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REVIEW

JAN-PETER HERBST (ED.) (2023). **THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO METAL MUSIC.**

by *Elena Bös*

With its singular aesthetic codes and community discourse, metal is a fascinating music culture that provides manifold opportunities for research. Indeed, metal music studies has become a field that attracts more and more scholars, established and new alike, and has been institutionalized over the past decade through the International Society for Metal Music Studies (ISMMS) with regular conferences as well as a journal. Reflecting this trend towards institutionalization, the *Cambridge Companion to Metal Music* has now been published, which aims ambitiously to be »a textbook for new generations of scholars« (4). The compendium comprises 25 contributions divided into six thematic sections by authors from various academic fields such as musicology, history, cultural studies, sociology, and psychology. Each part is preceded by short »personal takes« written not by scholars but by practitioners from the metal scene. Unfortunately, these takes are not further contextualized or commented on. Nonetheless, they provide highly interesting insider views beneficial to complementing the academic endeavors discussed in the articles.

In the introduction, editor Jan-Peter Herbst delineates the intention to reflect the thematic diversity and multidisciplinary approaches existing within metal music studies. The second introductory text by Andrew L. Cope provides an overview of the sonic evolution of heavy metal over five dec-

ades, stressing the diversification that characterizes today's sonic range of metal.

Part one features four contributions on ›Metal, Technology and Practice‹. The editor and Mark Mynett outline a historical overview of the evolution of ›Heaviness‹ as a marker of metal music. Similarly, Niall Thomas focuses on aspects of music production, specifically on how technology has influenced the recording practices of metal music, with ›extremity and precision, impact and energy‹ (53) being described as the main ideals. To readers familiar with the scene, these findings will not be particularly surprising or new—however, they provide a decent introduction to the topic. By contrast, the third contribution by Hale Fulya Çelikel, who is not only a metal musician but a researcher as well, deploys an innovative methodological approach to exploring a ›Metanarrative of being in a Metal Band‹ (57) through practice-led research. Her emphasis on the Turkish context and gendered experiences, combined with autoethnographic research, works to shift the focus away from conventional musicological analyses. Duncan Williams' fourth contribution on ›Timbral Metrics for the Analysis of Metal Production‹ (70) is helpful for all analyses of metal music as well as for non-musicologists. He proposes a definition of sound experience through timbre as a psycho-acoustic feature and imagines a possible future ›technology that might apply acoustic measurement of specific features to describe the timbral attributes‹ (75).

Historical narratives as frequent tropes deployed in metal lyrics and aesthetics are discussed in part two. First, Peter Pichler emphasizes the importance of history for narratives in metal due to the ›politics of history, of which value-oriented historical storytelling is a fundamental part‹ (87), and postulates that ›we can possibly learn from the past through metal music‹ (88). In his case study of Mesopotamian metal, he concludes that the ›construction of the past takes the form of a culturally ›hybrid‹ method of historical storytelling‹ (91), in which an ›ethical standpoint‹ is taken; ›sometimes even ... answers to crucial problems in the world‹ can be provided (96). At the same time, Pichler addresses more exclusivist narratives that can stem from this kind of historical storytelling. Jeremy Swist finds that metal ›repurposes and recreates antiquity in its own image and in line with its own spirituality‹ (103). Especially the legends of Sparta and their heroic narratives have recently been adapted in manifold ways, sometimes veering into critical territory when it is misused by right-wing bands. Conversely, Viking metal has been a much-discussed subject of contention because of its occasional amalgamation with right-wing extremist discourse. Imke von Helden inquires whether Viking metal is obsessed with the past and touches upon the prob-

lem of association with right-wing extremism in terms of narrative and symbolism. She provides an overview of both her qualitative analyses of sonic, visual and lyric elements of Norwegian Norse-themed bands and secondary literature, stressing the different ways and diversity in metal bands' use of Viking references, and invites further research, especially on fan perceptions of this music.

Subsequently, part three of the volume continues to examine the political in metal music with discussions about identity-related questions. The introductory personal take is by Jasmine Shadrack, who is a metal singer as well as a researcher, who applies an autoethnographic approach. She pointedly summarizes the problem of the inner-scenic dominant discourse of being un-political: Positioning herself as a feminist, she denounces »problems with race, class and gender« within the metal community that, despite its mentality opposed to the mainstream, constitute an »extension of the dominant discourse« (128). Contrasting this critical view somewhat, the article based on interviews with scene members by Paula Rowe finds that metal can provide »protective factors for mental health and well-being« (141) in the process of personal identity-making, and that metal »scenes and communities clearly provide numerous opportunities to road-test ideas and acquire skills and confidence that underpin well-being under the tutelage of good metal mentorship« (141).

Revisiting the criticism uttered by Jasmine Shadrack, Rosemary Lucy Hill concludes that women in metal face manifold experiences and challenges: While the music scene may offer opportunities for empowerment that can serve as a »Vehicle for Feminist Fury« (151), misogyny and the exclusion of women from making (metal) music still remain. These structural problems, according to Hill, are maintained by a »Myth of Equality« which »serves to reassure metalheads that they are already on the right team and that they do not have to do anything to challenge misogyny, racism, homophobia, etc.«, with such »kind of magical thinking hinder[ing] feminist and anti-racist work« (147). Her contribution is a resonating call to work towards a more aware metal culture. Referring to the ambivalence of metal discourses, Catherine Hoad identifies three ideological positions within the notion of ›transgression‹ that are important for metal, namely »conservatism, progressivism and apolitical individualistic misanthropy« (157). She touches upon the ever-relevant question »of whether a musician's personal actions can be separated from their music« (165), ultimately finding that metal »both reinforces and ameliorates power in its production of transgression« (165). Her conclusion remains ambivalent, as transgression in metal can take problematic forms, e. g. when bands deploy National Socialist imagery for the sake

of provocation. Yet, transgression might also be empowering given its spirit of resistance against the status quo.

The fourth part more loosely combines three articles under the broad umbrella term »Metal Activities«. Karl Spracklen defines metal as »Leisure Space« (175) by looking at the case study of a metal cruise in the theoretical context of the culture industry (as developed by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer) and hegemonic power (as coined by Antonio Gramsci). Denoting metal as a »communicative leisure choice« (178), he controversially argues that metal's »uncompromising riffs and unfashionable themes still make it more likely to be a space for resistance rather than a way for the entertainment industry to maximise profits« (185). In his paper »Dance Practices in Metal« (187) Daniel Suer rather considers »existent obstacles to participation« (188). His examination of moshing as a »regulated practice that enables experiences of communal bonding and individual identity work« (189) is nuanced: While moshpits provide the potential to transcend gendered boundaries, there is a danger of sexual transgression and even abuse. Suer furthermore counters an »essentialist notion of ›what metal is‹« (195) in metal research. Not least he also calls for the profound investigation of dance practices in the Global South instead of just »a simple extrapolation of ... findings« to avoid a »hegemonic overgeneralization« (195). This means a great impetus for further research on »dance in metal as a heterogeneous, complex and culturally situated practice« (198), too. Veering into the vestimentary sphere, Thomas Cardwell, who is both an artist and a researcher, incorporates photos of watercolor paintings of battle jackets into his chapter. Through his method of interviewing wearers of battle jackets on the personal meaning this garment holds for them, he delineates its origins in the military as well as in the biker counterculture and identifies them as a »globally observed marker of metal fandom« (208) today. The battle jacket thus functions as a »document of lived experience« and a kind of »externalised autobiography« (209) by adhering sometimes more, sometimes less to certain rules of authenticity in an »interface of the personal and the communal« (213).

Circling back to the musicological investigations at the beginning of the book, part five examines »Modern Metal Genres«. Ross Hagen reconstructs the development of Norwegian black metal and its adaptation by contemporary Cascadian bands (from Western North America). He finds a continuity of certain genre markers such as an »emphasis on local culture has an undercurrent of chauvinistic xenophobia, but it can also signal resistance to commercial and political forces of globalisation or support for indigenous communities« (225). Lewis F. Kennedy examines »Subgenre Qualifiers«

through the case study of technical Death metal. He sheds light on seemingly random discussions within the community about the allocation of certain bands to specific, increasingly obscure sub-sub-genres. He argues that technical death metal »has become a term both descriptive and prescriptive« (242); e. g. in some cases, bands positively appropriate that label in contrast to the often-ascribed derogatory meaning that can produce »a prescribed creativity« (247). With a similar focus on the subgenre, Owen Coggins shows how »marginal subgenres can affect how the broader genre and its cultural status and value are perceived beyond metal« (252). His case study on the reception of drone metal in the music magazine *The Wire* depicts that initially, in a process of »inverse Othering« (257 f.) metal is rejected as implicitly white, working-class, and stupid. Over time, in a »metaphor of alchemical transmutation« (261), through the appreciation of drone metal »the precious value of metal finally dawned on learned gatekeepers of the experimental avant-garde« (ibid.).

The last two articles of this section explore the inner-scene reception of new genres and touch upon discussions of »trueness«. Mark Merrington presents Djent as a genre that evolved in the late 2000s. Its reception polarized the metal community and reflected post-digital aesthetics. Eric Smialek's final section chapter discusses metalcore subgenres as »Abject Genres«. With a broad understanding of discrimination, he states that »serious forms of discrimination continue to affect the global metal scene, and the ways that abject genres are denigrated within fan discourses is one useful window into those often subtle prejudices« (285). In his combination of musicological analysis of musical features of the sub-genres with considerations of social and discursive reception, he provides an exemplary feat of interdisciplinary research.

The last part of the companion is dedicated to »Global Metal«, an already much-discussed research subject in previous publications. The political topicality of metal is highlighted by the fourth personal take, a statement by the music journalist Malcolm Dome (*Kerrang!*) about how today »controversy is seen as a boost for magazine sales and a way of ramping up the clicks on social media« (301). His is a perspective which does not take into consideration the actual problems of structural sexism within the rock/metal scene, but it is certainly an interesting reflection of an insider's view of this particular scene. Pierre Hecker's highly commendable chapter on metal in the Middle East contributes to methodological and theoretical debates on how to approach the topic of metal in non-Western contexts by scholars situated in the Global North. By providing a transparent positioning, he calls for more self-reflexivity to counter orientalist notions often pervading the

discussion of metal in the Global South. He concludes that »The whole debate on Westernisation fails to recognise that metal and other forms of popular culture are not just passively ›copied‹; they are renegotiated, re-shaped, ›authenticised‹, and thus integrated into local and individual identities« (316).

The following two articles would have benefited from adopting this analytical lens informed by post-colonial thought. In his portrayal of Asian metal, Jeremy Wallach presents »four necessary steps« for the integration of the genre in non-English countries (321 f.). Similar to modernization theory, this view remains quite Eurocentric, particularly when stating that »much of Asian heavy metal's aesthetic potency in the West derives from its capacity to overcome [o]rientalist expectations« (324). The chapter by Edward Branchs approaches the continent of Africa as the »last frontier« of metal (330). His field-work on metal bands from across the African continent is highly interesting and the appeal towards the Global North to pay more attention to African metal is certainly valid. However, Branchs' concluding view that African metal needed a »necessary validation from Westerners« (340) seems puzzling.

Refreshingly, Nelson Varas-Díaz and Daniel Nevárez Araújo provide a de-colonial proposal of thought by calling for an »ethics of affront« in their analysis, which is based on three principles: »Acknowledging the humanity of those oppressed by coloniality« (348); »Acknowledging the reality of the socio-political context« (349); and »Fostering activist action as a task for metal music« (351). In their view, the field of metal music studies should focus on »understanding how people in Latin America, and the Global South in general, use extreme forms of music to learn about their context and gather a deeper understanding of the social and political forces that sustain oppressive practices« (353). Lastly, Samuel Vallen presents selected examples of Australian metal bands as »pioneers and provocateurs« (357), who negotiated the spatial distance regarding the global metal scene in differing ways.

Overall, the volume manages to fulfil its promise of »providing a broader scope and an overview of metal music studies« (3). Readers will gain a sense of the diversity within metal as a distinct music culture, but also of the broad range of disciplinary approaches and perspectives in metal research. Contributions mostly provide a sound recapitulation of established theories within the field, and, along with the annexed bibliography, which encompasses most of the important recent secondary literature, invite further reading. A rather unfortunately accurate reflection of the current state of the art in terms of published visibility remains the under-representation of

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female voices as well as research from the Global South. In some instances, the tone of the contributions remains quite defensive, reflecting the early days of burgeoning metal studies, which had to counter the ›academic‹ vilification of metal that stemmed directly from the ›moral panics‹. However, the volume demonstrates the nuanced and constructively critical thinking prevalent in this academic niche, which makes it an essential reading both for established as well as new metal studies scholars and will hopefully inspire more innovative research.

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