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Just So Stories: How Heavy Metal Got Its Name—A Cautionary Tale

Deena Weinstein

An etymological inquiry into the origin of the term "heavy metal" to name a genre of rock music yields the surprising result that the conventional accounts of the term's origin are mistaken. Tracking down the actual origin, through research in the rock press and correspondence with participants in the naming, reveals the term, in part and as a whole, was in the cultural air of the times. There were competing terms for the kind of music that came to be called "heavy metal," but none of them would have given the genre the same configuration and sensibility that it has taken on.

Who named the genre called heavy metal? That question was the very last issue that interested me when I was writing an academic analysis of heavy metal a quarter of a century ago. With about a month left before the manuscript was due at the publishers, I realized that the question of the origins of the genre's name (and before the 1990s the term genre still applied) should be addressed. Today, in terms of its sound, lyrics, audiences, and so much more, heavy metal is so diverse that it is best characterized as a meta-genre. Yet what now connects this wide variety of styles is that all are called heavy metal.[1] Does the name have any significance? Perhaps an answer can be found by seeing how and why the name came to be used.

The genre's name functions much as Foucault described the author's name in literature.[2] Like the author's name, a named genre performs "a classificatory function. Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others." The "text" of heavy metal bands—their output of songs variously mediated—functions just as "the fact that several texts have been placed under the same name indicates that there has been established among them a relationship of homogeneity, filiation, authentication of some texts by the use of others, reciprocal explication, or concomitant utilization" (Foucault 452).

Minimally, I wanted to know who first applied the term "heavy metal" to describe a style of music. That is, I needed to do an etymological inquiry. Given

the absence of academic work addressing the naming of the genre, I relied on popular print media, the magazine articles and books written by rock journalists. Since the naming period came before the internet era, getting access to popular as opposed to academic or serious print media (now called physical media) was a serious challenge.

Traditional Answers to the Question "Who Named Heavy Metal?"

What I found by way of answers to my query reminds me, in retrospect, of nothing so much as those *Just So Stories* by Rudyard Kipling—like the one on how the leopard got its spots. Three different sources of the term's origin were mentioned in a wide variety of print media. Two of the three nominees, however, had not applied the phrase to a style of music at all.

One was the phrase "heavy metal thunder" in the lyrics of Steppenwolf's hit song "Born to be Wild." The song reached #2 on the US charts in June 1968. It is widely acknowledged as the first time "heavy metal" was used in music. (Spoiler alert—it was not.) Beyond heavy play on the radio, the song was so well known due to its inclusion in a popular movie released in 1969, *Easy Rider*. I wrote to the song's lyricist, Mars Bonfire (born Dennis Edmonton; his brother was Jerry Edmonton, Steppenwolf's drummer), asking if he had any clues as to why the term he wrote in the lyrics became used for a genre. He couldn't help on that score, but did say how he came up with the term:

> I used the phrase "heavy metal thunder" in "Born To Be Wild" to help capture the experience of driving a car or motorcycle on the desert highway of California. At the time of writing the song I was intensely recalling and imaginatively enhancing such experiences and the phrase came to me as the right expression of the heaviness and noise of powerful cars and motorcycles. Afterwards I realized that I had been aware of the term "heavy metals" from high school science. It is a part of Mendeleev's Periodic Table that contains the elements with high atomic weights. (Bonfire)

The second source cited as the originator of the phrase "heavy metal," and this one too did not use it in a musical context, was William Burroughs's novel *Naked Lunch*. For example, a *Newsweek* writer stated in 1983, that "heavy metal apparently got its name from William Burroughs, who used the expression as a synonym for torture in his apocalyptic 1959 novel, *Naked Lunch*" (McGuigan 102). *Circus Magazine* writer Philip Bashe in his book on the genre wrote, "Best indications are that the term *heavy metal* comes from Beat generation author William Burroughs's novel *Naked Lunch* (published in Paris in 1959, in the United States in 1962)" (4). A Toronto *Globe and Mail* writer agreed: "The modern folk music of steelmill workers, bike gangs, and the Muzak of South American torture chambers takes its name from a term coined by novelist William Burroughs in his novel, *Naked Lunch*" (Lacey E1).

Curious about how Burroughs deployed the term, I read *Naked Lunch*. Somehow failing to find any mention of "heavy metal," I read the book again. The term was not there. I sent a fax to Burroughs's agent asking for an explanation of why numerous sources claimed that the term was in that novel when I had failed to find it. The faxed response stated: "It is our recollection that in *Nova Express* there is a character 'The Heavy Metal Kid'" (Love). Indeed, that character was in that book, published in 1964, and in the two preceding books in Burroughs's *Nova* trilogy, starting with *The Soft Machine* (1961) and then *The Ticket That Exploded (*1962). The figure was introduced as "Uranian Willy The Heavy Metal Kid. Also known as Willy The Rat. He wised up the marks. His metal face moved in a slow smile as he heard the twittering supersonic threats through antennae embedded in his translucent skull" (*Soft* 56). Willy defected from the Nova Mob, "The Blue Heavy Metal People of Uranus—Heavy con men selling issues of fraudulent universe stock" (109). He had "been put on the 'unreliable' list and marked for 'Total Disposal In The Ovens.' But he provided himself with a stash of apomorphine so escaped" (55).

Willy the Heavy Metal Kid bore no relation to heavy metal music in any way, shape, or color. What was still not clear was why this character lent his nickname to serve as an appellation to what became called heavy metal music. But heavy metal was more than a character's nickname. Burroughs also used it, especially in *The Ticket That Exploded,* as a drug:[3] "What we call opium or junk is a very much diluted form of heavy metal addiction" (59). (Metal fans might see an analogy to getting high off the music to which they are addicted.)

The fax from Burroughs's agency also stated that they "cannot confirm if Steppenwolf's 'Born to be Wild' had any inspiration from Burroughs' works; although the late rock critic Lester Bangs did cite Burroughs in his groundbreaking *Creem Magazine* articles in which he is generally believed to have originated the term 'heavy metal' as applied to a rock music form" (Love). Indeed, most all sources given for the genre's namer mentioned Bangs, generally citing these three different origins in tandem: Steppenwolf's song, Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, and rock critic Lester Bangs's piece in *Creem* magazine.

For example, the "Heavy Metal" entry in the 1983 *Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll* indicated that "[t]he term heavy metal was originally coined by Beat novelist William Burroughs in his *Naked Lunch*, reintroduced into the pop vocabulary by Steppenwolf in their hit 'Born to be Wild' ('heavy metal thunder') and subsequently redefined by rock critic Lester Bangs in the heavy-metal fan magazine *Creem*" (Pareles and Romanowski). A 2008 edition of a dictionary of slang reprinted that quotation and then added a more error-filled sentence: "In fact, William Burroughs wrote of Uranium [*sic*] Willie [*sic*], the Heavy Metal Kid, in *Nova Express*, 1946 [*sic*], 13 years before *Naked Lunch* was published" (Dalzell and Victor 328). A newspaper article in the Toronto *Globe and Mail* in 1984 mentioned *Naked Lunch*, "Born to be Wild," and "critic Lester Bangs, during his tenure as editor of *Creem* magazine in the early seventies" (Lacey). In *Musician Magazine,* J.D. Considine wrote:

> The term "heavy metal" was first used to describe a style of pop music by Lester Bangs in *Creem*. It is believed that his inspiration was Steppenwolf's "Born To Be Wild," which contains the phrase "heavy metal thunder." The etymology of "heavy metal" is somewhat less certain. Most sources (e.g. *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll*) credit William Burroughs for coining the term in his novel *Naked Lunch*; however, scientists were using the same label to designate certain radioactive isotopes[4] well before that. (Considine 52–53).

Finding Bangs in *Creem*

It made good sense that Bangs was the name giver—critics are logical namers of genres since they need to use those constructs continually as shorthand. Interested in seeing the context in which Bangs used "heavy metal," and wanting to understand what features he considered definitive of the genre he was naming, I went searching for his famous 1972 *Creem* article.

I was in luck. A reference librarian at my university said that Northwestern's library, about a dozen miles from where I lived, had copies of early *Creem* in their stacks. I went there the next day, and, indeed, that article was there. I was given the first two years of that magazine's output. Rapidly I turned to the June 1972 issue, and found the piece on Black Sabbath written by Lester Bangs. Bingo! I carried it to the public Xerox machine, put in coins, and copied the whole article. My companion suggested that I make sure that the phrase was actually in the article before returning the magazines to the librarian. I rapidly read the magazine itself while he looked through the Xeroxed pages. Neither of us could find the magic words, "heavy metal." Before giving up, we noticed that this was only the first half of the article, the other part was in the July issue. After getting dollar bills converted to coins, Xeroxing, and then reading it, our double diligence confirmed the awful truth—the term was not there either. How could all of those authors' claims be wrong? And they were wrong.

Although the phrase "heavy metal" was not in Bangs's very long two-part Black Sabbath feature, Burroughs and his *Nova Express* were mentioned: "'War Pigs' and Burroughs' *Nova Express* are saying the same thing," Bangs wrote. "Despite the blitzkrieg nature of their sound, Black Sabbath are moralists. Like Bob Dylan, like William Burroughs, like most artists trying to deal with a serious present situation in an honest way" ("Bring Your Mother" 41). Bangs was certainly insightful and respectful of the band. But Bangs was no fan of Black Sabbath, or of what would come to be called heavy metal. His review of Sabbath's eponymous 1970 debut in *Rolling Stone* was a slam. Bangs gave it a rating of 2½ stars out of a possible five, writing:

> The whole album is a shuck—despite the murky song titles and some inane lyrics that sound like Vanilla Fudge paying doggerel tribute to Aleister Crowley, the album has nothing to do with spiritualism, the occult, or anything much except stiff recitations of Cream clichés that sound like the musicians learned them out

> of a book, grinding on and on with dogged persistence. Vocals are sparse, most of the album being filled with plodding bass lines over which the lead guitar dribbles wooden Claptonisms from the master's tiredest Cream days. ("Gun")

When the genre's name came into widespread use later in the decade, Bangs did not like it any more than he took to Black Sabbath. In a 1978 piece in *Hit Parader,* he revealed an important reason for his antipathy:

> Heavy Metal music in its finest flower had one central, obvious message: There is no hope. Whatever you do, you can't win. The world is run by war pigs who have turned you into human dogs and you must accept your fate as ignominiously as you possibly can. It was, in America at least, more or less the residue of Vietnam and all that stuff, but it was really a worldwide sentiment, and in that sense obviously the Heavy Metal Cassandras of bombast differed from the punks, who may scream of no future but at least are determined to go out kicking and flailing. Heavy Metal freaks just wanted to forget the whole fucking mess, man; they were, in a word, passive. ("Heavy…Sinal")

A decade after his initial Black Sabbath slam, it was clear that the genre that Black Sabbath had helped initiate was, for Bangs, dreadful. His entry for "Heavy Metal" in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll*, more negative than any other entry in the volume, begins:

> As its detractors have always claimed, heavy-metal rock is nothing more than a bunch of noise; it is not music, it's distortion—and that is precisely why its adherents find it appealing. Of all contemporary rock, it is the genre most closely identified with violence and aggression, rapine and carnage. Heavy metal orchestrates technological nihilism, which may be one reason it seemed to run dry in the mid-Seventies. ("Heavy Metal" 332)

If Not Bangs, Then Who?

Since the librarian had given me the first two years of *Cream* that day, I thought to look through it all to see if "heavy metal" was found anywhere in the magazine. The trip was redeemed—I found one mention. In a May 1971 review of Sir Lord Baltimore's debut, *Kingdom Come* (Mercury), *Creem* reviewer Mike Saunders wrote:

> This album is a far cry from the currently prevalent Grand Funk sludge, because Sir Lord Baltimore seems to have down pat most all the best heavy metal tricks in the book. Precisely, they sound like a mix between the uptempo noiseblasts of Led Zeppelin (instrumentally) and singing that's like an unending Johnny Winter shriek: they have it all down cold, including medium or uptempo blasts a la LZ, a perfect carbon of early cataclysmic MC5 ("Hard Rain Fallin'"), and the one-soft-an-album concept originated by Jimmy Page and his gang. ("Baltimore" 71).

So Mike Saunders was my nominee for the originator of the genre's name, as I wrote in my book before turning it in to the publisher. To me, and for those who

read my book, Saunders replaced Bangs as the initiator of the genre's name in the 1990s.

In the later part of the '90s, however, that certainty was shaken. I was conversing with a record publicist and she mentioned Bangs with a bit too much reverence. I groused and told her the story of my quest, adding that it wasn't Bangs but someone named Mike Saunders who first used the term "heavy metal" to describe a style of music. She knew Saunders, mentioned that he was known as Metal Mike and gave me his email address. I wrote to him immediately and told him that I had written that he was the originator of the genre's name. To my surprise, Saunders totally disagreed with me. "1971 was definitely the first year the term 'heavy metal' was ever used in print in the rock press (in either reviews or articles)," Saunders wrote. "I have no recollection of who used it first. It wasn't me but I suspect Lester Bangs since he was writing a lot of stuff in *Creem*." Saunders tantalizingly ended his note with: "Only the copy in my files knows for sure" ("Misc").

I was asked to write a new chapter for the heavy metal book about what had transpired in the genre during the decade since it was first written. Despite Saunders's denial that he was the one who first named the genre, nothing I found contradicted my identification of his Sir Lord Baltimore review as the ur-text. In the fall of 2001, about a year after the new edition of the book was published, I came across an online interview with Saunders. It vindicated my conclusion. In it, he recalled that "the review of my promo copy [of Sir Lord Baltimore] was typed up in Feb. in my Univ of Texas at Austin dorm room, that I threw down the phrase 'heavy metal' in its first use in the rock press ever (outside of Steppenwolf's lyric) as a descriptive term. Yep, all blame and shame goes to me" (Woods, "Metal Guru"). Case closed, or so I thought.

In an email to me in 2006, Saunders had to refute his boast, or, rather, replace his claim to fame with a better one. The heading put it concisely: "Subject: actual first usage (me) a Fall 1970 rolling stone record review of Humble Pie." Saunders's review of the first three Humble Pie albums ran in the 12 November 1970 issue of *Rolling Stone*. In describing their second album *Safe as Yesterday*, Saunders said that Humble Pie was "a noisy, unmelodic, heavy metal-leaden shit-rock band, with the loud and noisy parts beyond doubt." He found their most recent eponymous release to be

> more of the same 27th-rate heavy metal crap, is worse than the first two put together, though I know that sounds incredible. Well, if Humble Pie had to listen to themselves, they would probably vomit. For God's sake and your own, don't subject yourself to the same torture. Stay away from this album by all means. ("*Town and Country*")

In his 2006 email, Saunders also wrote about how he came up with the term "heavy metal":

> the derivation of the phrase now is crystal clear... i'd taken freshman chemistry during fall 1969 and spring 1970 semesters … the phrases "leaden metal" and

> "heavy metal," along with the periodic table of elements' neighborhood where they derived from or resided, clocked in a lot more time-share space in my day-to-day mind than any old steppenwolf hit song … [Humble Pie's album, *Safe as Yesterday Is*] was stiff, turgid, ie, leaden in its lack of hard rock drummer "swing" (also known as cool drum rolls/parts). since "heavy" had been around for three whole years as the most common genre term, i.e. "heavy rock," hell yeah...why NOT insert the phrase "leaden-metal" in between the "heavy"/"rock" tandem? flipped around, "metal-leaden" must have looked catchier on paper..."heavy metal-leaden rock"...since that put the words "heavy" and "metal" into a tandem status just like on the elements table. oh yeah, the humble pie album that i'd wasted my money on was complete shit, so throw in the "shit" word too...."heavy metal-leaden shit-rock." shortened in the next/final paragraph to simply "heavy metal crap." (no hyphen)...maybe the leaden part (as pejorative describing the dreadful humble pie rhythm section) was just implied. ("Actual")

Saunders's derivation was not based on Steppenwolf's song, "and you can believe i'd never seen or read anything by Burroughs," he insisted. He reported that several months after writing the Humble Pie review, "when i was closely listening to the SLB debut a few months later, i simply cannibalized my own mental inventory of phrases, that time in a much more favorable light, ie 'best heavy metal tricks'" ("Actual").

One could not ask for better etymological evidence it might seem, but was it conclusive?

I had no book to update, but it finally dawned on me that just because people were there and involved in an activity, it doesn't mean that they remember what happened correctly. What was that phrase that Ronald Reagan used repeatedly in his cold-war rhetoric? Trust but verify. (Of course the act of verifying is clear evidence of lack of trust.) Isn't science all about verification, providing empirical data to support or disconfirm some hypothesis? If Saunders was wrong that his Sir Lord Baltimore review was the first time "heavy metal" was used as a genre term in print, perhaps he was incorrect about that claim for his Humble Pie reviews. Perhaps it wasn't Saunders at all who coined the genre's name. There were other claimants to the title of the bestower of "heavy metal."[5]

Other Competitors to Saunders

The most credible and best known rival is Sandy Pearlman. He had been a rock critic when rock criticism was in its first wave, a writer and co-editor of *Crawdaddy!* He also became a producer of bands, most notably one that he also mentor-managed, Blue Öyster Cult. Pearlman has self-nominated as the namer of "heavy metal" for decades. "I invented the term 'Heavy Metal,'" he said in a 1991 interview. "I actually got it out of the periodic table of the elements, but I am the person who stuck it onto music when I was a writer" (Morgan). In a conversation that he and Roger McGuinn of the Byrds had with *Mondo 2000* writer Jas Morgan, Pearlman mentioned that he used the term in his *Crawdaddy!* review of *The*

Notorious Byrd Brothers album, because of "the incredible complexity of the distortion." McGuinn demurred: "That's a dubious honor, really." Tim Connors, owner of the website *ByrdWatcher: A Field Guide to the Byrds of Los Angeles*, where a copy of this interview can be found, cast doubt on Pearlman's claim:

> Pearlman's review in *Crawdaddy* does not in fact contain the term "heavy metal"; perhaps a helpful reader can identify some other mention of the Byrds where Pearlman uses the term. Note that Lester Bangs usually gets credit for lifting the term from William Burroughs and applying it in its musical sense. Still, Pearlman's observation is interesting even if his memory is inaccurate. (Connors)

Pearlman does drop the word "metal," however, in other reviews. "Metal" permeates his review of the Rolling Stones' *Got Live if you Want It!* published in *Crawdaddy!* in March 1967. "On this album the Stones go metal. Technology is in the saddle—as an ideal and as a method" (Pearlman). He used the term metal (or metallic) eight times in the first eight sentences of the review. However, he does not use the phrase "heavy metal." He simply employs "metal" as an adjective to describe a sound, not a style that transcends this album or this band—that is, not as a genre.

Barry Gifford became a major contender for naming honors after *Rolling Stone* made much of their earliest issues available on the internet, at least to some of its current subscribers. His belated celebrity is based on his review of an Electric Flag album, published in *Rolling Stone* in 1968. In it he wrote, "Nobody who's been listening to Mike Bloomfield—either talking or playing—in the last few years could have expected this. This is the New Soul Music, the synthesis of White Blues and Heavy Metal rock" (Gifford). This usage can be interpreted as a description of this album's sound, or as a genre coinage, since soul music and white blues are genres. However, the author later clarified his intended meaning. With regard to the term "heavy metal," he said: "I was just describing the sound of the band, who, of course, bore no resemblance to what later became popularly known as heavy metal" (Wiederhorn and Turman 2).

Still another rumored source of the genre's name was mentioned in a BBC interview by Chas Chandler, manager of Jimi Hendrix. Chandler had said the term was used in the *New York Times* to describe Hendrix's music. In a search of the paper's archive, no such mention of the term in this context was found. However, someone suggested that Chandler was thinking about the review of Hendrix's *Axis: Bold as Love* from *Rolling Stone* in 1968. In it, Jim Miller wrote, "Jimi Hendrix sounds like a junk heap (Ben Calder crushed monolithic mobiles bulldozed), very heavy and metallic loud."

Critic Scott Woods, commenting in 2011 on the Chandler-Hendrix posting, wrote:

> What's interesting, probably, about all these early examples is that the writers all seem to be using the word "metal" (and its derivatives) as an actual adjective, to get at how the music sounds. This is all before it was codified into a genre that

> everyone understood. (I think "grunge" has similar beginnings...was often used as a word by critics to describe certain types of loud, dirty guitar rock.)

At this point in the inquiry, then, with the other possible originators eliminated, Saunders, given his Humble Pie review from the November 1970 *Rolling Stone,* is left with the title of namer of the heavy metal genre. Yet there was a nagging doubt that perhaps I should continue my cultural detective work. The first detective story I ever read, and one that initiated that literary genre, was "The Purloined Letter" by Edgar Allan Poe. My take-away from that seminal tale was that the best place to hide something was in plain sight.

Guess Who?

Plain sight in this case turned out to be a bit tricky, even if I knew where to look. Was the term "heavy metal" used before Saunders's fall 1970 review in the most obvious place, *Rolling Stone* magazine? Indeed, it was, and by none other than Lester Bangs. Like Saunders, I'd only searched *Creem*, and, as Saunders found, his own earliest use of the genre term was in *Rolling Stone.* Bangs's earliest use of the genre term was in that magazine too, and even earlier.

In his review of the Guess Who's *Canned Wheat* in the 7 February 1970 issue of *Rolling Stone,* Bangs wrote, "With a fine hit single, 'Undun,' behind them, they're quite refreshing in the wake of all the heavy metal robots of the year past" ("Canned"). Here the term heavy metal is used as an adjectival phrase describing a cluster of bands. Describing these bands as robots is no praise—it demeans their work as mechanical rather than creative, generic rather than authentic. Nonetheless, it counts as the name for a genre. That they are called "heavy metal robots" seems redundant, since robots are generally made of metal (rather than some soft material like cloth, or some non-malleable material like concrete). Why not use the phrase metal robots or just robots? One can speculate that Bangs was referencing Burroughs's Blue Heavy Metal People of Uranus with their metal faces and antennae, like Uranian Willy the Heavy Metal Kid, a character, as has been noted, in each of the *Nova* trilogy books.

Bangs was deeply into the Beats. Although Kerouac became his main influence, he was certainly conversant with Burroughs's work. Describing the young Bangs in high school in El Cahon, California, in 1965–66, his biographer writes, "Lester dug the perverse-humor and science-fiction imagery of William S. Burroughs" (Derogatis 22). Bangs managed to earn a two-day suspension for passing around a copy of *Naked Lunch* in his biology class. His high-school friend Roger believed that his ambition then was to become "a famous mad-hatter novelist like Burroughs" (Derogatis 29).

A Genre by Any Other Name Is Another Genre

Although Bangs and Saunders each borrowed the term heavy metal from very different sources, both critics deployed it in a negative sense in the first reviews in

which they used it. Nonetheless, their attitudes toward this type of music were, at least during the first part of the 1970s, rather different. Bangs may have written about some of the bands that he or others would classify as heavy metal, but he was no fan. Saunders, on the other hand, played what he thought of as good heavy metal (not "27th rate hm crap") so frequently in his dorm room that by the end of 1971 he had earned the nickname Metal Mike.

Who first named the genre, especially since the two first uses of the term "heavy metal" as a genre of rock were published in the same magazine in the same year, is less significant than why that name took hold.

Initially there were several alternative genre names for the type of rock that eventually became known as heavy metal. The earliest was "heavy rock." It was applied to Cream, Blue Cheer, and especially Led Zeppelin in the late 1960s and remained in use, especially in Britain, through the early 1970s. Black Sabbath, coming from the same Birmingham scene as Robert Plant and John Bonham, were frequently classified as heavy rock too. (For a short while, Black Sabbath were also considered to be prog rock. Early concert posters for the band's UK gigs in 1970 used that phrase, and in their first US tour they opened for Yes, a quintessential prog-rock band.) Charles Shaar Murray's piece in *NME* in 1972 begins, "So you play lead guitar in a heavy rock band and you've just torn America to pieces for the umpteenth time." Heavy referenced the music's sound—the loud electric guitars and bass, and the bass drum too. But "heavy" was also a word in heavy use by '60s-era youth (counterculture and hippies, taken from the Beats and from jazz). It meant deep, meaningful, or merely good. "It's heavy, man!"

Hard rock was another descriptor, not so much for a genre, but of a wide swath of rock music that had blues-rock as a common denominator. When a band featuring electric guitars and bass and a big drum kit was not tied to any of the specific genres such as psychedelia or heavy metal, they tend to be put into this broader category.

Another genre term used especially in the US for Sabbath, Grand Funk, Bloodrock, and others, was "downer rock." This designation was used by critics in several ways. First, the lyrics of the bands gathered under the rubric were seen to be at the antipodes of the hopeful happy hippie fare. Indeed those bands did focus on the darker truths of reality, such as war and death. A second reference for "downer" was the proclivity of some fans of these bands to use barbiturates such as Seconal and Quaaludes ('ludes). These depressant or tranquillizing drugs were commonly known as "downers."

Rolling Stone popularized this genre name with their October 1971 feature titled "Twelve Homesick Hours with the Princes of Downer Rock: How Black Was My Sabbath." Downers did not refer to drugs in this piece; the audience was described as drinking beer and, also, "the smell of dope and steaming bodies enveloped everyone in a moist cloud which blended with the music and the words that Ozzie belted out, screaming on the stage now, shaking his fist in the air as he jumped up and down" (Green 42). The only depression-related drugs mentioned were the

anti-depressants that Ozzy took. "Metrospan, they're called. They really give you a hit in the head. A doctor gave them to me for depression a few days ago. They must have some ups in them, they make me crazy" (Green 41). The downer rock in the article's title referred to the band's lyrics. "All the lyrics to the iron-hard rock songs contain images of a doomed world, here on Earth, man's frustration, atomic tides, and through it all the Devil laughing—all this set to painfully loud and dirge-like music. The audience loved it" (Green 42).

It was "downer music," not "heavy metal," that Bangs used in his famously cited (but not well read) piece on Black Sabbath in *Creem* in 1972.

> The audience, searching endlessly both for bone-rattling sound and someone to put the present social and psychic traumas in perspective, found both in Black Sabbath … they possessed a dark vision of society and the human soul borrowed from black magic and Christian myth; they cut straight to the teen heart of darkness with obsessive, crushing blocks of sound and "words that go right to your sorrow, words that go 'Ain't no tomorrow,'" as Ozzy sang in "Warning" on their first album. The critics…responded almost as one by damning it as "downer music." Since much of it did lack the unquenchable adrenaline imperatives of its precedents and one look around a rock concert hall was enough to tell you where the Psychedelic Revolution had led, the charge seemed worth considering. ("Bring Your Mother" 42).

Bangs was being coy here, appearing to be both for and against Sabbath. Yet he recognized the prejudice of the critical establishment of which he was becoming a central figure, providing a third understanding of the word "downer"—a failure.

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet," wrote William Shakespeare famously in *Romeo and Juliet*. What is in the name heavy metal? The music grouped under the name "heavy metal" over at least its first two decades showed a set of characteristics and a sensibility. That music, indeed, would sound the same under other names, but would it have been grouped together without that name "heavy metal"? Genres exclude and include. Would the same music have been gathered together had the adopted term been "downer rock" instead of "heavy metal"? Or simply "heavy rock"?

To start with heavy metal has "heavy," with all of the connotations and recognition that word had in "heavy rock" as a genre name. In a sense, heavy metal is something like heavy rock, but more. The more, of course, is "metal."

The word "metal" itself had several connotations in the late '60s through mid-'70s. Pearlman and Gifford, both discussed above, and others used "metal" as a sonic descriptor. They were probably referring to the denser, more harmonically layered sound of amplified electric guitars, and used the metal of the guitar strings as a metonym. Bangs too employed "metal" liberally in his early reviews in a similar fashion. In a review of Johnny Winter's *Second Winter* album in 1969, he wrote that it was "an unrelenting floodtide of throbbing, burning sound, a work of folk art which captures the tradition of blues and rock from the prehistoric Delta bottleneck sundown moans to the white-hot metal pyrotechnics" ("*Second*

Winter"). In an earlier review that year, also in *Rolling Stone*, Bangs compared the recent releases of the Illinois Speed Press and Black Pearl, calling both "grits-and-metal" bands ("*Illinois Speed*").

Joining "heavy" and "metal," of course, did not come out of nowhere. It already had currency in other contexts at the time, and those were picked up by some, including the critics, in the rock world.

Lyricist of "Born to be Wild," Bonfire, and critic Mike Saunders each said they repurposed the expression from their knowledge of the periodic table of elements, a staple of introductory chemistry courses. Somehow it is hard to imagine that either of them was thinking of some specific heavy metal (cobalt, copper, manganese, molybdenum, vanadium, strontium, and zinc, mercury, lead and cadmium). More likely they were thinking of steel, or its raw material, iron. Iron isn't part of the heavy metal family, according to chemists; it is in the group (the columns on Mendeleev's table) called transition metals. But for metalheads, especially in the 1970s, it clearly was iron that was the physical metal representing their genre. So many of the first decades' fans came from metal-working areas—the iron-mining, smelting, forging, coal-mining (for the smelters and forges), auto-manufacturing areas—the British Midlands around Birmingham that birthed, among others, Black Sabbath and Judas Priest, and the industrial areas of northern Britain, and in the US, around Detroit.

"Heavy metal" was also a term with a literary pedigree wafting through the countercultural air in the '60s, thanks to Burroughs's novels. Burroughs and the other Beat novelists and poets were known to the hip youth (hipoisie) of the era on both sides of the Atlantic. The Beats were celebrities at major American universities and especially celebrated in the two centers where rock criticism emerged in the 1960s, New York City and San Francisco. They were well known by key musicians responsible for the transition of rock to an art form, such as Bob Dylan, Paul McCartney, Lou Reed, and the Grateful Dead. These artists interacted with various Beats, particularly Allen Ginsberg, and were familiar with their writing.[6] Early underground papers spread the word. Ed Sanders's Fuck You Press published Beat writers, and his band, the Fugs, embraced their style and message. The Fugs named their music-publishing company Heavy Metal Music in homage to Burroughs's *Nova* trilogy.

The phrase "heavy metal" had still another meaning in counterculture parlance. In an interview with Ed Sanders, Nick Tosches brought up the current political state of the world, and bemoaned the outcome of the revolutions in developing countries. Sanders isn't as resigned:

> But the third world is a big thing; the Afro-Asian surge is too big. The Afro-Asian surge is going communistic, socialistic. It's all involved in a compulsory sharing. Nationalization of all heavy metal stuff, all social services, all medicine, all hospitals. Walk into a supermarket and get what you want with your handsome face. I believe in that. It's going to come about. It's got to. Otherwise, Stone Age. (Tosches)

Here heavy metal is used as a reference to industry and its machinery.

London had its own Beats-influenced rock. A graphic artist duo, Michael English and Nigel Weymouth, working under the name Hapshash and the Coloured Coat were responsible for the posters for Pink Floyd, Soft Machine, and others at the center of the psychedelic scene, London's UFO club in 1967. The duo also formed a band with the even more unwieldy name Hapshash and the Coloured Coat Featuring the Human Host and the Heavy Metal Kids. Julian Palacios claims that the band's name on their 1967 debut was "the first use of the phrase 'heavy metal' in music" (170). The British band Soft Machine took its name from the title of a Burroughs novel. The Beats' sensibility was spread in underground papers in London, notably the *International Times* (changed to *IT*) and *Oz*.

Bangs was familiar with both the Fugs and Hapshash. His first review was of a Fugs album, published in *Creem* under the editorship of Dave Marsh in August 1970. He also referenced the Fugs elsewhere, such as in his review of the Mothers' *Fillmore East* in 1971 ("*Fillmore*").

Bangs also mentioned Hapshash. In his review of Hawkwind in June 1972, he wrote that the album was "reminiscent of such blasts from the past, present and future as the first Mothers album, Hapshash and the Coloured Coat featuring the Human Host and the Heavy Metal Kids, and Germany's great psycheoverload band Amon Duul II, of *Yeti* and *Dance of the Lemmings* fame" ("*In Search of Space*").

Even Blue Cheer's road crew was hip to Burroughs.

> "There was a guy in our road crew named Peter Wagner, who referred to us as the Heavy Metal Kids," said Dickie Peterson, front man for the pioneering sixties hard rock/metal band Blue Cheer. "But I think he did that because the heavy metal kids were the junkies in William Burroughs' books. I don't think he was talking about our music." (Wiederhorn and Turman 2)

Of course, not all rock critics were into the Beats. Saunders was adamant that he had never come across Burroughs's writings: "i grew up in Arkansas, had no idea who William Burroughs was when i was age 18 writing that review in a dorm room at the University of Texas at Austin" (personal e-mail dated 5 November 2005); "you can believe i'd never seen or read anything by Burroughs" ("Actual").

Heavy metal was also in the air, in the water, and in the news throughout 1969. Heavy metal was the popular term for one heavy metal, mercury, which was polluting the air and poisoning fish and those who ate them.

"Heavy metal" had been floating around the culturescape, ready to be captured and made a name.

Conclusion

Under another name, would it have been the same music, let alone the same fan base, that gathered under the name "heavy metal"? A genre's name denotes the genre itself, and serves as a shorthand for the genre's rules. But it does more than

that; it calls attention to how to hear the genre, what feeling is appropriate to hearing it. That is, the genre's name connotes a sensibility. What if punk had been called teen rock or trash rock, or if grunge was called Seattle rock or complainer rock? Not only is a genre by any other name another genre, but even when it corrals the very same music, that music is appreciated with a different sensibility.

The genre's name mediates the genre's music to audiences, to potential creators, and to critics. Rarely has any genre of popular culture had such a powerful name as heavy metal. Foucault concludes that as far as the author (and his/her name) is concerned, "what does it matter?" For heavy metal, the name matters.

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Notes

[1] Metal writers and fans specializing in "underground," "extreme" subgenres like death metal and black metal tend to omit the heavy in the meta-genre's name, shortening it to just metal.

[2] For an account of the various ways of understanding and studying genres of music, see "Classification as Culture: Types and Trajectories of Music Genres" by Jennifer C. Lena and Richard A. Peterson.

[3] For an analysis of Burroughs's use of heavy metal as a metaphor for heroin, see David Ayers, "The Long Last Goodbye: Control and Resistance in the Work of William Burroughs."

[4] Before radioactive isotopes were known, scientists were using the term heavy metal (for a group of elements) and continue to do so.

[5] Heavy metal is not the only genre whose name-giver is contested. Who named rock and roll? Some cited blues songs from the 1920s through 1951, with that phrase, or parts of it, in the lyrics. However, most agree that the term as a genre's name was given by Alan Freed. There is no question that he was the one who put the term on the map with his popular late night radio program on WJW in Cleveland, *The Moondog Rock & Roll House Party*, which began in July 1951. But it seems that Freed was not the one who gave this name as an alternative to R&B (*Billboard*'s term for black popular music starting in 1949). Freed's sponsor, and more importantly the person who told him how much white kids loved R&B, record store owner Leo Mintz, probably coined the term.

[6] For a rich description of the impact of Burroughs (and the other Beat writers) on rock music, see Simon Warner's *Text and Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll: The Beats and Rock Culture.*

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