

# Caught in a mosh



## I. Overview

- **Moshing** is a ritualized and furious form of dancing which combines physical aggression with collective displays of emotion.
- Moshing originated in the 1980s U.S. hardcore scene in Washington, DC.
- The vocalist of **Bad Brains** used the term “mash” in song lyrics to describe aggressive dancing at their shows. Due to his Jamaican accent, fans mistakenly heard “mosh” and the term suddenly appeared in numerous metal magazines.

# I. Overview

- There are many types of mosh pits that are associated with different subgenres of metal and punk music.
  - A **circle pit** is a form of moshing in which participants run in a circular motion around the edges of the pit, often leaving an open space in the center.
  - A **wall of death** is a form of moshing which sees the audience divide down the middle into two halves either side of the venue, before each side runs towards the other, slamming the two sides together.
  - **Hardcore dancing** is a term that covers multiple styles of moshing like windmilling, two stepping, or floorpunching.

## II. Etiquette

- Mosh pits appear chaotic but there are unwritten rules that are understood by the participants.
  - ➊ Pick someone up when they fall. Everyone should look after one another.
  - ➋ Respect people who are circumventing the mosh pit. Do not force others to join if they are not comfortable.
  - ➌ No actual (intentional) violence.

### III. Liminality

- **Liminality:** the transitional period or phase of a rite of passage, during which the participant lacks social status or rank, remains anonymous, shows obedience and humility, and follows prescribed forms of conduct, dress, etc.
- A mosh pit is an example of a liminal space.
  - As metalheads enter underground metal venues, they are stripped of their socio-economic status, everyday positions and routine expectations; instead, they take on their subcultural roles and identities.
  - Metal fans find themselves in a transitional phase, rejecting the society that they belong to while being reincorporated into an alternative society.

### III. Liminality

- Metal shows are very physical, and the outbreak of a mosh pit resembles the act of fighting.
- The mosh pit exhibits physical interactions that come close to harm but in a context that is playing with a type of liminal practice which simultaneously embraces and fights violence.
- The mosh pit challenges all the morals and orders regarding violence, aggression, anger, gender roles and expectations, the body, and how we should physically treat others.

## IV. Community

- Mosh pits provide an opportunity for metal fans to play with darker aspects of existence, subvert normative social conventions, and release pent-up frustrations while fostering a strong sense of community.
- *“I went into the mosh pits because I wanted to be part of it. I loved how crazy people went and how ecstatic the music made me feel”* - Ariel (metal fan)

## V. Headbanging

- **Headbanging** is vigorous nodding to the beat of the music.
- Metal fans refer to themselves as “headbangers,” and the same epithet is widely used to represent the genre as a whole.



## V. Headbanging

- Headbanging is an improvised dance: the movements are not choreographed ahead of time.
- Each musician and audience member decides spontaneously when and how to move during performance or listening, based on what they feel as the beat and what they think of as the most exciting moments of the song's form.

## V. Headbanging

- Why do metal musicians and fans headbang?
  - It amplifies a listener's experience of rhythm, allowing for the transformation of energy in the music into a felt bodily experience.
  - It communicates a level of excitement and commitment to the performers and other audience members.
- The social aspects to movement are just as important as the physical.

## V. Headbanging

- Where did the practice of headbanging originate?
  - The physical movements of headbanging bear a strong resemblance to accounts of African and African American dancing by Black Studies scholars.
  - These movements contrast with the relative lack of rhythm in movement used by musicians in the European classical tradition.
- Heavy metal, like all forms of rock music, originates from the blues. The social construction of headbanging as a participatory practice follows directly from precedents in Black music cultures.

## V. Headbanging

- Some scholars characterize metal music as progressively moving away from its blues roots, especially in the extreme metal subgenres.
- Some argue that headbanging, and possibly vocal technique and other important components of the metal genre, does not develop away from the blues as much as it ritualizes certain aspects of African American music culture.
  - Aspects of earlier African American culture have been transformed into (mostly white) metal culture.

## References

- Riches, G. (2011). Embracing the chaos: Mosh pits, extreme metal music and liminality. *Journal for Cultural Research*, 15(3), 315-332.
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