

Gender, power, and sexuality in heavy metal



I. Masculinity

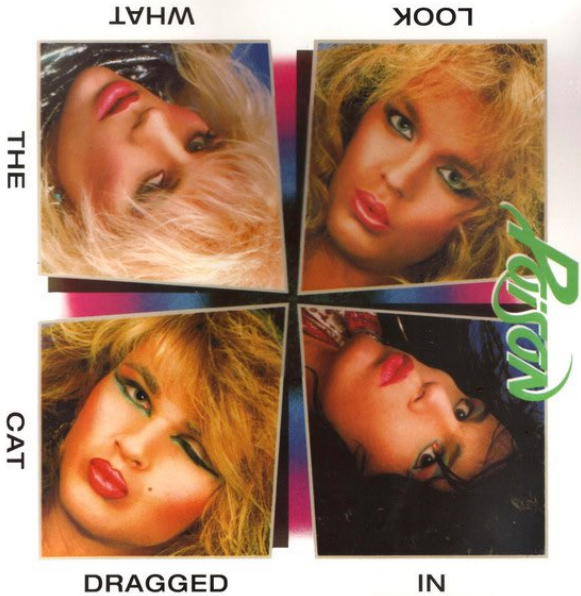
- Heavy metal is inherently **masculine**.
- In the early days of heavy metal (1970s), masculinity played out in two ways.
 - ❶ Patriarchal masculinity which centers on the relationship with women in which male desire and power is paramount (hard rock bands like **Van Halen** or **KISS**).
 - ❷ Male-bonding masculinity that focused on serious issues such as good vs evil or life and death, rather than sex and romance (**Black Sabbath** and **Judas Priest**).
 - Young working-class men played to a mostly male, working-class audience. Industrial work was dirty, rough and muscular work that defined masculinity.

I. Masculinity

- The dominant metal subgenre of the 1980s was **hair metal** or **glam metal**.
- **Glam/hair metal**: A subgenre of heavy metal that features pop-influenced hooks and guitar riffs, upbeat rock anthems, and slow power ballads. It borrows heavily from the fashion and image of 1970s glam rock.



I. Masculinity



I. Masculinity

- Glam/hair metal's gender ambiguity is an example of **deconstructed masculinity**.
- It does not convey homosexuality; the aesthetic was not straight-gay but masculine-feminine.
- Women groupies, frequent trips to strip-clubs, and strippers as romantic partners constantly reinforced heterosexuality.
- Some band names played up the deconstruction: **Twisted Sister**, **Britny Fox**, and **Cinderella**.

II. Women in heavy metal

- While the more extreme genres of thrash, death, and black metal exhibit **hypermascularity**, hair metal was the first metal subgenre where women musicians became popular.



Lita Ford, Doro and Vixen

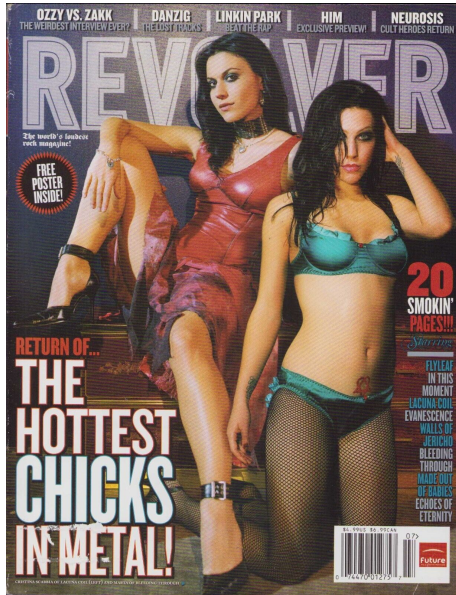
II. Women in heavy metal

- The appearance of female hair metal performers was adapted from their male colleagues who had borrowed their look from feminine visual attributes.
- These women were not on an equivalent level with hair metal's men.
 - Hair metal challenges the outward appearance of gender but leaves in tact the asymmetrical power relations of gender.
 - Women in hair metal were sexualized and their position as artists was undermined by frequent mention of the men who helped them write their material.

II. Women in heavy metal

- Women in metal were considered a gimmick in the 1980s and this idea extended through the 2000s.
- Bands with women operatic singers like **Nightwish**, **Within Temptation**, and **Evanescence** scored international chart hits in the 2000s.
 - Bands with women vocalists were classified as “female-fronted” metal, regardless of differences in musical style.
 - Should **Nightwish** and **Arch Enemy** be placed into the same category?

II. Women in heavy metal



II. Women in heavy metal

*“Being female is secondary when it comes to the band. We’ve never promoted the fact I was female, I’ve never done solo photo sessions, or any kind of self-promotion and I think I have gained more respect because of it...Seriously though, that’s something I hate about a lot of these new bands, when the main focus is on the girl in the band. The media love it, it sells magazines, but it makes it harder for the female musicians who don’t want to promote themselves that way.” - Jo Bench of **Bolt Thrower***

II. Women in heavy metal

- **Social marking:** Being singled out based on non-ability traits.
- Women are more visible in male-dominated metal scenes, despite being underrepresented.
- On average, women comprise about 3% of metal musicians globally. As such they are treated as *tokens*.
 - They tend to be evaluated as less competent through a gendered frame. “You play pretty well, for a girl.”
 - Appearance is more influential for gaining attention.
 - Women are subject to **role encapsulations**, symbolic boundaries about what a certain gender should do. This forces women into limited roles.

II. Women in heavy metal

- Are there positive aspects of increased visibility?
- *“You automatically gain some sort of fan base. It’s really true. We have gained followers because we are female and that makes them interested in us.”* - Elsa, guttural vocalist
- Men, in particular, evaluate the higher visibility of women as an advantage.
 - This reasoning assumes a level playing field, ignoring structural inequalities that women have faced in metal musicianship.

II. Women in heavy metal

Table 2.1. Percentage of Men and Women, within Subgenres.

Subgenre (sorted by percentage of women, descending)	Men (%)	Women (%)
Gothic metal	83.1	16.9
Folk metal	91.0	9.0
Power metal	96.0	4.0
Progressive metal	96.1	3.9
Doom metal	96.5	3.5
Heavy metal	97.0	3.0
Black metal	97.5	2.5
Crossover metal	98.0	2.0
Death metal	98.3	1.7
Grindcore	98.5	1.5
Thrash metal	98.8	1.2

II. Women in heavy metal

- These statistics are in line with theories of sex role socialization, suggesting that “softer,” more melodic music is associated with stereotypical feminine behavior.
- There is not a single country in the world where women form a majority in metal music production.
- 44.2% of all women involved in metal music production are vocalists.

II. Women in heavy metal



III. Sexual orientation

- Two moments that reshaped the discourse around sexuality in heavy metal are the coming out of prominent musicians Rob Halford of **Judas Priest** and Gaahl of **Gorgoroth**.



III. Sexual orientation

- Both can be considered representative of typical metal-masculinities.
- Both musicians made their homosexuality publicly known reasonably late in their careers.
- Neither case brought significant homophobic reaction.
- However, homosexuality was not suddenly accepted as completely valid in heavy metal culture.

III. Sexual orientation

- Heavy metal is **heteronormative**.
 - The impossibility of “gay metal” is so absolute that homoerotic imagery is widespread.
 - It is unthinkable that it will be interpreted as homosexual, making it “safe.”

III. Sexual orientation



III. Sexual orientation

- Explicit opposition to homosexuality is rare.
- The philosophy or ethos of heavy metal is not reliant on social categories. To “be metal” is to be true to oneself and deeply committed to the scene.
 - The most serious criticisms are reserved for those who transgress this rule.
 - Rob Halford was criticized for his industrial music side project in the 1990s as it was a departure from “true” heavy metal.

III. Sexual orientation

- Rob Halford proved himself as metal first and then came out after his reputation was unimpeachable.
- It was apolitical in intent, performed without any claims being made that heavy metal should or could change.
- Most metal scene members never reach such a position and may never affirm their metalness to a degree sufficient to make their sexuality irrelevant.

References

- Heesch, F., & Scott, N. (Eds.). (2016). Heavy metal, gender and sexuality: Interdisciplinary approaches. Routledge.
- Berkers, P., & Schaap, J. (2018). Gender inequality in metal music production. Emerald Publishing Limited.