



Black Sabbath and the Rise of Heavy Metal Music

by Andrew L. Cope

(Farnham: Ashgate, 2010)

Reviewer: Keith Kahn-Harris, Birkbeck College, University of London

Sheila Whiteley begins her foreword to this book with the enthusiastic comment “At last! A book about heavy metal as music” (p. xi). It’s certainly true that, although the field of ‘Metal Studies’ has grown considerably in recent years, heavy metal has not attracted the attention it deserves from musicologists. Musicologically-based studies as Robert Walser’s *Running With The Devil* and Harris Berger’s *Metal Rock and Jazz* are rare and focus on particular sub-genres or historical periods. Metal and its sub-genres still require systematic musicological description, not least to assist metal researchers who are not themselves musicologists but wish to engage with the sounds of the music – such as myself – in order to sonically anchor sociological studies of metal scenes. Andrew Cope’s *Black Sabbath and the Rise of Heavy Metal Music* goes some way towards filling this need, but its idiosyncrasies and errors seriously compromise the book’s ability to redefine the field.

Cope’s central argument and methodology is interesting and is summarised at the start of the book:

...Black Sabbath formulated radical and extensive transgressions of the blues and rock and roll context of their origins whilst Led Zeppelin’s more moderate transgressions of that same context faithfully retained blues and rock and roll stylisations; thus a clear dichotomy emerged between the two bands. The unique coding established by both Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin has been perpetuated through the engendering of those contrasting sets of coding by subsequent bands and this process has significantly contributed to the stability of the genres through frequent re-emphasising of the key codes. (p. 1-2)

The strongest section of this book is chapter two, in which Cope’s close analysis of Led Zeppelin’s and Black Sabbath’s musical syntax clearly establishes the key differences between the bands. Both bands were rooted in electric blues, but whereas Led Zeppelin extended the vocabulary of blues and folk music, Black Sabbath innovated more dramatically, creating a musical style based on sequences of power chords, down-tuned guitars, the abundant use of flattened 2nds and tritones, modal contours and episodic structuring. As Cope rightly points out, this musical syntax “...became the foundation of heavy metal and as later bands reiterated that synthesis they maintained, re-emphasised and developed these generic details” (p. 70). In contrast, Cope argues that Led Zeppelin’s musical syntax provided the foundation for hard rock.

The contrast between Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath is an important one and is helpful in clarifying the history of metal and its place in rock. Led Zeppelin’s influence on metal has probably been exaggerated – it’s hard to detect a trace of their style on most contemporary metal bands. But should the relationship between them be described as a dichotomy? In fact, the bands have plenty in common: a fascination with distorted guitars (albeit with different timbres); a tendency to draw on fantasy in lyrics (albeit different kinds of fantasy); innovative and distinctive vocal styles (albeit sounding very different). More importantly, while the blues influence on today’s metal bands is virtually undetectable, much of the 1970s and 1980s metal had a much closer relationship with hard rock – and concomitantly with Led Zeppelin

and ultimately with their blues roots. The dividing line between hard rock and 1980s 'lite' metal was blurred and Zeppelin-influenced bands such as Whitesnake had substantial followings within the metal world.

Thus it would have been more appropriate had Cope chosen a less strong term than 'dichotomy' to describe the relationship between Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath and between metal and hard rock. A concept such as 'ideal type' would have engendered a more subtle perspective on the ways that Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin provided musical models whose influences can be traced through the history of rock and metal. A more subtle framework would also have avoided the essentialism that permeates much of the book. The tracing of a genre back to a point of origin with a single band, as Cope does with Black Sabbath, is outdated in popular music studies and neglects the complexities that a more genealogical historical perspective can elucidate.

As Cope traces the influence of Black Sabbath in contemporary metal, so his argument becomes more idiosyncratic and problematic. Although his analysis of Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath's musical syntax and his basic musicological groundwork is often illuminating, Cope's knowledge of metal as a genre – as opposed to a collection of bands - appears to be variable. The bibliography is on the short side and does not include some key works and while his discography is quite lengthy, the actual number of bands discussed in the book is modest. There are also some small but telling errors in the book, for example: Napalm Death and Bolt Thrower were far from the "first to have extensively developed" low tessitura death growls (p. 133); early death metal bands such as Possessed and Death were just as important.

The most astonishing absence from the book is any mention of doom metal, the sub-genre that has been most assiduous in maintaining the Black Sabbath blueprint. What might the work of Saint Vitus, Eyehategod or even Sunn0))) tell us about the possibilities and limitations of the Sabbath legacy? Nor is there any discussion of nu metal, whose rap and funk influences were such that many metal fans rule it not to be metal. What might such conflicts over the definition of metal tell us about the history of the genre? Also missing is an adequate recognition of the influence of punk on thrash metal and the New Wave of British Heavy Metal and the continual cross-fertilisation between metal and hardcore. Regrettably, this book atomises the rich and complex history of metal into a narrow set of bands and musical tropes.

But the most problematic argument in the book is the dichotomy Cope sets up between hard rock as misogynist and sexist and heavy metal as "anti-patriarchal". The author suggests that:

My research of [sic] occult philosophies and the music of Black Sabbath therefore, has led me to conclude that the lyrics and philosophical world of Black Sabbath appear to contradict some of the more common theories concerning heavy metal's non sonic or aesthetic values such as Walser's concept of heavy metal as a 'social conflation of power and patriarchy' (1993: 1). My reasoning for this is based on the theory that (1) Satanism is anti-Christian (and therefore anti-patriarchal by default) and non-conformist, and (2) much of Wiccan and pagan philosophical is overtly matriarchal. Therefore, by buying into these philosophies Black Sabbath centre themselves on a world that largely supports female empowerment. (p. 83)

This argument is further extended to heavy metal itself: as Black Sabbath is anti-patriarchal and forms the essence of heavy metal, so heavy metal is always already anti-patriarchal. Now, one doesn't have to take the opposing position, that heavy metal is always already sexist, to see the spuriousness of Cope's extremely tendentious reasoning. The argument that by virtue of being anti-Christian, Satanism is anti-patriarchal, not only essentialises Christianity to an absurd degree, it also assumes that everything Satanism is, Christianity is not. Yet even a cursory glance at contemporary Satanism reveals that, while there certainly exists a kind of Satanic feminism, Satanic celebrations of the sovereign individual often boil down to a sub-Robert Bly kind of celebration of the savage, autonomous male (to say nothing of the naked women used as altars in Satanic rites). Furthermore, Pagan and Wiccan philosophy is too diverse to be essentialised as unproblematically anti-patriarchal. Extending

these simplistic readings of Satanism and Paganism to Black Sabbath also implies that the band themselves had a consistent and coherent kind of 'message', which is a dubious assumption. To extend this reading even further to heavy metal as a whole, as Cope does, rides roughshod over the diverse and complex history of metal. Cope is right to emphasise that spaces for women in metal do exist and are increasing with the growing popularity female-fronted bands like Nightwish and Arch Enemy (although female musicians as opposed to vocalists are still very rare) and he rightly points to the anti-patriarchal possibilities within metal's occult fascination. But to ignore the marginalisation of women in many parts of the metal scene, the presence of extreme violent misogynist lyrics in some forms of death metal, the ubiquitous and casual use of naked and sometimes abusive pictures of women, is a complete distortion of the complexity of heavy metal culture.

Black Sabbath and the Rise of Heavy Metal Music is not without its virtues. It does include some detailed musicological analyses that scholars are likely to find useful. However, as an analysis of heavy metal, it is highly compromised by the gaps in the author's knowledge and its extraordinary methodological and conceptual naivety. It appears then, that we must continue to wait for the musicological blockbuster on metal that is so badly needed.

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