While underground scenes tend to form and fade quickly, the extreme metal scene is unique in its longevity, its global reach and the intensity of the philosophy that often goes along with it. The result is a far-reaching network whose complexity is often invisible even to those immersed in it. And while metal is starting to get recognised for the dynamic—and often shocking—art form it is through documentaries such as ‘Metal: A Headbanger’s Journey’ and books such as the forthcoming attempt to put a philosophical bent on Metallica, the only attempt to look at metal and offer an explanation as lived experience is the recently published ‘Extreme Metal: Music And Culture On The Edge’ by former Terrorizer scribe, Keith Kahn-Harris. Although it’s a thorough work of sociological research, looking at how scenes work differently in different countries, as well as what unites them, delving into the close-knit interactions and often isolationist perspectives that accommodate each other so uniquely and much more, anyone involved in the metal scene can recognise their own relationship with extreme metal in the book, as well as understand the bigger picture. But can an academic book be taken up by the metal community? In his study in North London, the author was on hand to offer further perspective.

Who is the book aimed at?

“That’s the $54,000 question. It’s a work of academic sociological or cultural studies, but what I’ve tried to do is maximise its relevance to people who are not academics or sociologists. I want people in the metal scene to read it, and not because I want to sell more copies, but because I do believe in doing something as a form of intellectual masturbation. I want to influence the way people think and people inside the metal scene as much as academic sociologists.”

Was there original question that “Extreme Metal” stemmed from?

“This all started out in the early ’90s when I was an undergraduate. I have always had a complicated relationship with the metal scene. There’s a number of us that got into extreme metal through indie or alternative music, which was where the challenging music was at the time. I felt this overwhelming sense of curiosity towards the metal scene. It was not something that I was part of or by listening to the music and going to gigs, a part of the original question in a way was, ‘What is going on here?’ It’s as simple as that, I wanted to satisfy my own curiosity and wanted a licence to be nosy.”

There’s so many ways of looking at heavy metal – from a psychological viewpoint, philosophical, musicalological – you chose a sociological approach. What aspects of the scene did that particular approach illuminate?

“The most important question involved was a question of power: where does it lie in the extreme metal scene? In a sociological world, the concept of capital is not just a financial concept, it’s about how people attract prestige and power to themselves and it circulates like money does, albeit in an intangible form. For me that’s a central question in the book because that is precisely the sort of questions that are never asked within the scene, or are asked but quite marginally, and these include difficult questions about gender, race and sexuality. Those are the sorts of things that people within the scene don’t want to ask because it threatens their position.”

There seems to be a lot of complexities in extreme metal that separate it from other scenes. What are the complexities that were absolutely specific to heavy metal?

“That’s what’s so fascinating as a researcher. It’s not obvious stuff. The challenge of understanding an underground scene is quite formidable. The most interesting aspect is trying to understand how the scenes work in extreme metal, how you have a proliferation of global, national, and regional scenes. They all interconnect with each other, but they all have some degree of freedom from each other. So working out the conceptual framework to deal with that was very difficult. There’s no way of avoiding the complexity if you want to understand. So that for me was the biggest challenge. Understanding the globalisation of the scene is also crucial for understanding how power works, how different scenes relate to each other and why it is easier to be a death metal band in Sweden than it is to be a death metal band in Israel, or Malta, Italy or wherever. Those are the things that are the most difficult, especially when you tie in the whole history of the thing it adds a whole other dimension as well.”

Ironically, in Sweden, a country where the conditions are so comfortable, death metal really thrives...

“One of the things that is so remarkable is in a social democratic country, all the Scandinavian countries except for Denmark, which is the odd exception, they have these thriving scenes. That’s because it is very easy to be a musician in Scandinavia. You get quite a lot of support from the state and non-governmental organisations, like Intheho and Samoth from Emperor. They met through local government sponsored music workshops when they were quite young. And that’s a very, very common thing in these countries and of course there is a delicious irony that these people who have it easier than metalheads in other parts of the world are producing a lot of the most violent, anti-establishment music that has been produced by anybody, anywhere. Of course, one of the interesting things about that is it challenges the existing notions of resistance in art, that to produce resistive art you have to be suffering. A lot of these Norwegian and Swedish metalheads lead very comfortable lives, but yet they are still producing art that is extraordinarily
EXTREME METAL
MUSIC AND CULTURE ON THE EDGE

"THE CHALLENGE OF UNDERSTANDING AN UNDERGROUND SCENE IS QUITE FORMIDABLE."

transgressive.

One of the paradoxes you point out is the transgressive nature of the music, yet the scene around it, where followers have day jobs and the like, has a 'mundane' quality.

"That's one of the tensions I'm trying to capture in the book, the fact that the art produced is transgressive, it's pushing the boundaries. It's quite difficult to listen to but at the same time the everyday social factors that produce it are often quite mundane, sometimes even dull. You can't understand extreme metal without understanding that those two things go hand in hand and the tension between the two is what keeps the scene going. It's also the tension in the minds of all extreme metal lovers to be totally 'other', to be totally different, to be totally underground, to be totally full of hate or evil or whatever, and the desire to be the same kind of human being that everybody else is, to have family, kids and pets.

"One of the interesting things about the 1990s Norwegian scene is it was an attempt to sort of end that tension, to be completely transgressive, and how after a few years it reverted back to what it was before. There were plenty of people in the early '90s burning churches or going to prison and being completely transgressive now living quite quiet, comfortable lives, making music and producing albums, like Samoth. I'm not knocking Samoth, but that's what he's like. He's in his late 30s, he lives a life that's probably not that different to the rest of his neighbours in Norway except for the fact that he actually produces this extraordinary music. Some people in the scene see this as problematic; if you want to be black metal, you have to be totally black metal.

Despite all these complexities you point out, as well as the complex nature of the music, metal is still very much looked down on by the mainstream media. Why is that?

"It does get me angry sometimes. I can understand why people don't like it, it is an acquired taste, it is only ever going to be a minority taste. But at the very least you should recognise what is going on here is extraordinary. There is real innovation here, where the stereotype of metal, even by quite knowledgeable music critics, is that metal doesn't change. But in terms of change and innovation, certainly in the last few years, the amount of change and innovation has been pretty amazing.

If you look at the last twenty years, just think how far we've come in extreme metal since 'Seven Churches' and 'Black Metal'. However, I do think there has been more awareness. I mean Marduk, then have been recognised more than a lot of other bands.

In the book, you talk about women being marginalised in the metal scene, but what's also interesting is why so many women are attracted to extreme metal. As far as extreme metal goes, the three main gig promoters in the UK are all run or part run by women.

"I think what you find is the minority of women who are attracted to it tend to go all the way. They often have to be extremely good at the business side of the scene because they often have to be twice as tough as anybody else. Promoting is one of the toughest things to do, putting on gigs and not putting up with any bullshit, but to actually get to that stage in the first place is pretty impressive. It is very hard to know, I often shy away from saying why a person likes metal and why does that person not? To some extent it is unknowable. I don't know why I am into it necessarily, but what I can talk about is how people's background might predispose them to it or not into it. It is certainly the case that if you are a woman and you are attracted to it, it's going to be much more difficult to enter the scene. Maybe the internet is levelling the playing field to a certain extent. But the number of times I have been to a gig and a bloke fails to introduce his girlfriend... I find that problematic and awkward. There is sexism in other scenes; but at least metal has no pretensions about what it is or isn't in that respect it is very honest.

Are the paradoxes that metal is built upon a weakness or a strength?

"To grasp metal, particularly at the extreme end of things, it is important to grasp those paradoxes. The fact that what makes it to me so interesting, is that simultaneously you have something that is so dumb, populist, sexist, prejudiced, anti-intellectual, and at the same time, radical, avant garde, egalitarian, communardian, all these things. My argument is its vitality depends on it being both of these things at the same time. One of the reasons why I like extreme metal, and why I find The Wire's version of the avant garde so difficult is their version doesn't have the earthiness, whereas extreme metal, if it is anything else, it's earthly. It's human, it doesn't seem disembodied and surrealised. Extreme metal is lived. It's experienced. Even people reproducing the most abstruse post-black metal, they all like to bang their heads to Marduk or Manowar or Maiden."

"Extreme Metal: Music And Culture On The Edge" is published by Berg
http://www.kahn-harris.org/