

# What is heavy metal?

**Nobody:**

**Judas Priest:**



Looks like I'm about to break the law

# I. Overview

- **Heavy metal** is a form of rock music that developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, characterized by loud distorted guitars, emphatic rhythms, and a variety of powerful vocal styles.
  - Initially took from the traditions of blues, psychedelic rock, and hard rock.
  - Metal has a greater emphasis on minor tonality.
  - The music embraces darker themes and imagery.
  - Since its inception, metal music has split into many diverse offshoots but they all share a core set of characteristics.

# I. Overview

- The origin of the term **heavy metal** is debatable.
  - The phrase “heavy metal thunder” appears in Steppenwolf’s 1968 song *Born To Be Wild*. It repurposes the term from the periodic table of the elements to describe a motorcycle engine roaring on a desert highway.
  - The phrase was used in music reviews. In *Rolling Stone* the term “heavy metal robots” was employed as a criticism.
  - It is likely that the term developed from the vernacular of “hippie counterculture” of the 1960s.

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- Heavy metal is also a **subculture**.
- **Subculture:** A relatively diffuse social network having a shared identity, distinctive meanings around certain ideas, practices, and objects, and a sense of marginalization from or resistance to a perceived “conventional” society. Many subcultures also share:
  - Specialized vocabulary that demonstrate insider knowledge.
  - A sense of history surrounding legendary events, heroes and pioneers.
  - Social support systems where likeminded people feel accepted.

# I. Overview

- **Authenticity** is the most important value in heavy metal culture.
  - It manifests as a disinterest in commercial appeal or “selling out.”
  - There is often disagreement about what qualifies as *true* heavy metal.
  - It contributes to elitism and “gatekeeping.”



## I. Overview

- In recent years, the study of heavy metal has developed into an academic discipline called *metal studies*.
  - There is a peer-reviewed journal called *Metal Music Studies*.
  - The journal is published by the International Society for Metal Music Studies (ISMMS), which is an academic society comprised of metal music scholars in various fields.
- This surge in scholarly attention to heavy metal has evolved alongside a recent increase in the journalistic representation of heavy metal music.
  - Heavy metal news blogs **Metalsucks** and **Metal Injection** were founded in NYC and have wide readership.

## II. Origins



Aston Street in Birmingham, England, 1962

## II. Origins

- Heavy metal developed from blues based hard rock in a post-war industrial setting.
- Who was the first metal band?
  - **Black Sabbath**, formed in 1968, is widely acknowledged as the first metal band.



## II. Origins

### • Black Sabbath

- Detuned guitars and bluesy riffs created incredibly heavy sounds, but the tempos were somewhat slow and lethargic.
- Lyrics tackled heavy themes such as mental health, suicide, addiction, depictions of war, the occult, and people questioning their role in society.
- *“I would go past the factories and put rhythms in my head to different machine sounds. [Birmingham] was a place that had multiple factories. It had constant steam and smoke, so it has a very drab looking landscape. That’s where we were brought in.”*  
-Drummer Bill Ward
- Guitarist Tony Iommi lost his fingertips on his right hand in a sheet metal factory accident. He played with soft plastic tips attached to the ends of his fingers, influencing the sound of his guitar.

## II. Origins

- **Judas Priest** is another band from Birmingham that formed in 1969. They developed faced paced, high-energy riffing, rebellious themes, operatic vocals and a “leather and spikes” image.



## II. Origins



### III. NWOBHM

- **The New Wave of British Heavy Metal (NWOBHM):** A musical movement of the mid-to-late 1970s and 1980s in which heavy metal bands in the United Kingdom embraced the tempos and energy of punk rock.
- **Iron Maiden** focused on melodic guitar harmonies, epic vocals, and historical themes. They pioneered the genre of power metal.



### III. NWOBHM

- **Motörhead** is credited with inventing speed metal, which heavily influenced **Metallica**. They also used significant vocal distortion.



### III. NWOBHM

- **Def Leppard** embraced the glam rock style with many mainstream pop hits, inspiring hair metal acts like **Poison** and **Motley Crüe**.



### III. NWOBHM

- There were many NWOBHM bands that did not enjoy mainstream success but were influential to bands like **Metallica**. Those bands include **Venom**, **Saxon**, **Grim Reaper**, **Diamond Head** and others.
- *Influence* is very important in metal music.
  - Artists or musical movements can have an impact on the development of new genres.
  - Economic circumstances play an important role in how cultural goods are developed.

## References

- Heavy Metal 101 @ MIT
- Haenfler, Ross. *Subcultures: The Basics*. Taylor & Francis, 2014.