

Leah Honarbakhsh Metal Culture

“Metal for me is a brotherhood. I think that’s what keeps it alive. We pass it on to our younger brothers, we pass it on to our friends . . . it’s in your blood, it’s the air that you breathe.”

– Joey Severance, tour manager for various Metal bands

Stepping into the club makes me relax my squinting eyes. The cool darkness is welcome after the scorching South Florida sun that has been beating on my head for the past half hour. I glance around for familiar faces as I shove my driver’s license and ticket in the back pocket of my worn-out jeans. My boyfriend puts an arm around my shoulders and when I look into his face he grins excitedly. We walk past the bar and the merch booths, making our way through the steadily thickening crowd towards the lower level of the club where we know people will be waiting for us.

Social identity, in relation to groups, can be defined as a “part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Worchel). Simply put, one of the ways that people define themselves is based on their membership in social groupings and how important those memberships are to them. These social groupings can result in a culture, an entire society of people who believe and engage in the same things. According to Joel Charon, a culture is a “body of truth” that comes with its own vocabulary, events and beliefs that people who belong to that culture perceive as true and valuable. Metal culture is no different and holds the same truths for its faithful and dedicated believers. I have been a “Metalhead” since I was fifteen years old. This is one of the ways that I define myself, belonging to a vast community of people who enjoy Heavy Metal music of all genres, from all over the world. We are unique, not only because of our personalities, goals and beliefs, but because of the different sub-genres of Metal that we listen to and how we adhere to the rules of those genres.

Dress-Code

“What makes Metal a culture is firstly the music, no question about it. Secondly . . . uniform is the wrong word, but the way you dress. People dress in a certain way and it marks them immediately a Metal fan.”

– Malcolm Dome, writer and DJ

Before we walk down to the lower level, I look toward the front of the venue; “the rail” as we call it. I see our friends John and Alyssa hugging the metal railing right in front of the stage and talking. John is a mechanic in Vero Beach who gives the best hugs in the world.

He's a bear of a guy, towering over the rest of the crowd. Because my boyfriend's name is also John, we call him "Vero John." Alyssa is his new girlfriend, a sweet and somewhat quiet girl. They drive to many of the shows in our neck of the woods, which is unfortunately the only time we get to see them. John has his camera out, ready to take another set of amazing photos. The best of those photos will be printed in five-by-sevens and eight-by-tens, saved for the next time he might see the subjects so he can get them to autograph them. The autographed photos will then be framed and hung up in his Vero Beach apartment next to countless others. My boyfriend calls Vero John's apartment "the museum." Framed pictures of Metal bands, autographed guitars and cymbals and ticket stubs from every show make up the décor. The walls of his guest room, where John and I have stayed a couple times, are plastered with set lists. Judging from their position at the very front of the crowd, Vero John must be hoping to snag another one tonight. He wears one of his many tour shirts, to prove he has been to the big shows . . . the festivals in Canada and in far-away states. Alyssa wears beautifully shiny black boots that reach her knees, "gothic" style with large buckles. My boyfriend and I smile and wave as they look back at us, wearing the same excited expressions we are.

Charon also writes that "culture is a set of norms," norms meaning the "rules that people are supposed to follow" and "how people ought to act in the social organization." One big part of this is the way Metalheads are supposed to look. Looking at footage of Metal shows around the world and pictures of famous bands from across all sub-genres, there are constants in relation to style. Most of the time, except for some of the more theatrical bands, band members are hard to pick out from the crowd; everyone fits together. Long hair is important, for guys and girls, as well as wearing band shirts. Black is usually the staple, but any band shirt in any color works. Metalheads can pick out the Thrash-Metallers, Black Metal Kids, Deathcore Kids and Folk-Metallers by what shirt they are wearing. According to Revolver magazine, a music-related publication, Metal fashion "dos" include denim vests (a Thrash Metal staple), camo pants (more of a Death Metal thing) and bullet belts. Fashion "don'ts" were listed as top hats (no Slash-wannabes, please) and moon boots.

Markings

"It's a lifestyle . . . Metal fans love it forever. No one goes, 'Yeah, I was really big into Slayer one summer . . .' you know? I've never met that guy. I've only met the guy who's got 'Slayer' carved across his chest."

– Rob Zombie

Next to Vero John and Alyssa, is Kathy. Kathy is one of the coolest and most popular people in the South Florida Metal scene. To acquaintances and other show-goers, she is known as "Metal Mom." That's what we knew her as before I was introduced to her by Vero John at another show. By day, Kathy is a teacher working with Autistic kids in a Broward County kindergarten. By night (and on weekends), "Metal Mom" goes to shows, takes photos and videos and posts them on her website and YouTube page. My boyfriend used to subscribe to her videos, before we knew her, because she went to all the same shows we did. She is also a long-

time vegan, which is one of the ways that she and I connected – I have been a vegetarian for six years. She is the “mom” of the group, rolling her eyes at Vero John for his obnoxious statements and fart jokes, but she is also the most brutal of us all, hitting all the heaviest and craziest shows in and out of the state.

Another important factor in the style and dedication of Metalheads is the idea of a brand, a marking, a symbol that denotes the “ultimate fan.” Makiko Kuwahara, who studied the nature of tattoos and tattooing in relation to anthropology, writes that tattoos are “embedded in the historical and cultural contexts of each society,” and that relationships are formed because of them. “It locates the person in society and relationships form accordingly” Kuwahara writes, concluding “thus, being tattooed or not is writing one’s relationship on the body.” While this is certainly true of tattoo culture, which is another story in and of itself, it is also true of Metal culture. The biggest fans are the ones who have tattoos of lyrics, legendary Metal artist portraits and other meaningful pieces of art that developed out of their love for music. It is not uncommon to go to a Metal show and see your favorite album art, guitarist or band logo inked into someone else’s skin. Tattoos, like other forms of style and fashion, draw people together, start conversations and build lasting relationships within the Metal culture.

Beliefs

“I was so interested in the idea of the ‘Kiss Army.’ It was this idea that if you like Kiss, that means that actually you’re are part of this like, massive coven of people who have the same values you have. It’s not a way to understand your loneliness, it’s sort of a way to feel as though you belong to something larger than yourself . . .”

– Chuck Klosterman, author and essayist

We walk down the steps onto the lower level of the club. The crowd is getting thicker, the music is getting louder and energy is pulsing all around us. The show will start soon. I look around for more friends and I spot Alex walking purposefully towards us to say hello. Alex is a fellow student at the university I attend, a Music Education major who plays the drums. He is excited tonight, already frustrated about having to wait so long for the bands to come on and talking about what songs they might play. I remember when I first met him, standing in line next to me outside a show that was nearly sold out . . . hoping and hoping that we would be able to buy our tickets and make it in. He had told me about hiding his septum piercing from his extremely religious parents. His shirt had said “Christians to the Lions” on the back. Gotta love Metalheads, I think, as I watch him give my boyfriend a handshake and reach over to give me a hug.

Charon continues by saying that “culture is a set of values,” values that are defined as “that which we consider desirable, that which we prefer, that we consider important enough to guide much of our action.” In the Metal culture, these ideas manifest in the interests that push Metalheads to choose their favorites genre, drive ten hours to see a show and send endless amounts of money on band merchandise and music. Charon says it’s about a “commitment to something.” As every Metalhead knows, there is quite a significant amount of commitment in-

volved in the culture of Metal. Anthropologist and Metalhead Sam Dunn's documentary titled "Metal: A Headbanger's Journey" addresses this as an extremely important factor in Metal culture. Dunn states that Metal is kept alive by the dedication of the fans: "they are the ones who publish magazines, program college radio shows, run independent record labels and host news sites and chat rooms on the internet." Oftentimes, friends and dedicated fans of bands will go on tour with them, work merch booths, and pass out demos at other shows.

Musicianship

"It gives them a life of imagination . . . and it usually inspires the lot of them to pick up a guitar and start playing."

– Bruce Dickinson, frontman for Iron Maiden

We stand around anxiously, waiting for the sound check and I notice Ryan slightly to the left of us, staring quietly up at the stage. I call him over and he lopes towards us, grinning behind his glasses. Looking at Ryan, no one would know he listened to some of the craziest and heaviest Metal out there. Slim and unassuming, Ryan wears thin square glasses, jeans and sneakers, perhaps a band shirt or plain t-shirt. His short hair sets him apart from the rest of the crowd and paints him as a certain kind of Metalhead. He is everyone's favorite person. Sweet, nice and somewhat quiet, he stands and listens as others talk, interjecting sometimes and laughing at others. No one has ever seen him mad, or upset, or anything but content, calm and cheerful. He doesn't jump in the pit, he is happy enough just to stand in the middle of the crowd singing along.

Charon's final assessment of culture revolves around the idea that "culture is a set of goals." While this may seem the same as the aforementioned "values," Charon argues that the two ideas are different. He defines goals as "practical ends to be achieved and then replaced by other goals; they are the specific ends around which we organize our actions." For many of us who have grown up with or found ourselves enamored by Metal music, these goals and actions involve a music of our own. Some of us are drummers, others are guitarists or bassists. Regardless of what instrument we play, we heard a Metal song or musician at one point in our lives and the passion began. From the initial set of "practical ends," we pursue music school, play in Metal bands, Jazz bands, Classical ensembles and strive to make a living out of a dream.

Events

"It's a substrata of society, as it were, because what attracts fans to themselves is a tribal attitude. It's 'let's go to a festival, let's enjoy ourselves' and the fact that the outside world doesn't actually understand is fantastic."

– Malcolm Dome, writer and DJ

With my boyfriend, Alex, and Ryan by my side, I glance around for the rest of the group. I see a flash of long blonde hair coming through the crowd and I know they are here. My

best friend James finally walks up, his familiar haughty smirk ever present, with Daniel, Bruno, Shauni and another Alex in tow. Daniel, Bruno and Alex are the stoners of the group. They hide pipes and weed in their pockets and shoes, but it doesn't matter. Security doesn't care. These guys love all kinds of Metal, but today they wear denim vests, patches covering all sides. Shauni wears a vest herself tonight and it slams harshly against me as she dives at me for a hug. Shauni is Alex's girlfriend and they are damn near inseparable. Bruno says "what's up" in his thick Peruvian accent and Daniel just laughs by way of greeting. James gives me a sideways, one-armed hug and his incredibly long hair brushes my face. James doesn't need to wear anything other than jeans and a band shirt to demonstrate his belonging to this community, his hair is enough. People recognize him and stop to say hello, patting him on the back with choruses of "hey, man!" or "Dude, you going in the pit?" We all laugh, watching him drink in his apparent popularity with that smirk still in place.

One of the most important rites of passage and events for a Metalhead is attending a concert. McFeat writes that "the minimal condition in group definition . . . has to do with a group's history—operationally, the repetitiveness of its meetings—and, underlying this, the accumulated experiences of its members." As a defining condition related to Metal culture, these "meetings" would be the equivalent of the monthly concert calendar. Part of belonging to a Metal scene is attending the important events. Some fans pay thousands of dollars every year in concert tickets, some even more to see concerts in other countries. Others hit every local Metal show they can to support unknown bands and the local scene. Friends go on road-trips to catch their favorite bands at some hole-in-the-wall venue in the next state over. Die-hard fans shell out for plane tickets because "there weren't any dates" in their home state. Metal festivals reign supreme overseas, the most famous of which are Bloodstock in the United Kingdom and Wacken Open Air in Germany. The United States boasts some of their own festivals, like Maryland Deathfest and Summer Slaughter. The best part about the Metal community is that even at the smallest show in the smallest club, fans share their experiences. There's always someone who drove in from out of town, or had been to Wacken the previous year, or saw Amon Amarth at the same venue you did two years ago. Metal culture grows stronger through the experiences of the community and the love that people share for the music that changed their lives forever.

"I think it's probably more than anything the fact that it becomes a great big family of people who all share one thing; that is Metal. They just love it, and it's really them against the world and I think that's its importance and why it's lasted so long."

- Ronnie James Dio

The music stops and the lights suddenly go out. There is a deafening roar from the crowd and I can pick out the voices of my friends around me. Metal horns fly into the air as the stage lights turn on and the band walks on stage. I am screaming at the top of my lungs and so is everyone else. People rush past me, pushing their way to the front of the club. The girl in front of me bounces excitedly as I grin at my friends. The first song begins and all hell breaks loose. The outer walls of the crowd push back as the inner walls congeal into a circle, pushing and shoving each other in time with the music. Someone falls; three people lift him back up,

pat him on the back and throw him back into the pit. The guitars are squealing and voices are screaming out lyrics they've sung in their bedrooms for years. I laugh as the pit gets wider and the newbies are suddenly easy to make out, rushing back up the stairs to the upper level of the club. I see Thrash kids, Death Metal kids, Power Metal kids, Black Metal kids all smiling, laughing and banging their heads together. I think about the small events that have led me to be a part of this amazing group of people. People who would die for their friends, who will love this music until the day they die, who will pass that love on to their children. I think about the global community that I have come to love, respect and cherish with every fiber of my being. These are my people.

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This essay is dedicated to Metal fans around the world, without whom the music would not and could not have survived this long.

Last but certainly not least, this essay is also dedicated to the South Florida Metal scene, without whom my experience with Metal would not, and could not, have been any better.