original line-up played on that occasion, Ozzy Osbourne and Tony Iommi).<sup>14</sup> Following that performance, there were “calls for a more permanent tribute in Birmingham to honor the band and the city’s musical heritage”.<sup>15</sup> All of this suggests that there it at least the beginning of a self-aware-

ness in the local socio-political fabric of the city that the history of “heavy metal” is to some degree enmeshed with the history of the city since the turn of the 1970s.

## Black Sabbath’s Birmingham : grime and despair ?

Discussions of the relation between the formative years of the band and their hometown almost always circle back to the idea that it was a tough environment to grow up, that popular music was very much present in the lives of many in the city, and that these elements have had some kind of effect on their musical style. Among the numerous testimonies and remembrances on the subject, including by the members of the band themselves, is difficult to disentangle what exactly seems to pertain to the actual lived experience of this particular moment of their history, and what should be regarded as a romantic reconstruction, or even in some cases as a commercial argument to consolidate the “authenticity” of a band whose appeal, like that of most metal bands, has relied in their early years on its aura of toughness, closely associated to the “heaviness” of their music.

From the very start in 1970, the year when the band released their first, eponymous album, they were described in terms that explicitly established a direct correlation between their “heavy” sound and their Aston, Birmingham, origins:

The music of Black Sabbath is heavy, raw and doom-laden. It sounds like inner City Birmingham converted into musical notes. The life that the four men had laid out before them was one in which a third of the time would be spent working in a factory, a third playing darts in the pub and the other third exhausted in bed. It was a life expectation that they wanted to avoid. Music seemed to offer the most feasible escape route.<sup>16</sup>

This type of understanding of the band has since then had a long and rich history. To quote one of many artists and commentators who later voiced this vision of the Birmingham-Black Sabbath nexus, Tom Morello, the guitarist of Rage Against the Machine, commented in 2013:

The heaviest, scariest, coolest riffs and the apocalyptic Ozzy wail are without peer. You can hear the despair and menace of the working-class Birmingham streets they came from in every kick-ass, evil groove. Their arrival ground hippy, flower-power psychedelia to a pulp and set the standard for all heavy bands to come.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, the biographic notice on the website of the Rock’n Roll Hall of Fame, where Black Sabbath were inducted by Metallica in 2006, establishes a direct link with the bleak, poor, decidedly disadvantaged and working-class Aston neighborhood, and their distinctive sound, likened there to “*a merry singalong eviscerating the major torments of Western man.*”<sup>18</sup>

It is worth quoting further from the Rock’n Roll Hall of Fame to get a full view of the Black Sabbath mythology :

That’s just how it was in Aston, on the north side of Birmingham, England, where Anthony Frank “Tony” Iommi (born February 19, 1948), William “Bill” Ward (May 5, 1948), John Michael “Ozzy” Osbourne (December 3, 1948), and Terence Michael “Geezer” Butler (July 17, 1949) were spawned amid the rubble to which the German blitz had reduced an already bleak industrial landscape. It was a place where boys entertained themselves by marching one another through sewers, gangs were plentiful, money was scarce, and fourteen-year-olds met the future in sheet-metal factories like the one where Tony Iommi lost parts of two fingers.

Come Saturday night, according to Bill Ward, “any Astonian worth his salt would turn around and smack the crap out of you.” Ozzy describes it even more succinctly: a miserable shit hole. It was a place without either a literal or a figurative horizon – he never saw an ocean, nor could he envision a future beyond the dreary factory jobs that kept his parents too consumed with survival to demonstrate any affection for their brood of six. There was nothing for a school-leaving petty thief, as he fast became, if only to procure the mohair Mod suits his father could not, to aspire to bank robbery, maybe, and even that was a long shot. (...)

This understanding is fundamental to the real magic Black Sabbath created out of boiling black-magic lyrics and the blues right down to a big bare white bone stewed in Iommi’s Django-does-Stonehenge riffs, drums of doom, then-radical down-tuning and the exploration of space rather than notes.<sup>19</sup>

Beyond the mythology, it is indeed the case that the members of the original line-up (Ozzy Osbourne (voice and voice melody composition), Tony Iommi (guitarist and composer), Geezer Butler (bass and lyrics), and Bill Ward (drums), all hailed from the same neighborhood within inner-city Birmingham, namely Aston, which was decid-

edly disadvantaged and typical of an English-working class neighborhood, populated by lower income households, largely without much formal education, where most men in employment were manual laborers in steelwork factories and workshops, and undergoing rapid social change in the late 1960s and early 1970s, not least because of the influx of Caribbeans, Indians and Pakistanis, as well as the beginnings of industrial decline.

In the words of Geezer Butler:

Birmingham had a massive hammering during World War II.(...) I was born in '49 so there were still a lot of bombed-out buildings around. The place on the corner where I grew up was completely demolished by bombs in the war. So where we lived, it was, very, very working class. A lot of immigration there. My mom was from an Irish family ; the people next door to me were from India and people across the road were from Africa, so it was, very, very mixed racially and culturally. And it's a lot of street-fighting, because of all the different ethnicities; There was a lot of white against Black and Irish against English and all that kind of stuff, so it was quite rough in a way, and very working class. (Popoff, 2018, p ;13.)

Similarly, Bill Ward adds in another interview :

We come from a very proud yet very direct-speaking city or community, which was Aston. There were lots of choices there. You could go into the factories or you could go to prison or you could be a gangster- there were lots of choices. And I chose to play music. And so there's been four choices over there, really. And I certainly didn't want to go to college. Birmingham had a dismal... I like it but I think even today a lot of people would say that even today Birmingham's profile is dismal. Rainswept and factories and belching smoke. It's a very industrial place. (Popoff, 2018, p.14).

Tony Iommi drives the point home: "we were all in gangs but we didn't want to be in gangs- we wanted to be in bands."<sup>20</sup>

Beyond this bleak description of Aston, Black Sabbath musicians have also established a link between this urban and socio-cultural environment, on one side, and the style of music that was popular there at the time. Thus Bill Ward continues :

People play hard and they work hard. So when they finish work in the factories covered in oil and grease and what have you, they want a drink. They want to be entertained by good, solid music. It didn't surprise me at all that Aston and Birmingham were not the first city, but one of the first cities, to really embrace what would be the undertones of heavy metal in the late '60s and 1970s.<sup>21</sup>

Further on, when asked to give his version of how the heavy sound of Black Sabbath came to be, he answers :

I don't know. We didn't have anybody who taught us that. The songs, when they came about, they just sounded right. We just used to show up and play aggressively. I think it was just more the aggression that came out than anything else. We just pretty much turned up the volume. I mean, I didn't have a P.A. back then, for my drums or anything, so there were no microphones. I had to play as loud as I possibly could, and I think that sometimes the guys thought I was playing too loud (laughs), so they turned up. So we all just got louder, really. It wasn't anything that was planned.<sup>22</sup>

The desire for « aggression » is of course a key component of their music that distinguishes the band from their acknowledged influences, ie. largely the bands of the "British Blues boom of the 1960s".

## Birmingham's music scene and Black Sabbath

As noted at the outset, it is obvious that in the context of the late 1960s and early 1970s, cross-national influences and musical exchanges had already been taking place between a large variety of local scenes located in different countries and on different continents – and especially, of course, when it comes to rock music, between the USA and the UK. Even if one attempts to make abstraction of American influences, within the UK, there was also a fruitful dialectic between relatively autonomous regional scenes (one example among others being the. "Northern Soul" style) and nationwide and transatlantic trends.

Yet this does not mean that local specificities did not matter, especially for young aspiring musicians literally starting from scratch and who tended to rely on what moral and material support they could find, meaning in most cases local venues and local managers and the. dynamics of comradeship and competition with other aspiring bands of the area. This is typically the case for Black Sabbath, and this is why the locality of Birmingham needs to be understood not just in terms of urban environment or socio-economic background but also in terms of the specific resources of that local scene at the turn of the 1970s.

Jim Simpson, the first manager of the band and also a participant in the local jazz and blues scene, recalls the Birmingham pop music scene of the late 1960s with fondness and enthusiasm, in a way that to some extent contradicts the previous bleak descriptions :

It was getting by nicely, but the music dominated. I can't tell you how many gigs a week there were within five miles. It was probably 300 to 400 gigs a week you could go and see. A pub like the Crown on Hill Street, who I later got involved with, would put on six shows a week. And you've got 20 pubs with 6 shows a week. And they weren't just in the city center. All the suburbs had pubs that would put on live music, and the great thing about it was if a band was okay, they'd go out and start 20 shows, 30 shows a month, and they'd get to be pretty good (...).<sup>23</sup>

Many of the musical influences most frequently quoted by the original members of the band revolve largely around the British blues bands of the 1960s: John Mayall, Fleetwood Mac, Free, Keith Hartley, Aynsley Dunbar, Chicken Shack, some of which are not particularly well remembered anymore, but which will all seem to have been much appreciated by the band because they came to play in Birmingham, in a venue described by Jim Simpson as "the ultimate club", Mother's. In his recollection, the Who, the Kinks, Led Zeppelin, Canned heat, Cream and, ultimately, Black Sabbath all played there. The other key venue in Black Sabbath's Birmingham is Henry's Blues House, whose role in the local scene Bill Ward remembered as "huge", "like the Fillmore East and Fillmore West, with the same value and same importance".

Beyond the vibrancy of the local scene, local specificities of all kinds can come to bear on stylistic innovation. It is not anecdotal that the band explain that they chose the name 'Black Sabbath' because, during a time, they rehearsed across the street from a cinema which played horror films, including at one point a film called "Black Sabbath". Butler later mentioned that he had thought that if people were ready to pay money to watch a scary film, they may well be willing to pay money to listen to scary music, and that, after he had submitted this proposition to the band, Black Sabbath was swiftly adopted as their new name. This points more widely to the influence of other aspects of the popular culture of the time than just music, in this case the development of the horror film, and, more generally, a wider attraction for occultism and mysticism that was trending at the time in American and British popular culture. If one is to take at face value Ward's reminiscence, this global influence seems to have come to bear on the band's early development, and it seems to have come to their attention at least in part because of their routine whereabouts in their city.

One should also insist on another element of the locality-musical style nexus, which is the presence in the city of more experienced musicians who acted as key influences on the transition from Black Sabbath from a blues band to an original-sounding outfit, coming up with their heavier brand of blues which would quickly come to be viewed as morphing into something else. Notably, John Bonham, the drummer of Led Zeppelin (which had its first major success in 1967, three years before Black Sabbath), hailed from the Birmingham area, together with none other than Robert Plant, the Led Zeppelin singer, also a "Brummie" who was aware of Black Sabbath from their early beginnings. John Bonham, generally remembered as a pioneer of heavy rock drumming, and, beyond, as one of the very best rock drummers of all times, happened to rehearse frequently in the city in the late 1960s. The young and aspiring Bill Ward, who was yet to become a future grandee of drumming in his own right with Black Sabbath, recalls accompanying Bonham in his rehearsing sessions and receiving valuable lessons that came to bear strongly on the formation of his own style. For example, he reminisced Bonham showing him how to carefully set up the drum kit with the aim of producing the loudest sounds as possible, in particular the bass drum:

Let me know if you can feel it in your gut". And so he hit the bass drum a few times and I felt like a huge man had just come up and punched me in the gut. And I was about 15 feet out from his bass drum. And I said, I can feel it, John. I can feel that really loud and clear.<sup>24</sup>

### Aston, Birmingham, or any other "working-class town"

"Then the Beatles arrived, "They took me away, those four guys," Ozzy Osbourne told Mat Snow in 1991. It wasn't simply the soaring melodies – merely one of the hallmarks that immediately distinguished Black Sabbath's *oeuvre* – but the very idea that anyone from an environment not dissimilar from his own might possibly escape it. "Theirs was docks, mine was factories," he explained to Snow, and he loved them all equally and at once. When he didn't dream of becoming a Beatle, he prayed that at least one of his sisters might marry one."<sup>25</sup>

The parallel between the socio-economic background of the Beatles and Black Sabbath may appear slightly dubious, or at least exaggerated, because the latter clearly came from more disadvantaged and less educated back-

grounds than the former, but this quote is nevertheless very telling on the history of Black Sabbath and its relation to locality and social class. First, it shows the limits of a vision of locality as strictly bound by tight boundaries and operating in a closed circuit, and confirms, if need be, that local scenes develop in a web of trans-local and international influences. In this case, it is obvious that Ozzy Osbourne was not just influenced by the local Birmingham blues scene, but was very much aware of pop music in the UK – and probably, in the US as well, at the time when he was growing up and starting to cut his teeth as an aspiring musician. The parallel drawn by Osbourne between the cities of Liverpool and Birmingham is more convincing than that between the Beatles and Black Sabbath, because even if understood as an imaginative reconstruction, it does seem to make a lot of sense. The representation of rough and poor Aston as the cradle of the heavy and aggressive rock music takes a whole new dimension, because Aston is explicitly understood as one case among many of working-class neighborhoods. By simultaneously extolling Aston, Birmingham, as a place where one might want to play in a rock band “to escape it”, and likening it to another, purportedly comparable place, Osbourne is making an example out his own personal origins. He is in effect saying that where he grew up matters because it is like many other places, which are all considered to be typically working class, industrial and “tough” places.

### Working-class Birmingham as an incubator for spirituality-focused rock music

Sociologist Ryan Moore proposes an ambitious interpretation of the Heavy Metal-Social class-religion nexus by noting the specifically British dimension of the rise of religion as a rock music theme. He goes so far as to suggest a historical continuity between Heavy Metal and 19<sup>th</sup> century millenarist movements of religious inspiration which often predicted the Apocalypse with reference to the Book of Revelations. He refers in particular to the “cult of the poor” of Joanna Southcott, and to the priest Ebenezer Aldred, or ‘Zion’ Ward, a disabled shoemaker who believed to be a reincarnation of Christ but also thought that he had previously been Satan, and who gave lectures in the 1830s that attracted up to 2000 people, before being jailed for two years.<sup>26</sup>

Not unlike Heavy Metal, so Moore’s argument goes, all these movements operated on the level of religious discourse, or least of the supernatural, or one form or another of transcendence, in a context where they would appeal to disadvantaged populations in the context of rapid economic change due the evolutions of industrial capitalism. Interestingly, the parallel also extends to the fact that both Heavy Metal and these 19<sup>th</sup> century movements sought to construct or at least offer glimpses of possibilities of resistance against those changes, and they both were met with genuine popular success, in the face of reprobation of the dominant culture of their time. The religious leaders given as examples happened to operate in Birmingham – probably an anecdotal fact, but still interesting to note if one takes into account that the combination of Christian/Occultist religiosity and economic hardship experienced by the local population in both the 1830s and the 1960s seems to present intriguing parallels.

What is certain is that, beyond the music itself, the rise of Heavy Metal in Anglo-American popular culture at the turn of the 1970s is inseparable from its introduction of negative, dark and menacing lyrical themes with subjects that were previously marginal in rock music, such as mental illness, feelings of alienation, fascination (attraction-repulsion) with religion, the occult and black magic. In particular, what dominates in these new themes is spirituality in all shapes and forms. Black Sabbath, perhaps more than most other “hard-rock” or “heavy metal” bands of the time, are exemplary of this, and this is particularly relevant in the context of the 2020s, when metal continues to revolve largely (though far from exclusively) around various takes on spirituality, satanism, and anything supernatural or toying with the limits of humanity and inhumanity.

Black Sabbath’s decision to invest heavily into these themes at the beginning of their career - a very bold and risky move at a time when this was still, at best, very marginal, or totally new or unexpected- seems to have coalesced in a very short period of time, with the writing of the two very first songs of the band “Wicked World” and “Black Sabbath”. This was at least partly inspired by classic American blues trope of the “Devil” of the Crossroads: Geezer Butler (both the bass player the writer of Black Sabbath lyrics) explicitly relates his interest for religion and the occult to the this musical tradition, mentioning Robert Johnson’ songs on the Devil or selling his soul to the Devil.<sup>27</sup>

For the young members of Black Sabbath, this lyrical orientation was also inspired by a diffuse and ever-present preoccupation with religion, which was also part and parcel of what it meant to grow up in a working-class community. In this matter, as in others, the neighborhood of Aston is exemplary. As Bill ward observed:

I cared not for it (ie. Religion). It created too much guilt. I don’t believe in a fire and a brimstone God. That’s bloody rubbish. If you don’t do this and you don’t do that you’re going to burn in Hell. What a pile of shit as far as I’m concerned. It’s absolute rubbish. I believe in life and love. And that showed up a number of times in Black Sabbath.

Even in “Children of the Grave”. But yeah, because we were born in the Parish of Aston, we belonged to the Church whether you liked it or not, yes; and forced religion, it scared me. I had nightmares about it. I had nightmares about some guy who was going to... if I masturbated I was going to be punished forever in my life. It was like Jesus... Sorry, Jesus, but you know. I’m talking about before I was ten.<sup>28</sup>

In a seemingly opposite perspective, Geezer Butler notes:

I was brought up strictly Irish Catholic” (...). “I was sort of a religious maniac when I was a kid. I used to collect crucifixes and pictures and medals and everything, and I just wanted to become a priest. I used to sing in the school choir. I just literally loved God. I was just fascinated by the whole thing. I used to read about it and go to every class I could concerning religion. But he then goes on to add : (...)and that developed into sort of wanting to know more about other religions and other spirituality and more about the occult and everything else.<sup>29</sup>

In another interview from 1994, he adds : “I was brought up an incredibly strict Catholic,” “and believed in Hell and the devil. But though I’d been taught about God and Jesus, no one ever went into what the devil was all about, so when I was sixteen or seventeen, I went trying to find out.”<sup>30</sup>

In the same interview, the prolific lyricist also suspected that eschewing traditional boy-girl themes would make for a more personally satisfying writing experience.

The memories of the two men appear not so much contradictory as complementary, because in both cases what matters is a preoccupation with spirituality. Whether this interest is negative or positive, either way it finds its way to the forefront of the band’s early style – ostensibly wearing crucifixes onstage (before moving on to wearing them upside down) ; and to some of their most memorable songs, like the obviously not satanist, but on the contrary very much pro-religion song, “After Forever” on their “Master of Reality” album. The whole song is explicit, but perhaps the last verses sums it up most clearly: “Perhaps you’ll think before you say “God is dead and gone”/ Open your eyes, just realise That He is the one/ The only one who can save you now from all this sin and hate/ Or will you jeer at all you hear?/ Yes, I think it’s too late”<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion : Black Sabbath’s heritage and the metalness of metal

Developments in later periods may encourage much more diverse and finer lines of questioning on place, class, religiosity and metal, as various metal styles and subcultures keep on reinventing themselves on the basis of continuously renewed influences and changing perspectives on what it means to make and listen to rock music considered as “metal” (see the 2011 discussion. between Keith Kahn-Harris, Tom O’Boyle and Niall Scott of 2011<sup>32</sup>). In light of the present take of the history of Black Sabbath, it would probably be a stretch to deny that there is no significant historical lineage between these early days of the 1970s and the sounds, and lyrical themes and imagery of today’s metal scenes, however globalized, diversified or experimental they may have become.

Whilst considerable effort and expertise has been poured for the last 20 years into producing a sociology of metal, it may be the case that there is still much scope to historicize our understanding of the genre. This would mean of course placing different evolutions of the genre and its associated subculture(s) in the broader musical, esthetic, economic, political context of their time, and it would also mean paying attention to the ways in which musicians, lyricists graphic artists and audiences have absorbed and reflected the influence of previous influences. In this light, metal should be understood as a vast, complex, ever-evolving field, with a variety of esthetic inputs that have constantly redefined its contours over the decades.

But I would argue that this should not obfuscate the fact that there is in fact a constant, common denominator, revolving around the fascination for power, a sense of anger, or a penchant for the musical expression of violence, or at the very least of tension, which are already clearly visible in early 1970s bands such as Black Sabbath. To circle back to Smialek and St-Laurent mentioned at the beginning of this paper, we would offer that the bands they mention, such as Messhugah, - ie. more recent, and markedly different from Black Sabbath, including in terms of class identity- still reflect aspects of what made Black Sabbath a “hard rock”, or, more to the point, a “heavy metal” band from its first three albums in 1970 and 1971<sup>33</sup>. In other words, and despite its ever-evolving nature and shifting contours and influences, metal still does revolve around core esthetic values, that were more or less defined in late 1960s and early 1970s bands such as Black Sabbath, whose music reflected their working-class early socialization.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The author wishes to express his gratitude for Dr. Eric Smialek as well as the other participants in the Daegu panel where the first version of this paper was presented in July 2022. Dr. Smialek formulated many rigorous and constructive criticisms which have proved extremely useful to revise and expand it into this version. The author is of course entirely and solely responsible for the paper.
- <sup>2</sup> Andrew Bennett, 2001, p. 43.
- <sup>3</sup> Fabien Hein, *Hard rock, heavy metal, metal : Histoire, cultures et pratiques*, Mélanie Seutun, Paris, 2003.
- <sup>4</sup> « Ce ne sont pas les caractéristiques propres de la culture metal qui en feront éventuellement un ferment de résistance culturelle, mais leur interaction avec un contexte à la faveur duquel ces stratégies vont devenir significantes et se déployer. De fait, si le metal en Grande-Bretagne revendique souvent une fierté ouvrière, ce n'est que très rarement en termes explicitement politiques. Aux États-Unis, la communauté des fans de metal est souvent porteuse de valeurs « conservatrices », et n'est pas autant teintée de cette dimension populiste/ouvrière ». Jérôme Guibert and Jedediah Sklower, "Dancing with the Devil, Panorama des « metal studies », 5 November 2013, *La Vie des Idées*, <https://booksandideas.net/Dancing-with-the-Devil.html>
- <sup>5</sup> Eric Smialek, and Méi-Ra St-Laurent, "Unending Eruptions : White-Collar Metal Appropriations of Classical Complexity, Experimentation, Elitism, and Cultural Legitimization," *The Routledge Companion to Popular Music Analysis*, 2018.
- <sup>6</sup> Jérôme Guibert and Jedediah Sklower, « Dancing with the Devil, Panorama des « metal studies », 5 November 2013, *La vie des idées*; <https://booksandideas.net/Dancing-with-the-Devil.html>, p. 6.
- <sup>7</sup> Jérôme Guibert, *Qu'est-ce que le heavy metal ? Sociologie historique d'une catégorie esthétique*, Sociologie de l'Art, forthcoming 2023.
- <sup>8</sup> Andrew L. Cope A. L.ed., *Black Sabbath and the Rise of Heavy Metal Music*, London, Ashgate, 2010.
- <sup>9</sup> As analysed by Andy Brown, review of Andrew L. COPE (ed.), "Black Sabbath and the Rise of Heavy Metal Music", *Volume! 9* (2), 2012, p. 206-208, <https://doi.org/10.4000/volume.3334>
- <sup>10</sup> Andrew L. Cope, *Black Sabbath and the Rise of Heavy Metal Music*, op.cit.
- <sup>11</sup> For more information on Capsule, see their website: <https://www.capsule.org.uk>
- <sup>12</sup> Lisa Mayer, director of « Home of metal » project, quoted on: <https://www.birminghamworld.uk/news/black-sabbath-heavy-metal-birmingham-oszy-osbourne-3812535?fbclid=IwAR3ggTLROHoq-NcbIwJL5uAzNjNg-HoL75r7nPIWqVTzl6ss-1wljeiDEIk>
- <sup>13</sup> <https://www.birminghamworld.uk/news/black-sabbath-heavy-metal-birmingham-oszy-osbourne-3812535?fbclid=IwAR3ggTLROHoq-NcbIwJL5uAzNjNg-HoL75r7nPIWqVTzl6ss-1wljeiDEIk>
- <sup>14</sup> <https://www.birmingham2022.com/news/2735164/prince-of-darkness-oszy-osbourne-closes-the-birmingham-2022-commonwealth-games-with-unforgettable-performance-topping-off-the-closing-ceremony-celebrations>
- <sup>15</sup> [http://www.mom/bands/m/metal/greatest\\_metal\\_bands/071406/index2.jhtml](http://www.mom/bands/m/metal/greatest_metal_bands/071406/index2.jhtml)
- <sup>16</sup> From : 'Black Sabbath', Steve Turner, unpublished, March 1970, retrieved from rocksbapages: <https://www.rocksbapages.com/Library/Article/black-sabbath>
- <sup>17</sup> Rage Against the Machine guitarist Tom Morello : The Greatest Metal Bands of All Time". MTV. Archived from the original on 6 March 2013. Retrieved 10 February 2013 : [http://www.mtv.com/bands/m/metal/greatest\\_metal\\_bands/071406/index2.jhtml](http://www.mtv.com/bands/m/metal/greatest_metal_bands/071406/index2.jhtml)
- <sup>18</sup> Deborah Frost, Black Sabbath : Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, 13 March 2006, [https://www.rockhall.com/sites/default/files/2019-11/Black%20Sabbath\\_2006.pdf](https://www.rockhall.com/sites/default/files/2019-11/Black%20Sabbath_2006.pdf).
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Martin, Popoff, *Sabotage ! Black Sabbath in the 1970s*, Wymer Publishing, Bedford, UK, 2018, p. 12.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 21.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 15.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.26.
- <sup>25</sup> Deborah Frost, op.cit.
- <sup>26</sup> Ryan M. Moore, 'The Unmaking of the English Working Class : Deindustrialisation, Reification and the Origins of Heavy Metal', in Bayer, Gerd, ed., *Heavy Metal in Britain*, Routledge, Abingdon et New York, 2009. Moore refers to the historian of of 19th century British working-class movements, E.P. Thomson, who has retraced the history of these Millenarist movements, p. 143.
- <sup>27</sup> Popoff op. cit. , p. 19.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 20.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid , p. 18.
- <sup>30</sup> Deborah Frost, op.cit.
- <sup>31</sup> Black Sabbath, « After Forever »; *Master of Reality* Album, 1971, Vertigo.
- <sup>32</sup> Keith Kahn-Harris, *A Reply to Niall W.R. Scott and Tom O'Boyle*, in Brown, Andy R. Karl Spracken, Keith Kahn-Harris and Niall W.R. Scott, Routledge, New York, 2016. Tom, O'Boyle, and Niall W.R. Scott, *The Future of Metal in Bright and Hell Bent for Genre Destruction : A response to Keith Kahn-Harris*, in Brown, Andy R. Karl Spracken, Keith Kahn-Harris and Niall W.R. Scott, Routledge, New York, 2016.
- <sup>33</sup> Eric Smialek and Mei-Ra St-Laurent, op.cit.

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