

Liberalism, individualism and heavy metal

Andrew Kemp

“But the fact is unless you are a politician, shut up. What do they [musicians] know about politics? (With a southern accent) Oh well I’m gonna vote for a guy that gonna raise taxes on the fuckin’ rich. You stupid twat. You are in the upper income bracket in America, you are gonna get taxed. And when small business owners get taxed, jobs are lost.”
– Dave Mustaine, frontman of Megadeth, Heavy Metal spokesperson for sound taxation policy (apparently).

Heavy Metal is a curious music. Largely dismissed as nothing more than distorted drivel, it remains a black smudge on the grandiose landscape of musical culture. It is seen as immature by many, repulsive by a few, and just downright horrible by most. All of these judgements are in their own way correct. There is nothing creatively or musically remarkable about the genre—with one exception. In a time when popular music appears strongly aligned with the Left, Heavy Metal finds itself as a hotbed of classical liberals. Some things in life, it would seem, just don’t make sense.

Leftism in Popular Music

In 2004, then Presidential-aspirant Howard Dean graced the cover of popular music’s seminal journal, *Rolling Stone*. ‘The next few weeks will determine whether or not the year’s most extraordinary political story has legs’, began the article. ‘Unlike most politicians, who work hard to seem like

your best friend, Dean ... projects a refreshing quality of seeming not to really care if you like him.’ *Rolling Stone* was more accurate than it thought, and Dean bombed out of the presidential candidacy accordingly. Likewise, the Australian edition of *Rolling Stone* would interview Mark Latham and Peter Garrett during the last Federal election. *The Age* would write, ‘Opposition Leader Mark Latham’s appearance on the cover of this month’s *Rolling Stone* ... is another reminder that rock can be a powerful platform for politicians’. Latham would go on to lose the Federal election and quit politics altogether.

It is not that *Rolling Stone* has a remarkable ability in getting it wrong on almost everything—although this is definitely a point worth exploring on another day—but it is that a leftist culture seems to pervade the popular music establishment.

In 2004, three compilation albums were released, *Rock Against Bush*, Vols 1 & 2, and the Australian equivalent, *Rock Against Howard*. Both were equally as effective in the sense that they both equally failed. What was more significant, however, and somewhat disappointing, was the number of popular musicians who offered their services to the project. In the United States, anti-Bush sentiment would eventually culminate in a nation-wide tour, aptly titled ‘Vote For Change’.

Heavy Metal and Individualism

But while soft-rocker Bruce Springsteen and grunge-rockers Pearl Jam toured the nation trying to convince voters of their political righteousness, others chose to stay at home, unimpressed. ‘If you’re listening to a rock star in order to get your information on who to vote for, you’re a bigger moron than they are’, insists Alice Cooper. ‘Why are we rock stars? Because we’re morons. We sleep all day, we play music at night and very rarely do we sit around read-



ing the *Washington Journal*.’

Megadeth vocalist Dave Mustaine had similar sentiments: ‘The fact that people would vote based on who a celebrity endorses is just stupid. Don’t vote for Bush because I’m voting for him. Don’t vote for Kerry because you hate me’. Lars Ulrich, drummer of the most commercially successful Heavy Metal act ever, Metallica, would comment, ‘We’re one of the last remaining full-on bands. We don’t use the band as a vehicle for individual political statements’.

These honest, self-effacing statements are a surprising feature of the Heavy Metal genre. But this is not the whole story—this most unlikely of genres exhibits elements of individualist or liberal political thought.

Jeffrey Arnett’s *Metalheads: Heavy Metal Music and Adolescent Alienation*, is a study that attempts to discover the appeal of Heavy Metal music, particularly to teenagers. The results points to a strong correlation between Heavy Metal and individualism:

The belief system that underlies heavy metal songs has its roots in American individualism. In heavy metal songs, the right of the individual to do whatever he or she pleases is enshrined among the highest values. Self-fulfillment and self-expression are held high whereas self-restraint and

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self-denial are scorned as the values of the timid, the dull, and the humorless.

Ayn Rand would be proud of Arnett's conclusion. And there is ample evidence to support Arnett's claim.

In 1974, the world welcomed Rush, a Canadian progressive rock trio that would draw its inspiration from Ayn Rand's philosophy to produce an immense catalogue of songs that detailed the virtues of individualism and the evils of collectivization. The opening track from their sophomore effort *Fly By Night* is titled 'Anthem', obviously drawn from Rand's own novel, which contains the lyrics:

*Well, I know they've always told you
Selfishness was wrong
Yet it was for me, not you, I came to
write this song*

Rush would go on to become one of the most influential musical acts of their time, the most notable Heavy Metal band to cite their influence being Metallica. The theme of self-empowerment equipped with a 'Carpe Diem' mantra can be found in countless Heavy Metal songs.

Although individualism should be a prominent focus when looking at Heavy Metal, critics of the genre identified a much more sinister protagonist as the centre of lyrical discussion.

Milton to Maiden

In the Spring of 1985, the Parents' Music Resource Centre (PMRC) was formed with the intention of protecting America's youth from music that was deemed inappropriate and harmful. The PMRC would produce a list of 15 songs that promoted or glorified violence, sex, drugs and the devil. Heavy Metal featured prominently, and indeed, most songs from the list actually were offensive, albeit tunes that only a minority of listeners would hear (the market for extreme vulgarity isn't terribly large). Perhaps the most interesting inclusion was the Twisted Sister song 'We're Not Gonna Take It', a song more concerned about retaining individual liberty than



A compassionate conservative?

beating up your next door neighbour.

In response to the public perception that Heavy Metal was bringing violence and satanic glorification into the family home, a Christian Metal band emerged on the scene: Stryper. 'So many bands give the devil all the glory—it's hard to understand', sings Michael Sweet in the song 'From Wrong to Right'.

But does the devil get all the glory? John Milton received similar criticism for his portrayal of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. William Blake would famously write that Milton was 'of the Devil's party without knowing it'. Likewise, British rockers Iron Maiden would find themselves at the receiving end of attacks by several Christian groups, following their 1982 release *The Number of the Beast*. 'They obviously hadn't read the lyrics', says bassist Steve Harris. 'They just wanted to believe all that rubbish about us being Satanists.' Perhaps if the Christian pressure groups had continued to listen to the Maiden catalogue, they may have been surprised to find several songs supporting Christianity, such as fan favourites 'Sign of the Cross' and 'Judgement of Heaven'. For the literary folk, Iron Maiden's 14-minute epic 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', a rock version of the Coleridge poem, is equally as fascinating.

The influence of literature in Heavy Metal is perhaps another indicator of the values encompassed in the genre. Though not conservative in a political sense, many Heavy Metal artists appear

to be drawn towards topics that encourage fundamental Western values.

Individualism in niche genres

Individualist and liberal thought is not restricted to Heavy Metal, of course. Many niche genres, dismissed for their sonic or lyrical abrasiveness by popular media and culture, can feature artists who extol these values. Punk rock may be forever connected with the Sex Pistols 'Anarchy in the UK', or the Joy Division's neo-nazi motif, but much 'anarchism' in punk music is actually misinterpreted libertarianism.

The hardcore punk band Corporate Avenger advocate 'personal responsibility and compassion for others'. The title track from their album *Taxes are Stealing* contains the lyrics:

*The IRS was not there the other day
when I was unloading truck after
truck into that hot fucking ware-
house*

*The IRS was not there the other day
when I was pulling weeds in the
fucking hot sun*

*The IRS was not there when I need-
ed money to pay my bills, but they
sure as fuck were there on Friday to
take almost half my pay again and
again and again and again!*

Hardcore Punk bands can be offensive—a staple of the genre is the strength of their venom—but it would be a mistake to assume that they are always pushing hard-Left values upon their audience. The contribution of these bands to liberal or conservative political support does not deserve to be dismissed because of their niche appeal.

Similarly, in the elusive genre of Heavy Metal, the fundamental values of individualism, liberty and freedom are being promoted by the very groups that are slammed for defying such values.

As Noel Coward wrote, 'Strange how potent cheap music is'.

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