Honors Thesis Proposal
for
Bastard Offspring: Heavy Metal, Metal-core and Hardcore Punk

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In the late 1960s and early 1970s rock and roll, or what was then considered hard rock began to experience profound shifts in sound and style. Bands like Led Zeppelin, Blue Cheer, Cream, and Grand Funk Railroad created an atmosphere and sound that would eventually give birth to a new genre, heavy metal. Many scholars debate the first use of the term "heavy metal" to describe a definitive musical style, as well as when exactly this style began and which band to consider the first "real" heavy metal group. Most however, understand that it was an evolutionary process that culminated with bands such as Black Sabbath, Deep Purple, Blue Öyster Cult and Budgie. The heavy metal sound, defined by bands such as Black Sabbath, Judas Priest, Iron Maiden and Motörhead, consists of loud, distorted guitars, driving beats and an overall dark, dangerous atmosphere. That atmosphere is created by use of minor scales, most notably the minor pentatonic or blues scale, focusing on the tri-tone. The term heavy metal however has come to denote a particular style and sound, one of earlier acts predating a revolution that happened during the early 1980s. Simply the term "metal" is used to indicate the genre and will be used throughout this paper when not referring to heavy metal as a historical entity.

Hardcore punk possesses similar aesthetics to heavy metal, but in varying degrees. Bands that started the hardcore punk style are acts like the Ramones, Sham 69, and The Germs. Soon after an onslaught of other bands fueled by angry youth would create a coherent genre, including Bad Brains, Minor Threat, Black Flag and Vicious Circle. Like heavy metal the guitars in hardcore punk are loud, grinding and distorted. Speed is the most noticeable indicator, hardcore punk having introduced short, wall-of-noise like songs, consisting of simple pounding rhythms and an absence of melodic hooks. Hardcore punk, unlike heavy metal, places no emphasis on technical ability, and for the most part avoids any virtuosity at all except for the ability to bang out three successive chords on a guitar with blistering speed. Simply the term "hardcore" will be
used when discussing the bands that continued on with the hardcore punk style and aesthetic after the decline of the original scene. For the purposes of this paper the term “hardcore punk” will be used to identify the constituents of the original movement in the United States during the early to mid-1980s. Likewise, the term “punk” will be used to identify the precursors of hardcore punk such as the Sex Pistols and The Clash.

In the early 1980’s hardcore punk and heavy metal combined to create what is commonly referred to as thrash metal, featuring bands such as Metallica, Slayer, Anthrax and Megadeth, all precursors of and integral to modern metal. Without the exchange of aesthetics initially shared by punk and heavy metal there would not be the multitude of styles and sub-genres that exist today. Despite the earlier syncretic relationship between heavy metal and hardcore punk there is currently considerable distinction between the two. Metal-core, an increasingly popular, yet disenfranchised genre, falls in the middle of a spectrum with metal at one end and hardcore the other. This style of music, which upon inception was equally informed by hardcore and metal, exhibits its own unique culture, an amalgamation of the two and yet disparate from the original hardcore and heavy metal scenes. Metal-core receives little or no acceptance from the metal community, and only partial if any recognition from the hardcore scene. Metal-core however is experiencing increasing popularity within mainstream culture, despite combining influences from two distinct underground counter-cultures.

The most important differentiating aspect between these three genres is the music itself. Heavy metal began as an inflated version of hard rock, which itself was an advance along rock and roll’s evolutionary path. Metal’s genetic line followed essentially the same Darwinian processes throughout its early evolution. Heavy metal being faster, louder and “heavier” than hard rock, which in turn was “harder” than rock and roll. Heavy metal featured increased guitar
technique with precision and virtuosity, lyrics with darker more explicit content, along with an increase in tempo and complexity in the rhythm section. So, too, hardcore punk followed a similar familial evolutionary line. Descended from the originators in both English and American punk rock such as the Sex Pistols and the Ramones, hardcore went in the same direction as metal, faster, louder and angrier. The music overall ceased to be solely the realm of three-chord guitar lines sloppily played with an almost incoherent, sometimes non-existent rhythm section. Instead it grew faster, focusing its contents, built to showcase the angst and hate within the lyrics; songs sometimes barely lasting over a minute in length.

Central to the music and a defining characteristic of these three genres are the lyrics that accompany the sonic atmosphere. Punk has always been aligned with the political; it is in and of itself a social sounding box for the perceived ills of society and the banality of everyday life. An example of this is the Sex Pistols song *Anarchy in the U.K.* in which the singer identifies himself in the first-person as “the other,” as an “anti-christ” and “anarchist” countering with the very things he deplores about British society. Heavy metal on the other hand tends to follow the lyrical trends of hard rock and rock and roll, usually that of the fantastic, exemplifying the ‘sex, drugs and rock and roll’ lifestyle. However, heavy metal music as early as that of Black Sabbath’s did contain lyrics dealing with political issues, they usually centered around war and the destruction of mankind by similar means, but are displayed in muted, detached forms. Hardcore punk’s lyrics on the other hand presented a much more palpable, immediately political picture. In the case of hardcore bands the political views directly reflected the feelings of those in opposition to the many cultural, economic and political tenets of “Reaganomics.” And, while lyrics in metal music, notably that of thrash metal progenitors, reflected the early influence of hardcore punk on musical and lyrical content, showcasing controversial current events, they also
tend to reflect the general stance towards politics as heavy metal, taking a removed, critical yet less participatory stance than hardcore.

These three cultures consist of more than just music however; there are many facets involved in creating recognizable social interest groups. An important factor in the development of a metal, metal-core, or hardcore culture is the individual’s identification with and membership in one of these three groups. Identity within either metal or hardcore culture is dependent upon adherence to certain standards and possession of specialized information, such as knowledge of and familiarity with particular bands and current events within the scene. Part of that identity is outwardly evident in the fashions worn by members of these cultures, indicating to other members the degree of ones involvement within the community. Another determinant of cultural identification is the inclusive versus exclusive nature of the culture itself. Metal culture tends to be exclusive with acceptance dependent upon a participant’s willingness to conform to metal culture’s social norms and the ability to show adequate knowledge of and involvement in the community. Hardcore punk on the other hand tends towards an inclusive nature, creating a welcoming supportive community with little to no bias against the newly initiated versus long-time participants, based mostly on the ‘youth crew’ culture originating in New York City during the 1980s. Metal-core culture exhibits tendencies toward the exclusivity that defines the metal model, wherein the most knowledgeable and experienced participant receives a considerable degree of ‘sub-cultural capital,’1 (a term coined by Keith Kahn-Harris in his book Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge) however, it retains the inclusive nature of the hardcore ‘youth crew’ scene. Evidence of this can be seen in an interview statement by melodic death metal/death-core band member Trevor Strnd of Black Dahlia Murder,

1 Sub-cultural capital translates as possession of power, worth, or merit within the scene.
"Some bands that get labeled as metal-core are actually good, like Between the Buried and Me or The Red Chord...metal is what I grew up with, and then I learned about punk and hardcore. But a lot of our ethics, the way we carry ourselves, is more punk...I like that hardcore has a sense of community without the competition you see in metal." (Northwestern Chronicle, http://www.chron.org/tools/viewart.php?artid=1069)

Actions speak louder than words. Despite what participants may look like in terms of fashion, the actions and behavior at shows and in public gatherings are further evidence of which genre they align themselves with. For instance, thrash dancing has always been a feature at hardcore punk shows. This form of physical display involves throwing punches, kicking, sometimes in a karate-like fashion, throwing elbows and general disarray within a centralized "pit" area within the crowd. Participants are not looking for an all-out brawl so much as experiencing a display of emotional physical catharsis. This form of dancing associated with the hardcore scene evolved from what is called "pogo-ing," or a stiff upright jumping up and down with little sense of direction or personal space, usually in time with the music. However, as punk music evolved into the faster, more aggressive hardcore form pogo-ing gave way to the more aggressive thrash or slam dance. This is in stark contrast to the kind of pit commonly seen at metal shows, the "mosh" pit. A common feature at metal shows beginning in the early eighties, it is similar in nature to the violence and participation of hardcore thrash dancing, but without the dangerous emotional lashing out of fists, kicks and elbows. Mosh pits at metal shows today do not feature any sort of hitting or kicking, and to do so would be in breach of a sort of mosh pit social etiquette. Commonly shoving and running, usually in what is termed a "circle pit," so-called for the circular movement following the periphery of the pit itself, is the adhered to norm
at metal shows. Members who participate expect to be shoved, slammed into with the force of a football linebacker and possibly trampled. However, those who are in the pit experience a kind of collective effervescence², if someone falls down others are quick to help that person up; after all the actual purpose is not to permanently injure someone. At metal-core shows audience members are usually a mixed group of metal, hardcore and metal-core fans, depending on which band is performing. This can create a dangerous mix within the pit. Metal audiences adhere to the social codes silently set forth for moshing, while hardcore and metal-core audience members will unabashedly kick, punch, sometimes even do spinning cart-wheels and flying karate-kicks within the pit. Metal audience members do not expect to get sucker-punched and hardcore punks respond negatively to getting tackled from behind with the force of a Mack truck.

This paper will offer a cross-cultural examination between and among metal, metal-core and hardcore punk. To understand the perception of metal-core culture as a unique culture, both hardcore and metal will be examined historically, as well as through interviews with members of and participants in all three cultures. A qualitative approach as opposed to quantitative will be used to examine cultural features of all three. This approach is commonly referred to in anthropology as “participant observation.” A combination of personal observations, as well as formal and informal interviews with scene participants will be used to collect cultural perspectives.

Among the topics to be discussed are: identity within the culture; fashion; models of behavior and social interaction; ideology and political stances; and musical examples, including differences in lyrical content and adherence to genre musical standards. Other aspects to be

² Collective effervescence refers to the sense of shared energy experienced during group activities in which individuals coalesce into a unified mass. Often exhibited through an individual’s behavior in a group during riots, sporting events, raves and concerts.
examined are transculturation between the metal and hardcore scenes beginning in the early 1980s, as well as the role of mainstream acceptance in shaping the way metal-core has become the more accessible and popular culture amongst the three.

While much has been written on the ethnography, sociology and psychology of heavy metal and punk social interest groups there has been little or no academic study of the emerging popular culture of metal-core. My investigation of metal-core will offer a diverse, interesting look into how two different musical cultures can combine to create a decidedly different third genre that incorporates elements of both parent genres while creating a unique atmosphere all its own. It is essential to understand both heavy metal and hardcore punk in order to grasp exactly what is happening in this increasingly popular medium. Metal-core itself consists of a range of sub-genres and factions. The need for our popular culture to label and compartmentalize shapes the faces of these sub-cultures and creates distinct societies within a greater mass public. Without the sum of their parts, these musical sub-genres would be little more than footnotes in popular music, neither lasting as they have, nor defining entire decades of American culture. Metal-core picks up where thrash metal left off, embracing the spirit of hardcore while playing tribute to the gods of heavy metal.
Bibliography


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