

## 1 | Introduction

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Numerous bands and their fans see themselves as having revolutionised rock music in the late 1960s and the early 1970s and given birth to a harder style that was to become known as heavy metal. British bands Black Sabbath, Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin and The Kinks are considered pioneers within the two countries of metal's origin; their counterparts in the US were Steppenwolf, Iron Butterfly and Blue Cheer. Although it is safe to say that these bands were among those that gave the initial spark for a musical genre that has taken hold around the globe in the more than fifty years of its existence, this introduction is not meant to debate the origins of metal.

Today, metal music is a genre popular with fans worldwide, facilitated by a vast industry with specialised professions, such as journalists, artist and repertoire managers, record producers, concert promoters and stage crews. In the premier league of internationally-selling pop artists are some of the most prominent metal acts, including Metallica, Def Leppard, Guns'n'Roses, Linkin Park, Van Halen and Kiss, with over a hundred million records sold each. *Metallica* (1991), known as Metallica's 'Black Album', officially spent five hundred weeks on the Billboard 200, and their latest record, *Hardwired ... To Self-Destruct* (2016), climbed to number two on the Billboard Charts. Judas Priest's current (nineteenth) record is their highest-charting album, and Ozzy Osbourne's classic *Blizzard of Ozz* (1980) was recently awarded five-time platinum in the US. But metal music is not only flourishing in the mainstream. By the time of writing, the *Encyclopaedia Metallum* lists 156,453 metal bands around the globe, and *The Spirit of Metal* identifies 28,726 record labels dedicated to the genre – numbers expected to continue growing fast. Metal festivals like Rock in Rio, Exit, Hellfest, Graspop Metal Meeting, Rock am Ring, Download or Wacken attract hundreds of thousands of visitors every year. At the same time, countless smaller festivals for specific subgenres and subcultures take place throughout the world. A recent trend is heavy metal cruises like '70,000 Tons of Metal' hosting about one hundred bands and several thousand fans.

Considering its beginning as a rebellious subculture that never ceased to pride itself on its transgressiveness,<sup>1</sup> it is perhaps surprising that metal has become part of popular culture. Evidence of a growing mainstream acceptance

comes from heritage places like museums dedicated to metal. One such example is Birmingham-based *Home of Metal*<sup>2</sup> in the English West Midlands region, a government-sponsored network holding exhibitions and events. Given the enormous influence of forerunners Black Sabbath, Birmingham and the Black Country as the genre's supposed birthplace is the network's main focus. Developments that followed in Black Sabbath's wake in other parts of the world are also covered. The latest exhibition of Home of Metal was in 2019 at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the recording of Black Sabbath's seminal self-titled album, which many see as the origin of the metal genre.<sup>3</sup> A similar initiative is the *Rock and Metal Museum*,<sup>4</sup> whose RAM Gallery, curated by Bloodstock festival founder Paul Gregory, exhibits metal artwork by various artists. These two initiatives are examples of 'self-authorised heritage'<sup>5</sup> within the metal scene, supported and thus 'legitimised' by councils and local funders. Yet another prominent example supports the impression that metal has become a 'legitimate' part of popular culture deemed valuable. The *GRAMMY Museum* – an affiliate of the prestigious GRAMMY Music Awards – hosted a year-long exhibition from 2012 to 2013 on the theme of 'Golden Gods: The History of Heavy Metal',<sup>6</sup> showcasing the genre's origins, subgenres, bands and controversies, alongside interactive scream booths, tutorials on metal drum and double bass, and a metal guitar riff station. Should such an appearance in mainstream popular music not be proof enough of metal's cultural impact, then two more museums show that countries have begun to embrace metal music as part of their national heritage. The Finnish Music Hall of Fame in *Helsinki's National Museum* opened the special exhibition 'Metal Export' in July 2020 with artefacts from the legendary Nosturi Club, live videos of Insomnium, Moonsorrow and Amorphis, and instruments of Apocalyptica and Children of Bodom.<sup>7</sup> The second museum is the *Rockheim Museum* in Trondheim, which pays tribute to the cultural influence of Norwegian black metal through a dedicated 'black metal room' containing exhibits such as posters, vinyl, artwork, videos and instruments like the Pearl drum kit played by Mayhem, Satyricon, Burzum, Darkthrone, Enslaved, Emperor and Arcturus.<sup>8</sup>

Much like museums and exhibitions, there is also a wealth of metal documentaries, from early examples like Metallica's *Some Kind of Monster* (2004) and Sam Dunn's *Metal: A Headbanger's Journey* (2005) and *Global Metal* (2008) to a plethora of films about individual bands and metal

subgenres, many of which are nowadays being streamed on mainstream platforms such as Amazon Prime and Netflix.

Moreover, metal has found its way into vocational and higher education institutions. The *Metal Factory*<sup>9</sup> in Eindhoven, Holland, opened in 2013 as the world's first school for metal, teaching vocalists, drummers, bassists, guitarists and keyboardists how to build a career in the music industry. Among the former beneficiaries of government-funded popular music performance programmes are Floor Jansen (Nightwish), Ruud Jolie (Within Temptation), Stef Broks (Textures) and Johan van Stratum (Stream of Passion). The fact that these musicians became instructors at the Metal Factory indicates the success of the programme and national sponsoring schemes.<sup>10</sup> Other institutions follow a more theoretical approach. The University of Helsinki and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) offer dedicated metal music modules, two examples of the many existing. Institutions around the globe have begun to integrate metal into the curricula of their general popular music courses and modules.

Long before metal music became a subject taught in the academy, it had been researched. Pioneering book-length works in the 1990s stem from Deena Weinstein,<sup>11</sup> Robert Walser,<sup>12</sup> Donna Gaines<sup>13</sup> and Harris M. Berger.<sup>14</sup> Journalistic literature also embraced metal early on, featuring specific subgenres, bands and record labels on a large scale.<sup>15</sup> However, it was not until the late 2000s that a series of symposia and conferences – most notably the 2008 *Heavy Fundamentalisms: Music, Metal and Politics* conference in Salzburg, Austria – set the start for metal music studies to develop into a distinct field of study with its own learned society, the International Society for Metal Music Studies, and dedicated journal, *Metal Music Studies*. Since then, metal music studies have proliferated and diversified, encompassing many research traditions from the arts and humanities to the sciences. Hence academia and society have increasingly recognised metal music as a valid field of research.<sup>16</sup> Metal-related publications appear in general popular music journals and edited volumes, and research on metal is also found in publications of popular music's various parent disciplines. But perhaps one of the most evident indicators of the growth of metal music as a distinct field of study is the rapid increase in the number of collected editions and monographs over the last five years, along with an equally growing number of dissertations.

As the academic field grows, books and dissertations are becoming more thematically focused. This *Cambridge Companion to Metal Music* sets itself apart from this trend of specialisation by providing a broader scope and an overview of metal music studies. It strikes a balance between introductions

to key themes and state-of-the-art discussions of emerging issues and musical phenomena. Given this perspective, this volume is intended as a textbook for new generations of scholars, from undergraduate and postgraduate students to early career researchers. The chapters have been written by a diverse group of contributors, ensuring a well-balanced mix of emerging to experienced scholars from varied disciplines: musicology, music technology, media and communication studies, leisure studies, youth studies, religious studies, classical studies, history, sociology, art and design to Scandinavian and African studies. This range of approaches and methodologies reflects the discipline of metal music studies. The volume is divided into six parts spanning all-time classic and nascent themes in metal scholarship.

Part I, *Metal, Technology and Practice*, acknowledges the relevance of music technology and offers valuable insights into the perspectives of metal music creation for those involved, i.e., artists and recording professionals. Part II, *Metal and History*, contains selected case studies and examples of the common practice of appropriating historical themes and mythologies in metal for a purpose in the present. Part III, *Metal and Identity*, covers some of the mainstream themes in metal scholarship, such as gender, class and race. Part IV, *Metal Activities*, focuses on a less researched area with topics relevant to the practising metalhead, including leisure activities such as concerts, festivals and dancing/moshing. Part V, *Modern Metal Genres*, explores more contemporary topics, that is, lesser researched metal subgenres such as technical death metal, metalcore and djent, and how established and influential subgenres such as black metal are developing today. In the final Part VI, *Global Metal*, the focus shifts away from the historically early (and dominant) metal scenes in Central Europe, North America and selected Asian countries to acknowledge metal music cultures worldwide, as is popular within current metal scholarship. Like any compendium, this volume cannot be comprehensive. However, it is a starting point for broader discussions, provides an informative introduction for metal music scholars new to the field and serves as a source for contemporary research for readers familiar with the academic metal literature.

This *Cambridge Companion* begins with an overview chapter on the history and stylistic developments of metal music. Andrew L. Cope outlines metal's sonic evolution and its continuous expansion over five decades. He also addresses more recent developments in metal, where contrasting musical idioms are increasingly used through the process of extensive and elaborate assimilation. These idioms serve as a foil for the prominence of established metal devices in new and unusual contexts. Cope argues that

through a sequence of essential features and their relationship to key bands, tracks and albums, metal music developed in an accumulative process driven by a series of pioneering musicians who created and reiterated a specific combination of musical elements and performance practices to establish the metal sound.

Part I – *Metal, Technology and Practice* – provides a historical overview from a different perspective, focusing on record production and how technology has been utilised creatively to achieve ever-higher levels of heaviness in metal's ever-diversifying subgenres. Jan-Peter Herbst and Mark Mynett concentrate on the formative heavy metal in the 1970s, the thrash metal movement in the 1980s and the beginning of extreme metal in the early 1990s to trace how specific releases set standards and trends in metal music production, highlighting notable moments in the evolution of heaviness on metal records. They illustrate how the practice of live recording lost its importance and gave way to a hyper-real aesthetic beyond human performance capability through music production technologies. These shifts brought more extreme sounds through greater distortion and sonic weight, intended to achieve the ideologically desired heaviness as a key part or by-product of the genre's continued progress. The technological reflections are followed by Niall Thomas's chapter, which takes a closer look at the phenomenological perspective of record producers. Thomas argues that technological democratisation has transformed the experience of making metal records through creative flexibility and control, technologically and financially, an experience that would have been unattainable in the past. Drawing on the experiences of producers who shaped the recording careers of artists such as Black Sabbath and Judas Priest, Thomas connects the experiences of record production to musical, socio-cultural and technological development. Likewise phenomenological, but from the first-person perspective of a metal vocalist, Hale Fulya Celikel sheds light on how her professional career developed in the metal industry with a band performing and releasing original music. Reflecting on her role as singer of the Turkish progressive metal band Listana, Celikel addresses the following issues: high and low art, status and musical socialisation; metal-specific skill acquisition; songwriting practices; demo recordings and self-released albums; challenges in obtaining gig opportunities; discrimination as a female performer in a male-dominated environment. In the final chapter of Part I, Duncan Williams provides an overview of timbre in metal production from a psychoacoustic and computational musicology perspective, focusing on the use of acoustic feature extraction. Williams reflects on how the acoustic feature sets underlying performance and recording technology may inform production and analysis

in the not-too-distant future. These considerations make him predict possible AI-driven approaches to machine listening, timbral metering and tone matching with great future potential for metal music practitioners.

Part II addresses *Metal and History*. Peter Pichler begins with his analysis of how contemporary extreme metal has found ways to incorporate the ancient cultures of Sumer and Mesopotamia into their music. Pichler examines how history is constructed in Mesopotamian metal, a discourse he sees as promoting a specific kind of historical politics that helps solve problems in the present, especially in the conflict-ridden region of the Middle East. Extending the scope to draw connections to two other discourses of history in metal – ‘Oriental metal’ and ‘Viking metal’ – Pichler argues that we can potentially learn from the past through metal music. Jeremy Swist takes us to ancient Greece to discuss another appropriation of classical tales, particularly the saga of Sparta and its representation in popular media. The Spartans’ last stand at Thermopylae, the mythologised battle led by King Leonidas, has served as inspiration for metal bands worldwide since the 2006 film *300*. Swist argues that the battle resonates with political and nationalistic agendas and that Sparta’s broad appeal harmonises with metal’s ethos of hypermasculinity, the liberation of animal instincts and the disruption of systems of conformity and control, embodied by the battle in which the few stood defiant against the many. The section on metal and history concludes with Imke von Helden’s examination of Viking metal, one of the most popular adaptations of history and imagined cultures in metal music. The chapter analyses different approaches by Viking metal bands to these lyrical themes and how they intersect with cultural aspects, authenticity, ideology and gender. Von Helden finds that Viking metal is one of the few subgenres of metal music defined less by its sonic characteristics than by its visual elements and lyrical contents, which revolve around the Viking Age, Old Norse mythology and the depiction of Nordic nature.

In the first chapter of Part III – *Metal and Identity* – Paula Rowe explores the nexus of metal identity formations and mental health, arguing that metal music and culture have the potential to promote mental health by creating a sense of belonging, empowerment, well-being and resilience. Examining the domains of psychosocial well-being through the lens of heavy metal identity formation, she reasons metal to have qualities that can protect mental health. Rowe concludes that internal identity dialogues can shield metal fans against some of modern life’s most pervasive social and emotional threats. Rosemary Lucy Hill then investigates the gendered meanings of metal from the 1970s to the present, especially with a focus on the gendering of the genre, sexism and the continued male-dominance of

musicians' roles, women's experiences of empowerment through metal, and metal as a vehicle for feminist rage. Hill argues that current thinking about metal and gender has been shaped, on the one hand, by gendered expectations of musical suitability mostly outside academia and, on the other, by angry reactions from metal fans, musicians and scholars. The section on metal identities ends with Catherine Hoad's thought-stimulating reflections on what it means for metal to be transgressive in the twenty-first century. She draws on notions of resistance, rebellion, transgression and outsider-ness prevalent in the metal community, arguing that this spirit is challenged by metal's commercial success, geological diversification and generational shifts among fans, with 'resistance' taking on different trajectories as metal manifests itself in various political currents and contexts. Hoad explores how the politics of rebellion and resistance in metal play out in fragmented ways as metal fandoms around the world negotiate shifting ideological contexts and markets. In this context, she focuses on matters of performative transgression and commercial dissent, raising the provocative question of whether metal can still be rebellious in the twenty-first century or if it ever was.

Part IV focuses on *Metal Activities*, with Karl Spracklen introducing metal as a space for leisure and tourism. He discusses why metal is leisure for musicians and fans alike, exploring its meaning and purpose in modern society. Even though metal is part of the wider entertainment industry, best defined as commodified popular culture, Spracklen argues that metal still gives meaning to people's leisure lives by allowing musicians to make the music they love and fans to be moved by it. Spracklen points out that metal is less constrained than mainstream pop music and therefore provides a communicative leisure space where fans and musicians can find meaning, belonging and solidarity. He concludes that as long as metal does not become trendy and retains uncompromising riffs and unfashionable themes, it holds the potential as a form of leisure that resists conformity, commercialisation and control. Next, Daniel Suer gives an introductory overview of dance practices in metal and their social organisation. He examines the social organisation of mosh pits and discusses them as contested communities, as they offer communal experiences while perpetuating existent barriers to participation, especially in relation to gender identities. In addition, Suer outlines areas for further research, including dance practices in virtual spaces and the Global South, histories of metal dance and the relationship between music and movement in metal. Thomas Cardwell then explores the activity of battle jacket customisation. Battle jackets, he shows, are visible badges of identity in clothing that



derive their individual significance through decorative patches, band insignia, studs and other embellishments. Cardwell traces the origins of such jackets in twentieth-century subcultures and the development of their making among fans since the 1970s. He argues that the jackets serve as documents of personal music history, with patches commemorating concert attendance and favourite bands. Based on a series of interviews, Cardwell notes that while each jacket is unique to its creator, most follow a set of tacitly agreed conventions and structures.

Part V – *Modern Metal Genres* – begins with Ross Hagen’s reflections on the development of black metal, specifically how the emphasis on geographic location and local cultures has changed both in the bands’ music and visual presentation and how they are practised today. Hagen looks at the Mountain West region in the United States, where the genre is being cultivated, recontextualising Norwegian black metal’s musical and ideological tropes into forms that honour this new location while retaining key points of Norwegian black metal’s worldview. The subsequent chapter by Lewis F. Kennedy examines the impact of subgenre qualifiers that modify a genre title. Using technical death metal as a case study, Kennedy analyses the prescriptive nature of creativity contained within a relatively precise definition of the modifier ‘technical’ that has developed through consistent use by artists, reliable recognition by audiences and continued reinforcement by critics. Kennedy concludes that subgenre qualifiers simultaneously describe and prescribe the specific focus of a particular subgenre, affecting composition, production, performance and reception. Owen Coggins is next to explore how the subgenre of drone metal evolved, incorporating influences from metal and classical avant-gardes that provided an overlap for otherwise relatively unconnected audiences. Coggins finds ambivalence in metal media; while sometimes drone metal’s status is questioned, other times it is critically praised in more highbrow publications, particularly in avant-garde magazines like *The Wire*. Although a highly marginal subgenre, Coggins argues that drone metal significantly impacts how metal is perceived and understood, both within and outside metal culture, through its contested influences and deployment in legitimisation strategies. Mark Marrington’s chapter discusses djent as another controversial subgenre within the metal community. It examines the development of djent since the mid-2000s, taking into account the main musical, technological and environmental factors that have shaped the genre’s identity. Marrington emphasises the important role of emerging digital technologies, both in the formation of the subgenre’s musical and sonic characteristics and in its wider dissemination and expansion. Reflecting on djent’s significance as



a ‘cyber-genre’ within the domain of contemporary electronic music practice, Marrington concludes that djent aligns with recent trends that bring metal ever closer to the aesthetics of post-digital music practice. Part V on modern metal genres closes with Eric Smialek’s analysis of metalcore. Smialek provides a reception history of metalcore, marked by disagreements over its definition and legitimacy, revolving around the idea of an ‘abject genre’ – a shorthand term for nu metal, screamo and a variety of ‘-core’ subgenres that have been widely criticised by metal fans. After analysing commonalities metalcore shares with other abject genres, including mass popularity, stylistic alterations of traditional metal traits regarded by critics as simplified dilutions, and associations with marginalised categories of identity, Smialek outlines various historical accounts of the genre to conclude that a more complex consideration of chronological and conceptual boundaries is required than a single narrative allows.

The final part, Part VI on *Global Metal*, commences with Pierre Hecker’s chapter on metal in the Middle East. Hecker deconstructs the semiotic baggage of the term ‘Middle East’ shaped by a history of Western imperialism. He critically examines the exoticisation of the Muslim metalhead, addressing the semantic disorder caused by the emergence of local metal scenes in different socio-political contexts and the associated moral panics over metal and Satanism. Hecker argues that prevailing Orientalist discourses have led to an exoticisation of the Middle Eastern and/or Muslim metalhead in academic and popular discourses, emphasising that there is still a perception that the dominance of Islam somehow precludes the existence of metal music and culture in the Middle East. The next chapter covers metal in Asia, where long-established scenes in Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Nepal wield influence on the rapidly expanding scenes in India, China and mainland Southeast Asia, where heavy metal remains the preferred genre for only a small minority. Jeremy Wallach then explores the Asian metal universe as an increasingly interconnected field that has forged links with other regions. Wallach argues that by gradually attracting the enthusiastic attention of international audiences, Asian bands have achieved a shift in dominant representations of Asian musics, dismissed in the West as boringly derivative, inauthentic pop or featuring abstruse traditional styles inaccessible to non-Asian ears. Wallach concludes that Asian metal is neither and that its influence on the global music scene has only just begun. Edward Banchs gives an overview of African metal, focusing on sub-Saharan Africa. As Banchs suggests, the arrival of rock and heavy metal on the African continent was not uniform because the genres developed at different times in different countries and under different circumstances. He exemplifies how metal

stories, regardless of the circumstances, tell of a genre that empowers performers and ardent fans alike, even if facing challenges such as authoritarianism, economic hardship and conservative cultural norms. Banchs concludes that metal expanded in Africa mainly for three reasons: many countries have an enthusiastic fanbase; the establishment of national scenes that produce bands, original recordings, record labels and media specialising in this particular industry; an ever-growing number of metal festivals. The subsequent chapter by Nelson Varas-Díaz and Daniel Nevárez Araújo takes a perhaps unusual approach. Instead of providing an overview of metal in Latin America, the authors examine the efforts of Latin American metal artists to address injustices of coloniality through their music's sounds, lyrics and aesthetics. With the question in mind, 'What has Latin American metal music ever done for us?', Varas-Díaz and Nevárez Araújo draw on the concept of the 'ethics of affront' to show how artists tell and simultaneously challenge the colonial history of their culture through sounds, images and words. The authors find the application of this concept to have implications for metal music as an academic field. They argue that metal music should be studied to comprehend how people in Latin America and the Global South use extreme forms of music, which sheds light on their context and allows for a deeper understanding of how social and political forces sustain practices of oppression. In the final chapter, Samuel Vallen introduces Australian metal music, pointing to the common theme of distance that inevitably comes with its geographical distance to metal scenes in Europe and the United States and the vast territorial (and cultural) space between Australia's largest population centres. He examines some of the distance-related negotiations Australian metal acts engage in to conceptualise their practice. Vallen argues that the negotiation of distance is a pervasive aspect of Australian metal that has far-reaching and tangible implications across the style's musical and paramusical developments. He concludes that one cannot write the history of Australian metal without considering this ongoing negotiation.

## Notes

1. Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (Berg, 2007).
2. Home of Metal (2022). <https://homeofmetal.com> (accessed 21 March 2022).
3. See, for example, Andrew L. Cope, *Black Sabbath and the Rise of Heavy Metal Music* (Routledge, 2010).
4. Rock and Metal Museum (2022). [www.rockandmetalmuseum.com/about](http://www.rockandmetalmuseum.com/about) (accessed 21 March 2022).