

Heavy Metal and its Direct, Necessary Ties to Traditional and Evolving Masculinity

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Abstract

Heavy metal is a polarizing genre of music that began in the 1970's and has continued evolving with each passing decade. As heavy metal has evolved, so has the concept of masculinity. From the sexual objectification of women, to dominance and anger, to combating the stigma surrounding men and mental health, heavy metal has served as both a creative and interpretive outlet for men to express their emotions towards the world they are living in. Different techniques utilized by heavy metal artists, such as power chords, palm muting, distortion, screaming, and tremolo/sweep picking directly coincide with traditional masculine traits, like the suppression of "weak" emotions, anger, and violence. This paper allows for an interpretation of how the genre of heavy metal grew and evolved to fit men's emotional and psychological needs.

Introduction

Many thoughts may come to an individual's mind when the words "heavy metal" are perceived. Copious amounts of black makeup, screaming vocals, loud guitars, abhorrent behavior, or perhaps Satanism. What is not often asked, is what truly makes heavy metal, "heavy." Why was it created, how has it evolved, and what about the genre draws in men with psychopathology? This paper will showcase how traditionally masculine emotions directly coincide with heavy metal instrumental and lyrical techniques, the evolution of the heavy metal genre, and how this genre of music has historically given men an outlet for masculine expression of emotions.

Musical and Lyrical Techniques in Heavy Metal

To begin, understanding the instruments commonly featured in heavy metal are essential in comprehending how this genre of music is created. Electric guitars are the pinnacle of heavy metal, with traditionally digital effects creating an even further altered sound. Distortion, or the act of breaking up a guitar's signal, making it sound sharp or rough, is what people will often recognize first when listening to heavy metal. A clean signal on an electric guitar, or the raw sound of an acoustic guitar, are both much cleaner, passive sounds. The distortion created by digital effects is not an accident – it serves to emphasize the emotions articulated by the musicians creating their art. Calmness, or a sense of tranquility, are the antithesis of traditionally negative masculine emotions. Men have been conditioned by society to lash out and to destroy, not remain calm. The distortion applied to the guitar's signal signifies the high energy and anger that are representative of how a man is "supposed" to act.

Alongside distortion are quintessential heavy metal guitar techniques called palm muting, tremolo and sweep picking, and power chords. Palm muting, the skill of literally muting the guitar strings with one's palm, provides a kind of "thump" sound that adds to the heaviness. Tremolo and sweep picking are utilized when playing notes extremely quickly, so as to showcase aggression and speed. Power chords, which are not actually chords, but rather, the first note in a scale and the fifth note of a scale, come together, mixed with distortion, to create a powerful, emphatic sound. Power chords are typically also palm muted, giving the musical composition an extra piece of traditional masculine brutality. The concept of palm muting may be likened to that of thunder, while tremolo and sweep picking are its corresponding lightning. The thunder is the sense of aggression many men experience, followed by the lightning which may reflect a sense of overwhelming inner turmoil. The tempo of a song is also extraordinarily important, with slower tempos highlighting the emotions of sadness or apathy, while faster tempos (which are more common) exhibit force and intensity. Pantera's "Hollow" is an excellent example of this and is touched on later in this paper.

To define the term heavy in terms of heavy metal, it is important to provide certain criteria that make something musically heavy, the first of these terms being sonic weight (Herbst & Mynett, 2023). Sonic weight refers to the "mass" or "weight" we hear when presented with lower frequencies. For example, when picturing a giant, one may predict that their voice is significantly lower than that of the average person. The same goes for heavy metal – when guitars are tuned lower than standard tuning and kick drums are implemented, heavy metal stands separate from most other genres, giving it its defining "heavy" sound. A man's voice is considered to be more masculine when his voice is deeper and more resonant, something mirrored in the creation of heavy metal. It may also be understood that a more masculine man

weighs more or is built broader. The musical techniques of drop or lowered tunings, in addition to a powerful drum sound, reproduce those same masculine expectations in musical form.

The second item that is important in creating music in the heavy metal genre is that of clarity (Herbst and Mynett, 2023). For anyone who has listened to heavy metal, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the many simultaneous loud noises. This is precisely why clarity is so important. If nothing in the musical mixture is able to “punch” through the vast amounts of noise occurring, the music may be considered to be “just noise”. This is the guiding principle behind why guitar solos are boosted ahead of the noise levels of other instruments and vocals in a song. Without this boost, it would be exceptionally difficult to comprehend the music the guitar is playing in the midst of all the other corresponding instruments.

The final aspect that is essential in creating heavy metal is the aspect of loudness (Herbst & Mynett, 2023). Loudness is essential in the formation of what makes heavy metal, heavy metal. Any kind of music might be considered loud if the volume is set high enough; even the softest, most relaxing piano piece may be considered loud under these circumstances. However, with heavy metal, even at low volumes, it is often still perceived as loud. This is not only because of the many different musical aspects interacting with one another, but it is also because of the way the sounds are mixed in either pre- or post-production. In an equalizer, or EQ, both the high and low ends are boosted (Herbst and Mynett, 2023). These are frequencies the human ear is not accustomed to hearing, and as such, is perceived as loud, regardless of the volume the music itself is being played at. It may be theorized that this loudness in the genre embodies the idea of men requiring the attention of others, or the need to be the loudest or most powerful individual in the room.

The Evolution of Heavy Metal, and how it Evolved Alongside Masculinity

Glam (short for glamorous) metal, one of the first subgenres of heavy metal, arose in the 1970's and its peak lasted until the early to mid-1990's. It portrayed men with traditionally feminine traits, such as long hair, makeup, spandex, and platform shoes (Jeray, 2021). Bands like Motley Crue and KISS exemplify this. There are a few reasons as to why those in glam metal bands dressed the way they did. They wanted to make others uncomfortable, they wanted to create a form of art that was definingly them, and, probably most importantly, they wanted attention. By dressing in an unusual way, they gained more notoriety. It is exceptionally difficult to become famous in the music industry based on talent alone, so creating an unusual and eye-popping appearance was necessary in creating fame for these bands.

Even though these rockstars dressed in traditionally more feminine ways, their behavior and song lyrics did not exemplify even the most basic concepts of feminism. The song, "[Girls, Girls, Girls](#)" by Motley Crue is a prime example of this. This song is exclusively about women's appearances and how enticed the band members are by women's beauty and accessories. Lyrics from this song include, "Long legs and burgundy lips," "I'm such a good, good boy/I just need a new toy," followed by a bridge beginning with catcalling and culminating in the song's guitar solo. It is impossible to equate this song with anything that remotely resembles men seeing women as equals to themselves (Motley Crue, 1987). These kinds of lyrics were not exclusive to Motley Crue, and similar lyrics can be found in other songs by other glam metal bands.

It's also worth exploring why some men might pursue musical talent, and how they could have ended up performing in this genre. According to a study done by DeLece et al., strong associations were found between men wanting to play guitar to impress women, and men wanting to play guitar to impress other men (2024). Men who played only basic guitar chords,

those often used in pop, campfire, and country songs, reported a higher tendency to want to have casual sex with women, while men who learned intricate and challenging guitar techniques more commonly found in metal (i.e., “shredding”) valued competition with other men. In the initial formation of heavy metal, and perhaps still today, men playing guitar may choose to do so in order to impress women, but also because they feel they have something to prove to other men.

In the years leading up to the formation of heavy metal, the sexual revolution was ongoing. It took what was once taboo and altered the topic of sexual promiscuity into something that everyday people felt more comfortable speaking about. The sexual revolution made it possible for the musical content of heavy metal bands in this era to articulate what would have been ostracizing even ten years prior. It is possible that the overt objectification of women found in the early formation of heavy metal can be attributed to the sexual revolution. Objectification of women certainly did not begin in the initial era of heavy metal, but the genre’s heavy ties to masculinity and establishment around the time of the sexual revolution seem to have provided some men with a newly socially acceptable outlet to speak about how they viewed women.

Many songs written by glam metal bands spoke indirectly to these concepts of lust or hedonism (Rafalovich, 2006), the idea that in life, one should maximize pleasure and minimize pain. For these glam metal bands, it is evident that their versions of pleasure included women, copious amounts of partying, and heavy drug usage (Rafalovich, 2006). However, just as the concept of masculinity changed, the genre of heavy metal changed too, mutating into something completely different from what bands like Motley Crue and KISS had been creating.

The 1980’s featured not only glam metal, but another prominent metal subgenre – thrash metal. Genre, in any aspect of the word, is meant to adapt to what the people using it need to express. Just as glam metal expressed hedonistic views, thrash metal expressed its deep disdain

for the global political climate, organized/forced religion, war, and many other topics that may elicit strong, negative feelings. In addition to the lyrical differences, the musical differences are undeniable as well. While both feature distorted, electric guitar, thrash metal typically has a far quicker tempo, and an overall more aggressive playstyle. Glam metal, while featuring distortion, power chords, and even palm muting, rarely showcases violence or hostility, while thrash metal is quite the opposite. Even with the lyrical and musical content being so dissimilar, they both featured some of the same wardrobe choices. Megadeth and Metallica, two of the “Big 4”, or original bands of thrash metal, wore skinny jeans and had long hair, while KISS and Motley Crue did the same thing, just in a more exaggerated manner.

As thrash metal and other subgenres evolved, their lyrics moved further from that of sexualizing women, and closer towards internal problems, like emotional turmoil, or violent fantasies (Rafalovich, 2006). Adam Rafalovich, a former professor of sociology at Texas Tech University, writes how metal lyrics around this time primarily spoke to men being either “dominant” or “dominated” (2006). These feelings of being dominant or being dominated are highly masculine feelings. Someone who is dominant or powerful is strong enough to conquer other people, something that masculinity has historically promoted. On the other hand, the idea of psychological or physical domination has not been spoken about as much in terms of masculinity. Bullying, breakups, inability to cope with emotions, trauma, politics, and more, all contribute to a feeling of being dominated. Beginning during the 1980’s, and certainly after the ending of the popularity of glam metal, lyrics in heavy metal began to revolve around these concepts.

A prominent example of these feelings of worthlessness and domination may be accredited to the United States and the political climate that it cultivated in the 1980’s. Ronald

Reagan's economic policies that enabled corporations to build vast wealth while leaving consumers in the dust, the threat of nuclear warfare with Soviet Russia, and military excursions in both Central America and the Middle East caused American civilians to feel powerless in their own nation. These topics influenced thrash metal, and the feelings of vulnerability and weakness heavily influenced thrash metal's composition. Metallica's "[One](#)" is an instance of this, as the narrator in the song expresses his inability move, speak, hear, see, or taste following a landmine explosion he faced in warfare. This song can be taken literally in the sense of what the narrator is enduring, but also figuratively in the sense of helplessness people may have felt around this time period in the United States.

Examples of traditionally masculine strength, or conquering others, is found in both the lyrical and instrumental aspects of heavy metal music. Rammstein, an industrial metal band founded in Germany, exemplify this. Their guitar riffs are soul-crushing, the singer's voice is extraordinarily low, and their lyrical content describes domination in romantic relationships, internal struggles, traumatic events, politics, and many of the other criteria of metal previously listed. In addition to this, Rammstein is known for using both drop and down-tuned guitars which creates a larger sonic weight. These techniques showcase power and aggression, which resemble conventionally masculine traits.

Translated to English, lyrics from their song "[Zerstoren](#)" - which literally translates to "destroy" - talk about this idea of conquering and dominating. In the second verse, translated to English, Till Lindemann sings "I take your belongings/Will reduce them to nothing/Saw, disassemble/ No asking, smash." The chorus is simply, "I must destroy/Yes, yes, yes/I must destroy." (Rammstein, 2005)

Destruction of property, feelings, and many other things have often constituted values of what it means to be a masculine man. Men have been conditioned to be angry, and from this anger can come destruction. This destruction can take many forms, such as socially with bullying or mistreatment of others, while it can also be portrayed on a large scale, as with military leaders trying to conquer land and uproot entire civilizations. As with any song, “Zerstören” is up to the listener’s interpretation. Even with this, the lyrics Lindemann writes are clear: I will destroy until there is nothing left.

Another heavy metal band, Five Finger Death Punch, has been known to write music regarding the hatred of past romantic partners, fans, friends, and society. As if their title was not evident enough, their discography reflects themes about being a dominant male figure by being violent, while simultaneously highlighting how it feels to be dominated. In FFDP’s song “[100 Ways to Hate](#)” Ivan Moody, the lead singer, explains how much he detests an individual who has made him feel downtrodden. The chorus is sung “I hate you, that’s an understatement/I hate you (For who you are)/I hate you (And all you stand for)/I don’t care (Anymore)” (Five Finger Death Punch, 2007). Moody’s reaction to the individual that has wronged him, or made him feel dominated, is a response commonly found in many men – anger, hatred, and animosity. This kind of anger is not uncommon to men across history, as well as the kind of masculinity that toxic masculinity promotes.

Pantera, a groove metal band that evolved from glam metal, utilizes both slow and fast tempos to explain their feelings of being dominated in the song “[Hollow](#)”. The song starts with a moderate tempo of 95 beats per minute, well below what is typical in heavy metal. The lyrics in the first verse, “What’s left inside him?/Don’t he remember us?” are written about an individual who is in a coma (Pantera, 1992). The singer is expressing his misery about losing his friend to a

coma, with the song being in both a minor scale and featuring a slow tempo. As the song continues, however, the tempo rises to 160 beats per minute, with power chords, palm muting, and heavy distortion kicking in. Very quickly, these feelings of sadness turn to anger, which is how many men in history have dealt with sorrow. Pantera's lead singer yells "Mad/At God/Mad", as if he is unable to articulate his feelings in a more elaborate or coherent way (Pantera, 1992). The singer's inability to communicate his feelings may also be representative of the stigma regarding men and speaking about their mental and emotional health. As the song concludes, the instrumentals become angrier and more ferocious, with the song ending in an ultimately epic breakdown.

Speaking of the concepts of domination, Rafalovich writes about the distinction between objective domination and subjective domination (2006). The term objective domination refers to a literal event that has occurred, like being physically abused or persevering through a substance use disorder. On the other hand, subjective domination is more emotional than it is physical.

Megadeth's "[Family Tree](#)" is an example of objective domination. Its lyrics are about sexual abuse endured by an individual from their own family member. The chorus, sung by Dave Mustaine, goes "Let me show you how I love you/It's our secret, you and me/Let me show you how I love you/But keep it in the family tree." (Megadeth, 1994). The individual being abused has no power in the situation they're in, and in addition to this, is being told not to ever speak about it. Many people who have been sexually abused have encountered the same scenario and may feel tremendous shame. For men who have endured sexual abuse, they often face even more stigma speaking about it than one typically would. With this song and others, like "[Daddy](#)" by Korn, men were given a space to know that they were not the only ones who experienced this trauma, yielding a safe space for them to experience their feelings.

Another subgenre of heavy metal called “nu metal” began in the mid-1990’s and continued into the mid-late 2000’s. The genre gained notoriety for its use of rap, funk, and other pieces of separate genres. The nu metal band Papa Roach began their career in 2001, and the lyrical content of their songs is immediately distinguishable from their glam and thrash metal counterparts. Their hit song, “[Last Resort](#)” is about the lead singer Jacoby Shaddix’s struggles with mental health and suicidal ideation. The song features the lyrics, “Would it be wrong, would it be right?/If I took my life tonight? Chances are that I might/Mutilation out of sight/And I’m contemplating suicide” (Papa Roach, 2001). In a song like this, it showed men they didn’t have to restrict talking about the demons residing in their head anymore. This drastically differs from what was commonplace between glam, thrash, and other subgenres of metal, where talking about mental health consisted of screaming, blaming others, and not being able to fully articulate emotions. In nu metal, it became acceptable for men to ask for help with mental health, as opposed to only getting angry about it.

In the song “Last Resort”, we can also see Shaddix detailing a different kind of domination he is experiencing – loneliness. Loneliness has become an epidemic for men, with men in Australia being found three times more likely to die by suicide than their female counterparts (Franklin et al., 2019). It is important to note that while men often use more lethal and immediate ways to take their own lives, like using a gun or hanging, women try to die by suicide more but die less because of their methods used.

Loneliness in men may be attributed to many things, not the least of which being that many men may lack the ability to articulate their emotions in a healthy way. Without this, they cannot be understood by others and instead of asking for help, they may lash out and cause rifts in close relationships. In the same vein, these close relationships may not exist in the first place.

Often, women have larger social circles than men, leading to less social support for men following a traumatic incident (Franklin et al., 2019). In addition to this, men going through marital problems, i.e. separation, are more than 13x as likely to feel lonely as compared to women who are experiencing the same issue (Franklin et al., 2019). The inability to properly express emotions, a lack of a social circle, and the fracturing of an important relationship, may all lead to men experiencing tremendous loneliness and wanting to end their life because of it.

Another common musical theme in metal is that of playing within the minor scale. At its most basic, the scale tends to elicit happier emotions, while the minor scale elicits more negative emotions. While pop, or popular music, utilizes both the major and the minor scale, heavy metal is rarely ever in a major scale. Interestingly, college students who listen to pop music were found to be happier than their metal listening counterparts (Wang et al., 2022). Often, people choose to listen to music that encompasses the emotions they're feeling. Those who have poorer mental health seem to choose to listen to music that covers the scope of their negative emotions, while others who are happier seem to prioritize listening to music that addresses less mentally exhausting topics. It is possible that men's traditional repression of emotions could lead to men listening to songs that feature sadder themes, thereby allowing them to express these emotions in a way that was societally acceptable.

The aforementioned minor scale may not have made its younger listeners sadder, but rather, made them happier because they felt their emotions were understood. University of South Australia researchers Paula Rowe and Bernard Guerin aimed to understand why adolescents and young people listened to heavy metal. They found that metal music was used as a form of protection, whether that be from bullying, marginalization, familial struggles, or other issues (2017). These concepts tie back into the idea of being dominated, with metal being an outlet for

these individuals to feel understood in their domination. This genre of music gave adolescents a community to express their feelings where they otherwise might not have had one. Importantly, holding this identity of a heavy metal listener and finding a place where they felt heard and understood seemed to alleviate mental health issues that were present in these adolescents (Rowe & Guerin, 2017).

So, what draws men to heavy metal? It's the raw, unbridled negative emotion, the ferociousness of the instruments that replicate themselves in everyday masculine life, and the need to be felt, heard, and understood. These are what men have been feeling for centuries, and only up until the past several decades have they been able to truly express this. The concept of masculinity changes, and so does heavy metal. From the sexual revolution, to the outbreak of nuclear warfare, to societal and individual social struggles, heavy metal adapts and molds itself to what men need it to be – a place to belong, and a place to feel seen.

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