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"This is Beyond Your Experience"

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“This is Beyond Your Experience”¹

The Parents’ Music Resource Center (PMRC) was created in 1985 by the wives of prominent figures who feared the effects modern music would have on their children. Led by Tipper Gore, wife of future vice president Al Gore, this organization aimed to “raise awareness among parents about the profane, violent, and sexually explicit lyrics of some popular music that reached...children and adolescents in the United States.”² Citing an increase in delinquent behavior, a higher rate of suicide among youths, and antisocial tendencies, groups of conservative parents banded together to keep their children away from “the devil’s” music.³ From 1985-1996, heavy metal came to the forefront as one of the genres that most concerned the group, especially as it gained popularity among the younger generations. Soon, this music became so controversial that many fought for its regulation, including the very vocal PMRC. They took a successful first step when they convinced producers to tag albums with “Parent Advisory” labels, warning families of their explicit content.⁴ Others directly sued artists for the deaths of their children, claiming that their music was what pushed them to commit suicide. While it is true that adolescents who particularly enjoy heavy metal are more inclined towards vandalism, self-esteem problems, and suicidal tendencies, there is no irrefutable evidence that these are a direct result of the music rather than deeper personal problems.⁵ Given the themes that metal tends to deal with, such as isolation and despair, it is more likely that these so-called “troubled youths” related to the lyrics and felt understood. Moreover, there are some studies that suggest that listening to metal music has a primarily cathartic effect rather than a predominantly

¹ Title from Marilyn Manson’s “The Reflecting God.”

² Bogt and Soitos, “Parents Music Resource Center,” 645.

³ Arnett, “Heavy Metal,” 574.

⁴ Bogt and Soitos, “Parents Music Resource Center,” 645.

⁵ Arnett, “Heavy Metal,” 573; Baker and Bor, “Can Music Preference,” 285.

negative one.⁶ Therefore, although there is a distinct relation between heavy metal and suicidal tendencies, the music seems to be a safe haven for adolescents who feel alone in their struggles, rather than an outside force advocating for their deaths.

The primary concern about youths' exposure to heavy metal is its association with teen suicides. The concern arose when the victims' parents filed lawsuits against various artists; the "ensuing press coverage ensured...a new moral panic" when the judges ruled in favor of the musicians.⁷ While there does not seem to be concrete evidence that heavy metal music has directly led to adolescent suicides, this fact did not stop the opposition from speaking out.⁸ One study done in 1998 by Steven Stack using the General Social Survey, which is conducted nationwide each year, did find a correlation between suicide acceptance and a lack of "religiosity." His results showed that there was a lower level of suicide approval in relation to higher church attendance, and church attendance appears to be the only variable that accounted for a significant difference in suicide acceptance.⁹ Stack also argued that an inclination towards religiosity fostered "hope based on a positive image of an afterlife" and that this belief in an afterlife was soothing.¹⁰ He is not the only one who has argued that heavy metal's negative influences on adolescents stem from a lack of religion. In an article for *The American Enterprise*, Suzy Ryan discussed the events surrounding her brother's suicide, agreeing with columnist William Raspberry that "youngsters who are so troubled 'must be lacking in religious faith – without a belief in anything that could take them outside themselves.'" Although Ryan

⁶ Arnett, "Adolescents and Heavy," 83.

⁷ Olson, "Suicide, Rock Music and Moral Panics."

⁸ Walser, "Professing Censorship," 72.

⁹ Stack, "Heavy Metal, Religiosity," 392.

¹⁰ Stack, 393.

acknowledges that her brother's death was his own decision, she still holds the belief that a stronger dedication to faith could have saved him.¹¹

In 1996, 15-year-old Richard Kuntz committed suicide. At an informational hearing with the United States' Senate subcommittee, Kuntz's father Raymond (hereby referred to as Kuntz) joined various qualified speakers to discuss music censorship and regulation, and to share the story of his son's death. Richard is only one of several reported suicides that families believe to be closely linked with the music that the victims listened to. In this case, it is believed that Richard killed himself while listening to Marilyn Manson's "The Reflecting God," the lyrics of which Kuntz called "an unequivocally direct inducement to take one's own life." Two of Richard's friends were treated for attempted suicide following his death, and Kuntz informed the subcommittee that they "are and were caught up in Marilyn Manson's fearful, frightening music" as well.¹² In her article "Unleashing the Savage Within," Suzy Ryan connects the suicide of her 18-year-old brother, Bart, to the music of bands like Bauhaus, KMFDM, and, again, Marilyn Manson. Ryan said that "certain forms [of music] can unleash the savage within us," and that "heavy metal, and grunge music brings out the dark side of susceptible youth."¹³ At the end of the article, she acknowledges the freedom children have to listen to whatever music they please, but says that she wants to give her own children "the best odds possible," which she believes comes by "securing them in a faith that assures there is a God who loves them."¹⁴

While the families involved in these tragedies deserve respect and sympathy, they share biased interpretations of the music to which the victims listened. While it is possible that they did

¹¹ Ryan, "Unleashing," 17.

¹² United States Senate, "Music Violence," 9.

¹³ Ryan, "Unleashing," 17.

¹⁴ Ibid.

in fact find similar meanings in the lyrics, it stands to reason that these relatives needed to search for someone or something to blame in the wake of an unexplainable and devastating event. Kuntz interprets Marilyn Manson's "The Reflecting God," for example, as definitively encouraging suicide, but, although the song certainly mentions death, the ideation of suicide in the grand scheme of the song is very slim. Kuntz's perception of the song is understandable when some lines are taken out of context, such as "There's no reason to live at all." But when listened to as a whole, the song comes across as a frustrated call for power, especially in the line "When I'm god everybody dies." In particular, the lines "No salvation, no forgiveness/This is beyond your experience," quoted by Kuntz at the hearing, sound like a cry for help and understanding, which is the general tone of the song as I interpret it. In any of these cases, listeners would need preexisting suicidal tendencies in order to kill themselves; hearing the song would not spark a desire just because the lyrics mention or allude to suicide. The problem with this causal argument is especially clear in the case of Richard's two friends, whom Kuntz said also attempted suicide following his death, which he blamed on them being "caught up" in Marilyn Manson's music as well.¹⁵ This explanation overlooks the fact that their friend had just committed suicide, which can be overwhelming for a person of any age.

Similarly, while I feel the deepest sympathy for Suzy Ryan, she acknowledges the role of other factors within her own article. She says that "Bart had been dogged by manic-depressive illness his whole life," and that he had become obsessed with death in his last six months, in addition to Satan and heavy metal.¹⁶ While it is impossible to rule out the idea that music played a role in Bart's suicide, it is clear that he had preexisting mental health issues that would have

¹⁵ United States Senate, "Music Violence," 9.

¹⁶ Ryan, "Unleashing," 17.

resulted in suicidal tendencies without the influence of music. The main flaw among these articles and studies from the 1990s is the overarching ignorance regarding mental health. Almost every study I reviewed overlooked depression as a factor in suicidality, and instead declared that the theme of hopelessness in heavy metal's lyrics puts fans at a greater risk of suicide. In fact, Steven Stack said that "metal fans tend to be disproportionately drawn from groups that are at above average risk of suicide: lower and working class persons, males, whites, and persons from broken homes."¹⁷ Almost every one of these factors is associated with a predisposition to depression, especially when the stigma against mental health in the '90s is taken into consideration.

Though there have not been many scholarly studies on the link between heavy metal and suicide, there is one article that proves to be a fruitful source of information. In 1991, there was a study done by Jeffrey Arnett at the University of Chicago that effectively dismantled the argument that heavy metal music definitively produces delinquent behavior. The results are compelling because they demonstrate the subjects' general emotional intelligence and that heavy metal music made a largely positive impact on them. The group studied consisted of 179 white males 14 to 20 years of age from the middle and upper-middle class; 52 of the subjects liked heavy metal and the control group of 123 did not.¹⁸ Forty-three percent of the participants said that they listen to heavy metal most often when they were angry, and 23% said that they listen to it all of the time.¹⁹ However, rather than increasing aggression as many adults seem to think, listening to heavy metal actually had a largely cathartic effect, according to the subjects, with 54% of the subjects saying that it calmed them in some way.²⁰ One of the interviewees said that

¹⁷ Stack, "Heavy Metal, Religiosity," 390.

¹⁸ Arnett, "Adolescents and Heavy Metal", 79-80.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

listening to heavy metal is a “vicarious release of aggression,” which he needed because “otherwise [he’d] lose control.”²¹ Only two of the participants said that it “induced greater aggression, rather than less,” and encouraged them to partake in activities such as vandalism.²² Although his sample size was small, Arnett interviewed a fairly average group of boys, some of whom were white males from broken homes, thus putting them at greater risk for suicide. However, this study found that heavy metal had more of a positive effect on their attitudes than a negative one, and that it “did not usually mean that they were scorned by other peer subgroups or viewed as social outcasts,” and generally their interpersonal relationships were in good condition.²³

In the same study, the group of boys were asked why they enjoyed certain bands, and “subjects most often cited the musical talent and skill of the performers.”²⁴ The participants also often said that they liked the songs for their lyrics.²⁵ Concerned families have said that their children are being influenced by the violence and inappropriate language of heavy metal, but most of the subjects said that they especially enjoyed songs that “exhibited social consciousness.”²⁶ The subjects voiced a particular appreciation for lyrics that deal with “ecology and the danger of destruction of the environment...child abuse and the threat of nuclear war,” injustice done to the Native Americans, and an opposition to drug use.²⁷ Of course, they also enjoyed the “heavy sound,” “brutal lyrics,” and fast-paced music, but their commentary on the lyrical content shows a level of social consciousness that is overlooked in other studies.²⁸ The

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 89.

²⁴ Ibid., 81.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

display of knowledge and interest in social issues from this sample demonstrates that not all heavy metal fans are isolated and hopeless, but that they appreciate content that raises awareness. Robert Walser acknowledged the importance of these topics in *The Journal of Popular Music Studies*, saying that, "...heavy metal confronts issues that cannot simply be dismissed or repressed, and...we must investigate the *meaningfulness* of images of horror, madness, and violence in heavy metal."²⁹

Although the demonstration of "delinquent" behavior was not entirely disproven in Arnett's study, he presents explanations that many adolescents can relate to. Thirty-one percent of the heavy metal fans that he interviewed "voiced strong hostility towards school:" four of them had dropped out of high school and many expressed a distaste for the "structure and regimentation of school," saying that they found it "difficult to take."³⁰ One subject said that he "didn't like sitting down all day" and would "rather be doing something active outdoors," while another described school as pointless and said that he would "rather learn from real life" and had "better things to do."³¹ These attitudes towards school have only worsened over time, but not because of students' laziness or disinterest. Education in the United States is becoming more and more routinized with every passing decade, and I believe that many students would be quick to agree that school is now about passing rather than actually learning, while colleges and universities are nothing like the "real lives" they claim to prepare us for. Those opposed to heavy metal seem to believe that fans are ignorant of the world outside of their subculture, but Arnett's study debunks this theory as well. Overall, the subjects showed an aversion to anything that would limit their personal freedoms, most often naming an opposition "to attempts to restrict

²⁹ Walser, "Professing Censorship," 73.

³⁰ Arnett, "Adolescents and Heavy Metal," 89.

³¹ Ibid.

legal access to abortion,” a stance that is considered progressive even today.³² Subjects also voiced “opposition to gun control, opposition to censorship, approval of legalizing marijuana, opposition to restriction on pornography, and...opposition to attempts by the PMRC to limit the availability of heavy metal.”³³ These positions, as seen in the subjects’ preference for socially conscious lyrics, again suggest that not all metal fans shut out the world, but rather engage with its politics and social restrictions.

According to Arnett, heavy metal fans do appear to lack religiosity, but this lack has a generation-specific explanation. Quantitative social scientist David Voas explained in a presentation that “generational replacement” is a process in which older, more religious generations die out and are replaced by the younger, less religious population. One of the graphs shown during his presentation illustrates a steady decline of people between 1910 and 1990 who, without a doubt, believe in the existence of God.³⁴ Nationwide, every passing generation becomes less and less religious, a progression that is entirely independent of musical preference.

Once again, Arnett does not disprove that fans lack religious devotion, but as Voas demonstrates, it is a trend that can be seen over generations. In Arnett’s study, 49% of the participants described themselves as Christian, 33% described themselves as agnostic or atheist, and only one participant called himself a Satanist. However, some of the self-described Christians “nevertheless expressed uncertainty or apathy with regard to their religious beliefs or practices,” and several said that they were looking into other faiths and belief systems.³⁵ One boy who showed an interest in Satanism and witchcraft said that he was “not going to give up [his]

³² Ibid., 90.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Voas, “Why There is No Way.”

³⁵ Arnett, “Adolescents and Heavy Metal Music,” 90.

faith” despite encouragement from his friends, but expressed interest in learning more about what Satanists do and said he is “keeping an open mind.”³⁶ As a whole, though, most of the subjects agreed that heavy metal’s advocacy of Satanism is merely a publicity stunt “not to be taken seriously,” but that it is “just a concept.”³⁷ In regards to the one participant who labeled himself a Satanist, he explained that “neither for him nor [the band King Diamond] was it something evil, something intended to do harm to others” and that he places a personal emphasis on making contact with the dead.³⁸

It is difficult to keep in mind that these articles were written during the early 1990s, because we continue to see great changes in the normalization of mental illness. As a depressive 18-year-old with suicidal tendencies, who is nonreligious and enjoys listening to heavy metal when the mood strikes, I can use my own experiences to vouch for the behaviors I have analyzed in this paper. I can see a connection between the young people of my generation and those of the 1990s, particularly in the lack of understanding expressed by adults. From my perspective, each generation seems to become more open-minded and more aware of the shortcomings of society, while older generations remain governed by the standards of their own time and, in many cases, lack the ability to understand what their children are experiencing. In the cases of suicide examined in this paper, I could see the evidence that mental health was heavily stigmatized during the early ‘90s, meaning that it would have been shameful to admit to feelings of depression and that these young people had no one to turn to. Even today, it is still considered weak for men in particular to show emotion, and it was not lost on me that all of the instances I found in my research of harm towards the self or others were perpetrated by boys. Nor is it

³⁶ Ibid., 91.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

surprising to find that male heavy metal fans demonstrated “less strong reasons for living.”³⁹

While there is clearly a link between heavy metal and a risk of suicide, it is not a direct result of the music. It is the one thing that every study overlooked or brushed aside: the preexisting presence of mental health problems and suicidal tendencies in heavy metal fans. Many artists in the genre deal with topics such as depression, isolation, and hopelessness, and it can be said without a doubt that such themes made these depressive teenagers feel understood. Suddenly, their problems were not unique to them – a broken family, indescribable hopelessness, loneliness; these songs proved that they were not alone. There is definitely a connection between heavy metal and suicidality, but it is simply because of its relatable content and the refuge it provides for troubled youths.

³⁹ Scheel and Westfield, “Heavy Metal,” 253.

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