



## A Case for Heavy Metal

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Allan Bloom's seminal *Closing of the American Mind* was a jeremiad to the political, intellectual, and spiritual conditions that made liberal education possible. The torrents of the culture—an extreme and perpetual “openness” stemming from modern relativism—made people “closed” to the possibility of closure on the essential and fundamental questions of human life. One example Bloom gives is the influence of music on his students. Modern music represented a collapse between “high” and “low” culture. By appealing to the base aspects of the human person, rock music, with its “orgiastic thumping,” offered students a frenzied pleasure, promoting separation, individualism, sexual looseness, and drug abuse. All of this, Bloom concluded, left people unable to properly orient themselves to the deepest truths of human life, making liberal education impossible.

Some forty years later, much of Bloom's analysis has retained its potency. Pop stars are cultural icons and idols with immense power: some, like Taylor Swift, could even be said to have a devotional status, with the power to inspire a “Baby Boom.” Mick Jagger-esque androgyny has accelerated into transgenderism. Marijuana has been legalized and normalized in large parts of the country. Porn is ubiquitous, and studies suggest that virginity is exceedingly rare. Musically, modern music has become less dynamic, less structurally and harmonically complex, and more repetitive.

But Bloom's trenchant diagnosis misses something important from within the culture of modern music. *Metal* music and its subculture take things in a different direction: metal has anti-modern tendencies. Had Bloom lived longer,<sup>1</sup> he may have come to appreciate metal music for both its technical genius and its deeper interaction with enduring truths.

Metal music recovered the full-minor scale, and features musical complexity and sophistication, maintaining a strong emphasis on playing and mastering instruments. It is also spirited in an age of enervation, and a last bastion of masculinity in a feminized world. Thematically, lyrics and themes vary, but at its core it deals with permanent questions: death, despair, religion, war,<sup>2</sup> and an existential sense of meaning.

First, technical precision and mastery is an essential draw to metal music. The musicians are talented. They take years to hone the skill of playing their instrument. It requires a discipline of the spirit, the mind, and the hands to make the music. Guitar players create impressive solos.<sup>3</sup> Harmonically and melodically, the music is complicated, using key changes, tempo changes, and layered harmonies. We could call metal musicians the bodybuilders of music, pushing technical skill and ability to the limits. Innovation and creativity are to be found here.<sup>4</sup>

Much is made of “screamo” as evidence of the depravity of metal music, but this actually speaks to the technical rigor of metal. Screaming well takes precision and care in order to not destroy a singer’s vocal folds.<sup>5</sup> Those who take such care can scream night after night with no damage; order, rather than disorder, makes such performance possible. Hearing the “beauty” of screamed vocals can only be understood by listening to a lot of it, but the nuances to the “art” of screaming is there for all to hear.

Moreover, metal music recovered the full minor scale in Western music. The distinction between popular and traditional music is found at this juncture: rock and the blues opted for pentatonicism and ran with the basic four-chord structure that is still the basis of much of modern pop. Metal recovered the fullness of the minor scale in the composition of harmonies, melodies, and solos. Being fuller and more complete, it is a reaction against the simplicity of “low” pop music made for mass culture.

Second, metal is masculine in its vital energies. Both the aggressive aspects of the music itself and the socially acceptable displays of physicality that take place at metal concerts, “moshing,” offers a display that is properly masculine in a society that rigidly tamps down manifestations of physical power. Metal concerts could rightly be described as “fight club to a soundtrack.” Certainly, women do attend metal concerts, do enjoy metal music, and even perform in bands, but it is predominantly a male space, and one characterized by masculine energies of raw power.

Lyrically, the themes of metal music speak loudly. Metal has been associated with Satanism and the occult, and while there are some parts that either lean into or fully embrace dark spiritual practices, much of metal lyrics deal with religious themes in a more serious way, raising the existential and fundamentally human questions of belief, the afterlife, addiction and abuse, war and politics, and why we often feel so badly. Enlightenment and modern reason were supposed to replace religion as the source of happiness, peace, and prosperity, so metal music speaks to the fact that something has gone wrong in our turn from religion.

For instance, Slayer’s album,<sup>10</sup> *God Hates Us All*, is a theodicy. Guitarist Kerry King offered: “I definitely wanted to put more realism in it, more depth. *God Hates Us All* isn’t an anti-Christian line as much as it’s an idea I think a lot of people can relate to on a daily basis. One day you’re living your life, and then you’re hit by a car or your dog dies, so you feel like, ‘God really hates me today.’” These questions are as old as philosophy itself. To be sure, using one example as representative of all metal music is impossible, but it is fair to say that metal music finds itself sitting in the muck of nihilism at the heart of modernity.

Being a metalhead is an identity. In that way, Bloom’s notion that music is a deep source of meaning to young people rings true. But metal engages with important, human ideas, questions, and practices, and so opens man to what is most central to life, rather than closes him off from it.

1. Bloom died in 1992. There were well-known metal bands by that point, and Tipper Gore’s “Parental Music Resource Center” had successfully launched a massive publicity campaign in 1985 to get “Parental Advisory” labels added to records, including heavy metal records. During the Congressional hearing associated with the campaign, professors and psychiatrists testified about the negative effects of “heavy metal.” The controversy took place before the publication of *Closing of the American Mind*, and it is likely that Bloom would have had some familiarity or exposure to metal music, though I have not found any reference to writing where he talks about it. In the “Music” chapter, he only focuses on rock music, and so perhaps he lumped metal music as a species of rock n’ roll, but by the 1990s and 2000s, the differences became clearer as both genres developed their respective styles. Even today, some bands straddle the line between rock and metal (for instance, Disturbed, Alter Bridge, and many others in the “alternative metal” genre), but moving towards the extremes, the differences are clear.

2. With often a strong critique—see Metallica’s “Disposable Heroes” and Black Sabbath’s “War Pigs” for examples.

3. There are too many examples to cite, but see Arch Enemy’s “*War Eternal*” solo from 2:20–3:37.

4. Polyphia’s “*G.O.A.T.*” is evidence of this claim.

5. Compare “*Counting Worms*” by Knocked Loose with “*The Heretic Prevails*” (3:15–3:49 in particular) to see the difference. Having seen Knocked Loose perform live on multiple occasions, it seems that lead singer Bryan Garriss has damaged his singing voice from improper technique. Lamb of God’s Randy Blythe, conversely, has been active as a singer for almost 30 years.

6. Disturbed’s album, *Believe*.

7. Alter Bridge’s “Words Darker Than Their Wings” “Show Me a Sign” and “Blackbird” all speak to this theme, the former song being a dialectic between lead singer Myles Kennedy and lead guitarist Mark Tremonti. See also Killswitch Engage, “*Always*.”

8. Metallica, Megadeth, Slayer, and Anthrax, collectively known as the “Big Four” of thrash metal, all have written songs about war. Modern thrash metal band Havok’s 2017 album *Conformicide* took inspiration from Orwell’s 1984 in its lyrical criticism of the contemporary United States. In 2022, Falling in Reverse released “*ZOMBIFIED*,” a critique of political correctness and the COVID-19 lockdowns and medical tyranny.

9. Hardcore band Beartooth’s discography is just one of many good examples.

10. Lead vocalist Tom Araya is a practicing Catholic, even though some of the lyrical themes throughout the band’s career (largely written by Kerry King) and imagery are satanic or devilish.