

METAL MOVEMENTS: HEADBANGING AS A LEGACY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN DANCE

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MODERN HEAVY METAL: MARKETS, PRACTICES AND CULTURES

International Academic Research Conference * Helsinki Finland 8-12 June 2015

Abstract

This paper examines the movement patterns, aesthetic values, and social meanings that constitute headbanging practice in heavy metal culture. The author demonstrates that headbanging is a progressive exaggeration of a few movements seen in earlier African American music styles of rock and blues. The rhythm styles of metal music, the motions of headbanging, and embodied feelings of meter and groove cannot be analyzed separately. These components together form a culture of rhythm that is the most significant legacy of African American culture in metal music today.

Is it possible to have heavy metal without headbanging? Metal fans refer to themselves as “headbangers,” and the same epithet is widely used to represent the genre as a whole. “Headbanger’s Ball” was for a long time the only place to find metal on cable television; *The Complete Headbanging History of Heavy Metal* is the most extensive history of metal published to date; and “Metal: A Headbanger’s Journey” is one of the most thoughtfully-produced film documentaries available about the genre. While a number of conventional types of movement are common among metal fans, including moshing, fist-shaking, crowd-surfing, and air guitar, headbanging alone has this special iconic status. As Robert Walser theorizes genre as a “horizon of expectations” (Walser 1993, p. 27), in studying headbanging, I investigate how headbanging is integrated into the collection of expectations that shapes the metal genre. In addition to tracing the visual and somatic history of movement styles, this study will explore what these movements mean to listeners and performers, how these generic meanings have come to exist, and how they have changed over time. I trace the origins of headbanging to physical rhythmic movements in African American traditions such as blues and early rock and roll. While many social and musical codes that shape headbanging are retained from African American cultures, the way that these codes are assimilated and developed in metal ultimately distances them from earlier ethnic significations, and they acquire new meaning in a predominately white genre.

Before excavating the history of headbanging, however, it is necessary to examine the components of motion and meaning that are a part of this practice in the present. While brief references to headbanging are ubiquitous in metal literature, few scholars describe the practice in detail. Perhaps the most concise direct definition is from Robert Walser, who wrote that “Headbanging is vigorous nodding to the beat of the music” (Walser 1993, p. 180). This brief definition, found in an endnote to the first chapter, over-generalizes what is actually a fairly complex phenomenon. In his recent dissertation on the aesthetics of doom metal, Jonathan Piper gives the most extensive treatment of headbanging available in English language scholarship. He contends that headbanging is much more than mere nodding: “the head does not simply pivot on the neck; the entire body undulates back and forth, up and down, to propel the head (and often long hair) through space in a spectacular display” (Piper 2013, pp. 59-60). Headbangers frequently stand with their legs apart and knees bent for balance,

and may lean forward for greater depth of movement, or even grab on to their knees or a nearby piece of furniture for support. Crucially, headbanging is an improvised dance: the movements are not choreographed ahead of time. Each musician and audience member decides spontaneously when and how to move during performance or listening, based on what they feel as the beat and what they think of as the most exciting moments of the song's form.

Although Piper is one of the only scholars to consider the physical motions of headbanging at length, a number of authors have commented in passing on the meaning and purpose of the practice. Many of these authors mention that headbanging amplifies a listener's experience of rhythm. Glenn Pillsbury argues that the sound of thrash metal "assault[s] and affect[s] the bodies of the performers and audience, usually through some sort of headbanging or moshing" (Pillsbury 2006, p. 11). One of the main purposes of headbanging is to transform rhythmic energy in the music into felt bodily experience, which recalls the dynamics of African American dance traditions, as I will explore later. I will return to Pillsbury's conception of rhythm and movement in metal music after examining other components of headbanging's similarity to African American movement.

Headbanging also communicates a level of excitement and commitment to the music. Natalie Purcell notes that "While popular bands are playing, fans show their appreciation by 'getting into' the music in various ways" (Purcell 2003, p. 33), including headbanging. In this sense, headbanging serves several purposes. It communicates a listener's enthusiasm for the band performing, indicating that she chooses a specific moment of a particular song by a particular band to identify with and engage more physically, a kind of voting with the head. But headbanging does not just indicate a listener's preference – it communicates physical energy to the performers and to other audience members, encouraging and rewarding mutual physical investment. It also seems to be a coin of authenticity: only thrashers are real fans, and only a worthy band deserves a throng of headbanging celebrants. These social aspects to movement are just as important as the physical and musical in studying the history of headbanging.

The physical movements of headbanging bear a strong resemblance to accounts of African and African American dancing by Black Studies scholars. (It would be ungrateful of me not to mention here that Jasmine Johnson's class on Black Dance provided many of my sources and inspired much of my thinking on this subject.) Jacqui Malone's characterization of Africanist movement styles emphasizes bent knees and hips and angled back as central characteristics of African American dance, while the straight limbs and erect posture common in European ballet styles "epitomized rigidity and death" in Africanist styles (Malone 1996, p. 15). Her sources describe West African musicians who "respond to the music while playing by moving their bodies, especially the trunk and head, in response to the rhythms they are playing." These movements contrast with the relative lack of rhythm in movement used by musicians in the European classical tradition (Malone 1996, p. 16). She also mentions a tendency to "dance the song," in which the rhythms of a song are expressed through physical motion in parallel with the sung or performed sound, so that the visible body becomes a part of the rhythm of the music. (Malone 1996, p. 28). The visible movements of headbanging described earlier in this essay clearly have significant consonance with Malone's descriptions, and are more similar to African American practice than most other white American or European dance styles.

This line of descent can be traced out visually in video recordings of performances by early metal and rock musicians, forming a kind of pre-history of headbanging. As mentioned earlier, the members of Black Sabbath can be clearly seen headbanging in a live video of a 1970 concert in Paris. It is important to note, however, that Ozzy Osbourne especially is not just banging his head: he shakes it side to side, he leaps into the air, he stomps his feet madly, showing a lot more variance to his movement than the highly conventionalized headbanging of a number of more recent death metal bands. Specifically focusing on the head movement, however, I found a video of Blue Cheer playing

“Summertime Blues” a few years earlier in 1968, in which the drummer nods his head vigorously in time to the music, shaking his long hair. While some critics place Blue Cheer at a critical turning point in the road towards what would eventually become heavy metal (Walser 1993, p. 9 and Chapman et al. 2011), few fans would call Blue Cheer a metal band today—but the drummer’s movements have a clear resemblance to modern headbanging. Extending this exploration further, while Chuck Berry and Muddy Waters do not regularly nod in time in historic videos of their performances before 1968, members of their backing bands can be seen nodding along on some videos. The “invention” of headbanging at the dawn of heavy metal seems to be mostly just an exaggeration of this nodding, which was just one movement among a large repertoire used by musicians in blues and rock styles to communicate their wholehearted musical engagement. While Black Sabbath’s performance reflected a more diverse repertoire of movement, headbanging seems to have become more and more conventionalized as the metal genre developed.

Beneath the visual similarity of headbanging to earlier blues and rock movements lie more significant parallels. Malone also emphasizes the participatory nature of black music and dance performance (Malone 1996, p. 35). A large part of her extensive quotation of the ethnomusicologist Portia Maultsby is worth reproducing here:

“When performers demonstrate their knowledge of the black musical aesthetic, the responses of audiences can become so audible that they momentarily drown out the performer. The verbal responses of audiences are accompanied by hand-clapping; foot-stomping; head, shoulder, hand, and arm movement; and spontaneous dance.” (Maultsby 1990, p. 195)

Headbanging has clear similarities to the kind of spontaneous audience participation Maultsby describes. Both practices use spontaneous physical movement to indicate appreciation of a performer who engages impressively with a set of cultural expectations. This appreciation feeds energy back into the performance, and simultaneously serves to confirm or perform the cultural identity of the person who participates through this movement. In this way, the social construction of headbanging as a participatory practice follows directly from precedents in black music cultures.

Headbanging also seems to inherit some of the aesthetic qualities of black dance observed by several scholars. Thomas DeFrantz (2004) gives an admirably concise gloss of some key terms introduced by Brenda Dixon Gottschild:

“embracing the conflict ('a precept of contrariety, or an encounter of opposites'); high-affect juxtaposition ('mood, attitude, or movement breaks that omit ... transitions and connective links'); ephebism ('power, vitality, flexibility, drive, and attack ... that recognizes feeling as sensation, rather than emotion'); and the aesthetic of the cool ('an attitude ... that combines composure with vitality') (Gotschild, 1996: 13-16).”

The ephebism of black dance is clearly reflected in the extreme energy of some headbanging movement. Headbanging also appears to embody high-affect juxtaposition with its sudden transitions: at the beginning of a breakdown, a group of hundreds of relatively still people can suddenly begin headbanging furiously. The aesthetic of cool transfers more problematically: the most extreme headbanging loses all semblance of control, becoming a frantic and wild act. On the other hand, some bands coordinate their headbanging impressively, showing a control that seems much more like the spirit of “coolness” described by black dance scholars. Not only is there a notable physical similarity between headbanging and African American dance styles, but these practices are shaped by strikingly similar social rules and aesthetic values.

Headbanging isn't the only connection between metal music and earlier African American music. Musicologists have already traced some important musical systems in metal have already been traced back to African American rhythm and blues. The pentatonic scale, and its extension with blue notes, is

widely associated with African American musical genres, and the system of modal scales that appears in many metal songs was previously used extensively in jazz and early rock (Moore 2001 and Lilja 2009). These scales are common in riffs from all subgenres of metal music, and are especially prominent in many guitar solos. The riff-based structure of metal music can also be traced back to the repeating motives used in many blues songs, and later in rhythm & blues and rock. (Cope 2010, p. 11, and Fast 2001, p. 116) The backbeat drum pattern used frequently in heavy metal is also prominent in these same earlier genres. In addition to these structural components inherited from blues and rock, many authors describe the vocal styles used in heavy metal as influenced by Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and other African American blues singers (Walser 1993, p. 9).

One of metal's most significant debts to earlier African American music styles, that of rhythm, has not been acknowledged as consistently. Jeff Pressing theorizes Black Atlantic Rhythm as centered around groove, a regular rhythmic process which allows for prediction and which engenders physical movement (Pressing 2002). Piper convincingly argues that although groove is “absent from the metal literature” (Piper 2013, p. 53), it provides tools that are important in discussing the physical engagement listeners make with the genre, and it creates new ways to understand concepts like “heaviness” that appear over and over again in metal literature (see Piper 2013, pp. 53-65 for an excellent and thoughtful discussion of groove in metal music). But in addition to his discussion of groove, Pressing examines “perceptual rivalries,” single spans of music in which “two interpretations that are in contradiction are maintained, creating an anomalous, energizing percept that can be clarified by reasoning, but not banished” (Pressing 2002, p. 298). Pressing presents a repertoire of perceptual rivalry techniques which are common in Black Atlantic music styles, including syncopation, overlay, polyrhythm, swing, and several others. Pressing argues that these “characteristic rhythmic devices achieve their effects in relation to [the groove]” (Pressing 2002, p. 308), and that they are crucial to the music's effectiveness in engaging listeners.

The combination of regular groove and perceptual rivalry techniques can be found in many styles of metal music. Figure 1 below shows a collection of examples from metal representing almost all of Pressing's techniques, each of which can be found in countless other songs as well (the only rhythmic techniques Pressing mentions which I have not found to be common in most styles of metal music are speech-based rhythms and hocketing). It is important to note that the use of perceptual rivalries varies significantly between styles; for example, black metal tends to use very little syncopation, overlay, or swing. But these techniques are used frequently in most metal styles, and usually in combination with a regular groove pattern. This fact, considered in light of the standard historical narrative which describes metal growing out of blues and rock, indicates that the rhythmic vocabulary of metal music today still reflects its black American origins.

One of the most significant features of black American music culture that survives in metal music is something I mentioned earlier and promised to return to: an important function of headbanging is as a way of feeling the beat. This facet of headbanging practice unites my investigations into the roots of rhythm in Black Atlantic Music and the roots of headbanging in Black Dance. Rhythm patterns, dancing, and perception of groove do not work in isolation, but together form a culture of ways of making and hearing heavy metal. Pressing, in his article about Black Atlantic Rhythm, argues that “Groove or feel forms a kinetic framework for reliable prediction of events and time pattern communication, and its power is cemented by repetition and engendered movement” (Pressing 2002, p. 308). Piper clarifies that although headbanging is part of a such a kinetic framework, it is by no means merely marking the tempo.

"If the drums go into a half-time feel, so do heads. If the last 4/4 measure in a four-bar phrase is accented in a 3+3+2 feel, the banging of heads will change to match it. Headbanging is not simply an

automatic motoric response to meter that is initiated like a metronome. It is a sensitive and reactive embodied response to musical feel, reflecting both that headbanging is more than simple nodding, and that metal relies on potentially shifting temporal experiences beyond basic meter." (Piper 2013, p. 60) Although he does not mention it, Piper's observation reveals substantial parallels with descriptions of African American dance expressing rhythm through motion. Along with the social codes and aesthetic values I examined earlier, the fact that headbanging functions as a kinetic framework is a strong argument that the generic expectations that shape headbanging originate with earlier African American practice.

Figure 1:

The figure displays six musical staves, each illustrating a different rhythmic technique in metal music. The first staff, titled "Syncopation: Diamond Head 'It's Electric'", shows a series of eighth notes with accents on the off-beats. The second staff, "Displacement: Meshuggah 'Demiurge'", features a complex, irregular rhythm with a note explicitly marked as being displaced from its previous phrase's metric location by two sixteenth notes. The third staff, "Overlay: Metallica 'Master of Puppets'", shows two different rhythmic patterns overlaid on the same staff. The fourth staff, "Polyrhythm: Opeth 'The Grand Conjunction'", illustrates multiple rhythmic patterns occurring simultaneously. The fifth staff, "Off-Beat Accents: Sweet Savage 'Eye of the Storm'", shows a steady eighth-note pattern with accents placed on the off-beats. The sixth staff, "Swing: Tygers of Pan Tang 'Killers'", features a swing feel with triplet eighth notes.

Perceptual Rivalries in Metal Music

Headbanging also serves as a way to feel larger structures in time, not just local perturbations in

rhythmic feel. Pillsbury introduces the concept of “cycles of energy” as an organizing element in metal songs that renders the form of the song in the body of the listener. Varying rhythmic feel, and especially changes in rhythmic intensity between sections of a song, can “focus power and intensity into bodily experience in thrash songs” (Pillsbury 2006, p. 11). A more intense “mosh section” engenders more intense movement, and Pillsbury argues that these mosh sections frequently represent the apex of energy in a cycle of sections with graduated intensities. While a headbanging listener is free to choose where he places his head, Pillsbury argues that this choice is modulated or guided by the rhythmic energy of the sound. These observations, combined with the quotes from Piper in the paragraph before, show that the tendency to “dance the song” mentioned by Malone and other black dance scholars does not merely survive in metal music. This expectation forms the basis for song composition, structures listeners’ perception of song form, and provides the foundational guidelines for their somatic experiences. In other words, headbanging as a way of feeling rhythm is a key determinant at all levels of metal music practice, including the creation of songs, the music’s performance, and its physical and cognitive reception by listeners.

The rhythmic patterns of metal music, the physical movement patterns of headbanging, and the generic expectations surrounding groove and physical engagement in metal all have clear antecedents in African American culture. But these components cannot be studied separately. The kinetic framework of groove in metal music inextricably integrates dance movement and musical rhythm; the rhythms of metal are not groove without embodied feeling such as headbanging movement, and the headbanging movements of metal are inappropriately out of place when metal rhythms are not being heard. These components form a rhythm culture in which dance, sound, and social codes each are fundamental in the others’ construction and basic functions. This rhythm culture is not tied to earlier metal’s explicit references to rock, blues, and other black musical idioms, but has persisted as a central and defining element in metal culture even when bluesiness and grooviness have been largely removed from the stylistic vocabulary, as in the black metal and folk metal subgenres.

However, there are some significant differences between headbanging and African American dance practices. Scholars of Black Dance frequently highlight the polyrhythmic nature of that dance tradition, and while some rhythmically dissonant movement can be observed in live concert video of songs such as “The Grand Conjunction” by Opeth, metal fans most frequently shake their heads in unison. (When two metal fans do not headbang together, it is usually a hierarchical difference, not a polyrhythmic one: one fan shakes her head at twice the frequency of her neighbor.) More significantly, many scholars stress the importance of originality and change in Africanist dance. Malone mentions that black social dancers avoid repeating sequences of movements, especially if those movements have been danced before by another (Malone 1996, p. 35). Headbanging consists of ceaseless repetition of the same movement, which fans and musicians synchronize and repeat in unison, even at a large concert. Audience members at live events frequently mimic the motions of musicians onstage, whether headbanging, clapping, or pumping their fists in the air, and musicians can be seen directing and encouraging these movements at many concerts. Perhaps these differences were what Robert Walser was referring to when he said that “Metal’s relatively rigid sense of the body...reflect[s] European-American transformation of African American musical materials and cultural values” (Walser 1993, p. 17). Although headbanging seems to have been inspired by the performances of black rock and blues artists, the form it has ultimately taken within metal culture in some ways seems at odds with these earlier black dance traditions.

Myths surrounding the origins of headbanging in metal are intertwined with the genesis of the genre itself. While few scholars have attempted to identify the first headbangers, a quick glance around Wikipedia and other online fan-authored sources suggests several popular candidates (Headbanging

2014). One story describes Led Zeppelin fans literally banging their heads on the front of the stage during a live performance. Lemmy of the British metal band Motorhead seems to have endorsed the idea that the etymology of the word “headbanger” is related to the name of his band. Ian Gillian of Deep Purple admitted the possibility that he had invented headbanging as well. Indisputably, members of Black Sabbath can be clearly seen headbanging in video of a live concert in Paris in 1970. All four of these bands played important roles in the early evolution of metal music, but Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath in particular have frequently been singled out as progenitors of the genre. (Notably, Andrew Cope has argued that Black Sabbath established the musical standards followed by most later bands, and that Led Zeppelin is not a metal band. See Cope 2010, pp. 43&ff.) But regardless of which band is conferred this special status in hindsight, it is significant that these narratives attribute the invention of headbanging to the creators of the metal genre. This positions headbanging as something special and unique which separates metal from earlier music, but as I've argued, headbanging was a progressive exaggeration of earlier movements, and there is not a single moment of invention.

Is headbanging an Africanist dance? Does headbanging reference blackness? Ronald Radano, in his 2003 monograph *Lying Up A Nation*, warns against the danger of origin narratives when discussing music and race. Music genres historically associated with African Americans -- for example, hip hop or blues -- are not necessarily black because of the origins of the musical techniques those genres use, or because of any inherently African mode of expression. Instead, black music is a socially-constructed category which is shaped by ideologies and mythologies of race, and which changes over time. In Radano's words, “The relational nature of difference has meant that the musical categories of black and white would never remain stable. On the contrary, difference fluctuates wildly as a never-ending loop of text and sound” (Radano 2003, p. 12). While headbanging, and metal music more generally, clearly inherits ways of moving the body and ways of making sound from earlier eras of African American culture, these generic elements are by no means permanently adjoined to African or African American ethnicity. Given the number of bands playing metal blended with European folk music or with lyrics grounded in European pagan or folk identity, it seems that the many formerly Africanist elements still present in heavy metal are no longer explicit references to blackness.

The fact that headbanging is deeply influenced by African American movement practice has some significant consequences for metal music today, despite the disconnection of references to blackness. Some scholars, such as Cope 2010, characterize metal music as progressively moving away from its blues roots, especially in the extreme metal subgenres. In Cope's historical narrative, the blues musical syntax common in earlier metal music is progressively pared away in favor of angular dissonances, extreme speed, and angry performance. Significantly, however, the generic expectations surrounding headbanging, which I have demonstrated have roots in African American culture just like blues stylizations, are just as strong if not stronger in extreme metal genres. Headbanging, and possibly vocal technique and other important components of the metal genre, does not develop away from the blues as much as it fetishizes and ritualizes certain aspects of African American music culture. A historical narrative reflecting these understandings may focus less on increasing distance from blues, and more on the way that aspects of earlier African American culture have been transformed into (mostly white) metal culture.

Our ways of making and hearing heavy metal are still fundamentally rooted in headbanging and other legacies of African American culture, however much these legacies have been distorted, transformed, or disconnected from their previous referential meanings. In this study I have focused on movement and rhythm, but inevitably this way of considering the blackness imbued in the history of metal practices can transform all areas of metal studies. The cultural values and generic expectations surrounding authenticity, outsider status, topics of darkness and evil, violence and deviance in song

lyrics, vocal techniques, and stage costuming in metal are all informed by earlier blues and rock. The often forgotten racial history of these earlier genres shaped the earliest formations of the metal genre, and the legacies of this racial history continue to be at the core of metal culture today.

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