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AUSTRALIAN METAL MUSIC: IDENTITIES, SCENES, AND CULTURES

EDITED BY

CATHERINE HOAD



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Acknowledgments

Much as I had hoped for this collection to problematise stereotypical imaginings of Australia, it originated in possibly one of the most Australian ways possible: at the pub, on a hot summer afternoon in Sydney, over beers. When I mentioned to my friend that I hoped someone would put together a collection on Australian metal one day, she looked at me in exasperation, and said ‘Why don’t you just do it?’. And so here we are.

This collection has been a labour of love for nearly two years, but my often-troubled love of metal in Australia goes back even further. It was a constant source of frustration during my PhD that there was so little research on metal in Australia. As I found myself at gigs in Sydney, where flags were draped across speaker stacks, and bands alternated between crows of ‘how ya goin’?’ and pointed criticisms of Australian politics, I often wished more people were writing about this scene, and engaging with this music. For all their often challenging, narrow conceptions of Australian identity, I also found my formative years in Sydney’s more ‘metal’ spaces – the Manning Bar, the Bald Faced Stag, the Oxford Art Factory, the Factory Theatre, among others – to be some of the most important moments in my academic career, and more generally, some of the most liberatory, eardrum-endangering, instances in my life. Those experiences spurred on my drive to bring more interest to Australian metal, both in my research, and more often by forcing recommendations upon anyone who would listen. In many ways I think those scenes, bands, fans and venues deserve the most thanks here, for sustaining a metal scene in a country where it is not always easy to do so – and indeed a city such as Sydney, which is increasingly being starved of live music and communal leisure spaces by rigid legislation, gentrification and privatisation.

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Catherine
November 2018

Critical Introduction: What Is ‘Australian’ About Australian Heavy Metal?

Catherine Hoad

Abstract

This chapter serves as the introduction to the edited collection, calling into focus the diverse ways in which ‘Australia’ is asserted in the spaces, scenes and practices of Australian heavy metal. This chapter responds to earlier quandaries in the sparse research on Australian metal which question if there is anything definitively ‘Australian’ about the characteristics, themes and narratives demonstrated within Australian heavy metal scenes. In response to this challenge, the author uses this chapter to establish critical foundations for addressing how Australianness has been represented ‘Downunderground’ (Phillipov, 2008, p. 215) – historically, musically and geographically, as work in this collection affirms. This introduction foregrounds the concerns of the edited collection at large, which addresses how national identity has been imagined and constructed in ways which can at once celebrate problematic patriarchal nationalist symbolism, yet also call into focus the resistant and subversive ways in which metal scenes have deconstructed, critiqued and renegotiated the parameters of what it means to be ‘Australian’. This chapter asserts that any interrogation of the ‘Australianness’ of Australian metal must problematise the notion of a singularly ‘Australian’ identity in the first instance. Here the author argues that ‘Australian metal’ as a consolidated signifier must be problematised to instead come to an understanding of the multisited ways in which ‘Australianness’ is experienced within scenes. In doing so the author establishes the critical trajectories for the edited collection at large – to track the genealogies of Australian metal as a component in a wider global scene, and consider the plurality of its contemporary manifestations.

Keywords: Australia; heavy metal; national identity; hegemony; resistance; masculinity; Indigeneity

Introduction

Defining 'Australian metal' is a quandary which continues to represent a struggle for scene members and researchers alike. Australian metal has long been located in the interplay of local and global considerations; simultaneously isolated from yet tethered to international scenes. However, despite a wealth of music cultures and audiences within Australia, heavy metal music has struggled to find a foothold in the national imaginary. As such, while numerous metal scenes exist throughout the country, 'Australian metal' itself, as a style, as a sound, and as a signifier, is a term which cannot be easily defined. This is a central problem that this collection seeks to engage with, by considering the myriad ways in which 'Australianness' has been experienced, imagined and contested throughout historical periods, within particular subgenres, and across localised metal scenes. In doing so, the collection not only calls into account what can be meant by Australian metal, but also, what can be meant by 'Australian' more generally.

This collection canvases chapters from researchers and practitioners across Australia, each mapping the distinct ways in which Australian identity has been grappled with in the scenes, cultures and practices of heavy metal in the country. Such distinct ways, however, are not immediately conspicuous, and often deceptive. As such, in this collection authors address the quandary of whether there is 'anything particularly "Australian" about Australian metal' (Phillipov, 2008, p. 217). Research in this collection hence responds to previous scholarship which suggests that a 'genuine' Australian identity may not be permeable in ways other than tropes (Phillipov, 2008, p. 217); and furthermore whether there is such a thing as the genuinely Australian. In engaging with this theme, work in this collection shows that often it is precisely through reaffirming Australian identity through performative gestures to white hegemonic masculinity that Australian heavy metal scenes constitute themselves within a nationalist discourse. However, in acknowledging this white hegemonic masculinity as a dominant theme, other work in this collection actively critiques this understanding of 'Australianness' to demonstrate how women, people of colour and non-human environmental others are configured within, and actively respond to such mythologies, and furthermore how such depictions of national identity can be strategically toppled to reveal their underpinnings of xenophobia, intolerance and violence.

These tensions surrounding the definition of 'Australian metal' have thus in part contributed to the fact that it is a musical form which is overlooked in Australian music scholarship, as well as domestic arts policy and programming. Nonetheless, as this collection shows, Australian metal has a rich history and acts as an important mechanism of community formation within domestic settings, where scenes have coalesced around local identities in Australia's geographically disparate capital cities. Metal has provided a site for resistance by Indigenous communities, who have utilised metal's communicative frameworks to respond to ongoing colonial violence, and has also offered an outlet for marginalised communities to voice their perspectives and assert new dimensions for 'Australian' identities. In looking towards the global, metal has also acted as a key presence for Australian music in international arenas. Australian metal acts such as Parkway

Drive, 4Arm and Northlane have experienced comparatively greater success internationally than on domestic shores, where scenes are impeded by a lack of institutional support and little political interest aside from interventionist censorship. Heavy metal music is a viable cultural export for Australia, yet its absence from wider discussions of Australian arts media and funding continues to situate Australian metal fans, bands and research at the margins of the metallic mainstream.

This edited collection thus attempts to remediate this marginality as it is experienced both politically and academically. Much of Australia's musical identity has been built around the canonisation of masculine rock styles and spaces (e.g. [Breen, \[1999\]2007](#); [McFarlane, 1999](#)), where 'Oz rock' is understood as a distinctly Australian contribution to the global music industry. Such accounts have not yet addressed the role of heavy metal within this Australian rock tradition, even as metal's foundational forms, as Paul 'Nazz' Oldham shows in this collection, were realised through bands such as AC/DC, Rose Tattoo, The Angels, Buffalo and Lobby Loyde and the Coloured Balls. Australian popular music scholarship continues to overlook metal, even in its current position as a site of community formation, and its viability as a cultural export. Furthermore, even as Metal Music Studies as a field has increasingly looked beyond Europe and North America to examine the role of metal in distinct locales, Australia has been overwhelmingly erased in this purview. As such, even though Australia has played a crucial role in metal's foundations and continues to produce bands which have achieved international success, scholarly work has rendered Australian contributions to metal largely invisible. This lack of academic attention is hence bolstered by the absence of government patronage for and interest in metal as a creative site, even as metal maps the terrain of national identity, intercultural relations and community engagement. The topic of Australian metal is thus a notable omission from popular music studies, metal music studies and Australian social and community research. This edited collection combats this absence, and offers diverse perspectives on how metal and metal fans connote, critique, and reimagine 'Australianness' in local and global contexts.

My aim for this collection is to extend the trajectory of research into Australian metal not by offering a broad survey of scenes and histories of the genre, but rather by critically engaging with what 'Australian' actually signals in this context. As the following chapters articulate, this is a discourse which emerges in myriad ways. It is an identity which can be articulated through dominant masculinist archetypes such as the 'larrikin', as chapters by Sam Vallen and Samuel Whiting, Paige Klimentou and Ian Rogers demonstrate. Such images of laddish, boisterous masculinity are enshrined in the dominant histories of Australian rock at large, as Oldham explores. Such Australianness can also emerge, as Laura Glitsos shows, in the ways in which women in the 'western frontier' of Perth draw on older colonial narratives of the gothic sublime in their entanglements with metal. However, these exclusory colonialist imaginings can also be readily contested to reveal the ways in which Australian metal has combatted Islamophobia and racism, as Can Yalcinkaya and Safdar Ahmed highlight, or how, as Ian Collinson analyses, bands utilise metal to criticise and despair of Australia's political impotence in the face of climate change and ecological destruction. Moreover, this collection also

seeks to further expand the critical methodologies of Metal Music Studies and studies of Australian popular music by engaging with the discursive and symbolic complexities of scenes and their identities, as Rosemary Overell's Lacanian analysis of the tensions between Sydney and Melbourne's grindcore scenes exemplifies.

In this chapter, I wish to offer an introductory discussion which can call into focus the diverse ways in which 'Australia' is asserted in the spaces, scenes and practices of Australian heavy metal. This chapter responds to earlier quandaries in the sparse research on Australian metal which question if there is anything definitively 'Australian' about the characteristics, themes and narratives demonstrated within Australian heavy metal scenes. In response to this challenge, I use this chapter to establish critical foundations for addressing how Australianness has been represented 'Downunderground' (Phillipov, 2008, p. 215) – historically, musically and geographically, as work in this collection affirms. In this chapter, and indeed within the collection at large, I argue that redressing the problem represented by the 'Australianness' of Australian metal must begin with the critique of a singularly 'Australian' identity in the first instance. Metal scenes throughout Australia have often articulated common sentiments of national identity that allow for the formation of an imagined community across disparate locales. Such sentiments have sustained an imagined community across metal scenes in Australia. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Hoad, 2016), while the flow of nationalist narratives across intranational borders may herald a sense of community, it is also a community frequently marked by rigid parameters of what, or who, may constitute 'Australianness' in the image of such communion. 'Australian metal', as a consolidated signifier, must be problematised to instead come to an understanding of the multisited ways in which 'Australianness' is experienced within scenes.

Metal in Australia: A Brief Overview

The performative gestures of Australianness which emerge in metal scenes – oft-understood as emphasis on white, working class masculinity – are an example of the intrusion of regional differences into ostensibly universal practices (Homan, 2000, p. 32). Australian heavy metal is located within an interplay of local and global considerations; simultaneously isolated from yet tethered to the international scene. Despite a wealth of music cultures and audiences within Australia, heavy metal music has struggled to find a consolidated following within the nation at large. Locally produced metal music, and indeed metal at large, is still a relatively marginal genre in a nation that prides itself on its rock output. Heavy metal in Australia has its origins in late 1960s hard rock and psychedelic acts such as Buffalo, Lobby Loyde and the Coloured Balls and Blackfeather. Australian metal further owes a stylistic debt to harder pub rock acts of the 1970s and 1980s such as AC/DC, The Angels and Rose Tattoo. 'Pub rock' or 'Oz rock', the colloquial labels for rock'n'roll music played in crowded inner-city and suburban pubs, is an important generic forebearer for mapping the growth of Australian heavy metal (see Oldham, Chapter 1). Furthermore, such categories reveal how Australian metal has articulated its relationship to and performance of certain iterations

of national identity. Rock'n'roll in an Australian context has historically been defined through its 'toughness' (Evans, 1998, p. 125), where rock music bolstered elements of Australian working class life, 'adding a dimension of specularity to the world of the ordinary' (Evans, 1998, p. 126).

The earliest Australian heavy metal bands emerged in the late 1970s, heavily influenced by both existing pub rock scenes and the emergent New Wave of British Heavy Metal. Such acts were largely unsuccessful and had limited audiences; support emerged primarily from a small number of community radio stations in Melbourne (3PBS and 3RRR). While some local bands gained support slots on Australian tours with larger international acts (Sydney band Heaven, for example opened for Judas Priest, KISS and Mötley Crüe before their breakup in 1985), the domestic scene itself remained underground. The increasing success of thrash metal in the late 1980s raised the profile of heavy metal in Australia and ushered in a wave of Australian thrash metal acts heavily influenced by Bay Area and Teutonic Thrash bands. This period was a turning point in the development of Australian heavy metal and arguably marks the first moves towards crafting an identifiably 'Australian' sound. Hobbs' Angel of Death from Melbourne and Mortal Sin from Sydney were the two most high-profile bands to emerge from the Australian thrash scene. Mortal Sin in particular were arguably Australia's most well-known band in this period, gaining a respectable following in Europe and the United States.

Mortal Sin's case is not entirely unique in that they are among Australian acts that have found greater support in foreign markets (see Vallen, Chapter 2) – Decaylust of Denouncement Pyre notes that 'Most of the interest and support comes from overseas' (Haun, 2010, para. 36). As such, while numerous metal scenes, institutions and bands exist throughout the country, many Australian heavy metal acts have found greater success in foreign markets. 'Australian heavy metal has enjoyed a real surge in popularity and acceptance [since 2002]', argues Fischer-Giffin, leading him to suggest that 'the Australian metal scene has finally come of age' (Fischer-Giffin, 2008, p. i). It may be the case that Australian metal is more commercially viable than ever – evidence of this can be seen in the international and domestic success of metalcore acts such as Northlane and Parkway Drive (see Whiting, Klimentou, & Rogers, Chapter 3). The marginalisation and migration of Australian metal music, however, forces the question of what it is to perform 'Australianness' within a scene that may be disconnected from not only a consolidated national scene, but also finds the bulk of its audience beyond the geographic parameters of Australia itself.

This challenge of conceiving of 'Australianness' in a scene that is not only fragmented by vast distances and political tensions within the nation, but also largely relies on overseas audiences for commercial success, becomes one of the key struggles of defining Australian metal. In response to such challenges, attempts to assert a distinctly 'Australian' metal style have frequently hinged on narrow, and exclusory, understandings of both Australianness and metal as tied to archetypal figures of white masculinity. Parochial mythologies of Australian masculinity as straightforward, unaffected and energetic have become mobilised into the ways in which members of the Australian metal scene have articulated its sense of self,

which esteems honesty, purity and brutality. Haun's (2010) interview with long-term performers within Australian metal scenes reveals that common descriptors of Australian metal rest on the purity and ferocity of the genre. 'Loud', 'chaotic', 'ugly', 'ferocious', 'bestial' and 'brutal' are repeatedly used in discussions of the Australian scene, where phrases such as 'heavy as fuck' and 'brutally aggressive' are used to separate 'true' Australian metal from 'overpublicised, glamourised, commercial shit' (Haun, 2010). This legacy of 'authenticity' is central to marking the territory claimed as 'Australian'. Ben Wrecker (drummer of Hotel City Wrecking Traders and the owner of Bro Fidelity records) argues that the fierce do-it-yourself ethic of the Australian scene is underpinned by 'the "Aussie Battler"⁴ mentality that nothing's supposed to be that easy' (Haun, 2010, para. 7). This sense of 'doing it the hard way' – and taking pride in such efforts – has hence been seen as pivotal to the central identities of Australian metal scenes.

These notions of self-sufficiency, authenticity and 'purity' have been crucial to the dominant understandings of Australian metal which have circulated both within scenes and scholarship. The shift towards metal fundamentalism (Weinstein, 2000, p. 48) was typical of European and American scenes in the mid-1980s, but appears particularly rampant within Australian metal scenes. Early Australian metal acts became renown internationally for their 'uncompromising brutality' (Phillipov, 2008, p. 218). Bands such as Bestial Warlust (formerly Corpse Molestation), Deströyer 666 and Sadistik Exekution were notable proponents of this style – short, fast songs, 'chaotic' sounds (heavy distortion, rapid tremolo picking, blast beats and growled or screeched vocals), a disavowal of melody, and low-quality production are all generic conventions. This combination of thrash and death metal influences and the lyrical themes common to early black metal is regarded as a 'particularly Australian one' (Phillipov, 2008, p. 219). These ferocious bands were labelled 'war metal' (denoting the combination of black, death and thrash and its interest in warfare) – both Decaylust and Ian Belshaw note that this label is particularly associated with Australia (Haun, 2010, para. 16 & 18) despite the small number of bands to which it refers. The correlation of war metal, and later blackened thrash, with Australian heavy metal scenes, then offers a starting point for charting how bands have been able to articulate their Australianness through both generic conventions and lyrical and visual narratives; however, it also signals the very narrow ways in which 'Australian' has been understood in the greater context of Australian metal.

Imagining Australia and Indigeneity in Metal Scenes and Studies

The general history of Australian metal is one which has focussed largely on the ways in which the genre has drawn heavily from existing rock scenes and their institutions, which had long been understood as steadily white, male and working class in the demographics of both bands and fans alike. Even so, Australian heavy metal has long existed on the peripheries of the global heavy metal scene. Within a national context, the genre has always been 'resolutely underground' (Fischer-Giffin, 2008, p. i), rarely attracting the attention afforded to other local

music scenes. Within the wider sphere of Metal Music Studies, Australian scenes have been treated as a remote outlier, a characterisation that has in turn informed the dominant ways in which the scene conceives of itself. In this following section, I then establish the wider scholarly trajectory from which this collection has emerged, and how extant literature has shaped the ways in which 'Australian metal' has been characterised and understood, and crucially, the implications this has held for its imagined audiences and performers. The dominant understanding of 'Australian' metal as that which expresses archetypal imaginings of white Australian heteromascularity – an issue which, retrospectively, I identify in my own earlier research – denies the longstanding contributions that women, Indigenous Australians, LGBT+ communities and people of colour have made, and continue to make, to the genre in its localised manifestations. To imagine Australian metal as that which caters to expressions of hegemonic white masculinity echoes the same forms of colonial violence which exscribe Others from the possibility of existing within the parameters of 'Australianness'.

Relative to metal's traditionally understood centres in the United States and United Kingdom, scholarly literature on heavy metal in Australia is very scarce. Where early discussions of heavy metal in Australia emerged, these were largely located within the broader moral panic period of heavy metal literature characterised by Tipper Gore's PMRC. Discussions of the role of heavy metal in youth violence and self-harm in Australia (Martin, Clarke, & Pearce, 1993), for example, indicates nothing particularly 'Australian' about this scholarship beyond the location of its sample. Maggie Brady's *Heavy Metal* (1992), despite its title, limits its discussion of heavy metal music to a brief section exploring the relationship between metal music and youth rebellion in Australian Indigenous communities. Here some significant insights are offered as to the communal power of heavy metal within the context of Indigenous communities maligned by cultural and political power. Strategic alignment with heavy metal allowed young Indigenous people to stake out an identity external to 'mainstream Aboriginal society' (1992, p. 88); loudly playing heavy metal on cassette players in public spaces also provided a point of contrast to the Christian pop music favoured in Indigenous settlements (1992, p. 91).

This research nonetheless establishes a problematic correlation between heavy metal, gang violence and Indigenous Australians which has shaped how Aboriginal engagements with metal have been represented. Brady notes that it is against the backdrop of a strong Christian presence (a result of the Church Missionary Society of the Anglican Church that sought to 'civilise' Indigenous communities) that 'juvenile Aboriginal gangs' have emerged, and hence used heavy metal as a form of deviance that allows for the development of an alternative source of self-esteem (1992, p. 93). This notion of Indigenous youth using heavy metal as an identity marker to deviate from instrumental Christian colonialism is a compelling one; it is nonetheless lost within a demonising tone wherein young Indigenous men are labelled 'sniffers' (a reference to the act of petrol sniffing) and the discussion of metal itself is couched in negative terms and associated with drug use (1992, p. 95). The ready association of gangs with Indigenous relationships to metal still circulates well into the twenty-first century, where the 'heavy metal

gangs' of Wadeye in the Northern Territory, wherein young Indigenous men have formed social groups named for metal bands such as Judas Priest and Metallica, are discussed near wholly in association with truancy and domestic violence, and presented as an exotic, tribal Other for consumption by white Australians (see e.g., Vice's 2009 documentary *Heavy Metal Gangs of Wadeye*).

The notoriety of these 'heavy metal gangs' and their spectacular associations with violence denies the ways in which Indigenous Australians have engaged with metal in agentic and nuanced ways. John Mansfield's response to the widespread media fascination with Wadeye, for example, contends that media coverage which amplifies 'public disorder' (2014, p. 239) and 'violent conflicts' between the 'heavy metal gangs' criminalises both metal and indigeneity (2013, p. 148). Mansfield's research instead demonstrates that heavy metal 'mobs' (the preferred term he designates) actually represent new forms of Aboriginal social organisation which are highly codified, and, far from parochial reporting which situates metal as an invasive evil which has corrupted Indigenous Australians, are systems in which non-Aboriginal influences are quite peripheral (2013, p. 148). 'Metal mobs', he argues, are a highly localised cultural form that is 'unambiguously Aboriginal' (2013, p. 158); further to this, his later work argues, 'heavy metal music in Wadeye is not just a matter of individual musical taste, but has taken on a major role in symbolising groups of *kigay* (young men from their teenage years to their 30s) in the social arena' (2014, p. 246).

This nuanced approach to the relationship between metal and its uses for Indigenous communities nonetheless further reveals the problems which emerge not only in speaking of a singularly 'Australian' identity, but also those which deal with a uniformly 'Indigenous' identity within Australian metal. In both metal scholarship and music in Australia, a common trope has been to resign Indigeneity to antiquity by equating such identity with token symbolism. Phillipov argues that Indigenous music and lyrical references to landscape are demonstrative of how individual bands have deployed 'tropes of Australianness' (2008, p. 217). Nonetheless, positioning Indigenous musical forms as a trope of Australianness is a complex statement that necessitates further interrogation. Where 'Indigenous' metal music has been broached, this has been represented through broad signifiers which are performed by non-Indigenous musicians. Lord, for example, sampled a didjeridu for the opening track of their album *A Personal Journey* (2003), entitled 'The Dreaming'.¹ Alchemist are also notable for their prolific use of didjeridu music, evident in the track 'Austral Spectrum' (*Organasm*, 2000). Discussions of the 'indigeneity' of Australian metal which hinge either on references to 'gangs' or acoustic symbolism thus largely occlude Indigenous people themselves, and ignore the long-term involvement of Indigenous musicians and scene members in varying capacities.

These understandings of 'Australian' metal, in which 'indigeneity' is represented insofar as aesthetic borrowings of the didjeridu, for example, further amplifies

¹The 'Dreaming', or the 'Dreamtime', is the name given to the varied creation narratives of many Indigenous Australians.