

Lands of Fire and Ice:
An Exploration of
Death Metal Scenes

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An anthropology whose objects are no longer conceived as automatically and naturally anchored in space will need to pay particular attention to the way spaces and places are made, imagined, contested, and enforced. (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 17-18)

Introduction

Death metal is widely regarded as one of the most aggressive, technical, and visceral forms of music. Characterized by guttural vocals, distorted and down-tuned guitars, rapid double-bass drumming, and complex song structures, death metal emerged in the mid-1980s as an extreme offshoot of the genre of heavy metal. Its lyrics and iconography (including group logos and album covers) typically depict themes of horror and gore, environmental destruction, political corruption, and social decay. Death metal bands, particularly Tampa, Florida's Cannibal Corpse, have sparked considerable controversy among political and religious groups and have been banned in several countries (Purcell 2003, Kahn-Harris 2003, Christie 2003).

"Scenes" have played a particularly important role in the development and evolution of death metal. Most notably, the two distant locations of Tampa, Florida and Gothenburg, Sweden have served as the most influential scenes throughout the genre's twenty-year history. In 1983, Tampa became the birthplace of death metal when the group Mantas (which later changed its name to Death) released its first demo cassette. This primitive recording was circulated throughout the underground metal cassette tape trading circuit, and in turn spawned a number of bands from the Tampa area, most importantly Morbid Angel, Obituary, and Deicide. By the early 1990s, death metal had gained international popularity and new scenes began to emerge. Most prominent among these were Stockholm and (especially) Gothenburg, Sweden where bands such as Entombed, Dismember, At The Gates, and In Flames combined the aggressiveness of the "Tampa sound" with the melodic European metal of Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, and others. This particular style of death metal, which has been labelled the "Gothenburg sound," typically focuses less on themes of horror and gore and instead addresses societal and philosophical issues including media manipulation, political corruption, and hopelessness.

The influence of the Tampa and Gothenburg death metal scenes is well supported by fan discourse and metal writers (Moynihan and Söderlind 1998; Popoff n.d.; Christie 2003; Wasyluk 2003; Ayers 2002). When I was growing up as an avid death metal fan and musician in the 1980s and 1990s, the Tampa scene was widely regarded as the most vibrant and important in the genre. In this pre-Internet world, news about the Tampa scene spread by word of mouth, tape trading, and small magazines and fanzines. Through similar mechanisms and an emerging online culture, the Gothenburg scene flourished in the mid to late 1990s and its sound continues to have an enormous influence on metal bands in North America, Europe, and other parts of the globe. Yet there has been no examination of why death metal thrived in these two specific localities. How did these two scenes become the most important scenes in death metal's twenty-year history? And what does the prominence of these two scenes suggest about the relationship between place and metal?

This paper draws on fifteen years experience as a death metal fan and musician in two metal scenes in Canada (Victoria, British Columbia and Toronto, Ontario), an analysis of texts (particularly musician discourse and books and articles on heavy metal) and theoretical research (especially John Connell and Chris Gibson's recent book, *Sound Tracks: Popular Music, Identity and Place*). It critically investigates the development of the Tampa and Gothenburg death metal scenes and sounds and raises questions for future research on the relationship between music and place. It is not a comprehensive history of death metal¹ or a detailed analysis of the wealth of theoretical literature on scenes.² Instead it focuses on the construction of the Tampa and Gothenburg scenes and sounds and the relationship of these concepts to place. That these two scenes emerged in two distinct geographical locations has been a subject of debate among metal fans, musicians, and journalists for many years. When asked why death metal emerged within these two disparate locations, respondents (fans, musicians, writers, record label representatives) usually provide one or more of the following simple explanations:

“It's in the water.”

“We have nothing else to do.”

“It's the weather: really hot, really cold.”

One goal of this paper is to move beyond these essentialist explanations and consider the social, cultural, political, economic, and technological factors that have produced and sustained these two scenes. Building on the work of anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, this paper pays “particular

attention to the way spaces and places are made, imagined, contested, and enforced” (1992, 17-18). What are the motivations, desires, and interests that have built and maintained these two death metal scenes? Are certain motivations, desires, and interests more influential than others in giving shape to—and supporting—these scenes? Further, how did these scenes become identified as sounds and what does this process say about how music is produced and consumed?

This paper is divided into three broad sections. First, I examine a select body of theory on scenes and sounds and suggest ways in which the examples of the death metal scenes in Tampa and Gothenburg can contribute to this work. Second, drawing on key sources on heavy metal music and culture, I provide a very brief history of death metal and situate it within the broader genre of heavy metal. Third, I pose questions about the connections between music and place and encourage researchers to examine the subtle yet powerful ways in which texts shape the formation of scenes and sounds.

Scenes/Sounds: A Brief Overview

“Scene” is a common concept used to explain the link between music and place in local settings. In everyday talk, the term is usually used to describe the connection between a locality, a group of people, and a form or style of music (e.g., “The Detroit Scene,” “The Seattle Grunge Scene,” “Bay Area Thrash Metal Scene,” etc.). “Scene connotes a...flexible, loose kind of space within which music is produced; a kind of ‘context’ for musical practice” (Harris 2000). For example, as Mark Olson (1998) describes in the paper “Everybody Loves Our Town,” the indie rock scene in Chapel Hill, North Carolina (often referred to as “the next Seattle” by the music press) features a critical mass of young people who have aligned themselves with (and migrated to) “where all the action is.” The Chapel Hill scene is characterized by several bands exhibiting a particular style and sharing venues for performance, radio programs, and record labels. Scenes such as Chapel Hill also commonly involve local “hang-outs,” rehearsal or “jam” rooms, fanzines and magazines, music shops, and recording studios (Connell and Gibson 2003, 101-102).

It is probably impossible to estimate the total number of local music scenes across the globe. Any village, town, or city with any number of music groups and artists—and people aligned and associated with those groups and artists—could be called a local scene. Indeed, as a heavy metal fan growing up in Victoria, Canada (population roughly 335,000) in the 1980s, we had a small scene of local bands, venues, fanzines, and a radio show. We went to shows, traded cassette tapes, played in bands together, and wrote letters to metal fans in North America, Europe, South America, and Japan. Despite this “small but dedicated metal scene” (Schreurs 2002)

and our connections to fans in other local scenes through letter writing and tape trading, many of us felt outside of—or peripheral to—the major hubs of metal activity such as Toronto, Tampa, and even nearby Vancouver. How, then, do particular localities become recognized as influential scenes and, further, as sources of particular sounds while others become peripheral?

Scene may also be used in a broader sense. According to Harris (2000, 14), scenes are also “decentralised, global and diffuse networks of producers and consumers” of a particular (sub-) genre of music. “The Extreme Metal Scene,” for example, is a global music scene, but it also contains quasi-autonomous local scenes within it (Harris n.d.). Death metal fans, musicians, and the music press speak of a generalized, global death metal scene that is not perceived as rooted in any particular place (Purcell 2003), but rather described as a network and infrastructure for producing, distributing, and consuming death metal. In this paper, although I situate the Tampa and Gothenburg death metal scenes within a global social, cultural, economic, and technological context, I concentrate primarily on how they are produced, maintained, and contested as globally recognized *local* scenes through the discourses of fans, musicians, and the music press and how these scenes have been credited with producing particular sounds.

Sound is another concept adopted by the music press, music industry (record labels, management companies, booking agents, etc.), and researchers to capture — and in some cases promote — the relationship between particular styles of music and a particular locality. Connell and Gibson point out (2003, 14) that “many sites, or wider geographical regions in which musical production and consumption occur, become linked with particular sounds, styles or musical approaches (such as the ‘Motown’ sound, New Orleans jazz).” But beyond this theoretical work, there has been little critical attention paid to specific examples of how sounds are constructed and how sounds relate to scenes (if at all). Sound is often assumed to be synonymous with scene. The “Tampa scene” and “Tampa sound,” for example, are typically used interchangeably in music press and promotional materials. I would suggest, however, that there is a conceptual move from scene to sound that seems to denote a “dis-placing” of musical production, consumption, and exchange. That is, while one has to travel to Gothenburg to be part of “its” scene you can access “its” sound through (among other formats) recordings, live performances, and Internet radio. By listening to In Flames, for example, who are arguably the most widely known Gothenburg death metal band, the listener instantly accesses the sound of Gothenburg. Through this construction of the Gothenburg sound, the city becomes a “mythologized place in which unique, locally-experienced social, economic and political circumstances are somehow ‘captured’ within music” (Connell and Gibson 2003, 14). The

term “Gothenburg sound” thus suggests that there is some natural, essential connection between the city of Gothenburg and a particular style of death metal (distorted guitars, guttural vocals, and double-bass drumming, but with “conventional” song structures, melodic and harmonizing guitars, and in some cases clean vocals). But *how* do scenes become sounds? And what elements or discourses contribute to the construction of sounds and their promotion?

Before we begin to explore these questions in relation to the death metal scenes/sounds of Tampa and Gothenburg, we will take a brief look at the history of death metal and its place within the broader genre of heavy metal.

Death Metal: Providing a Context

Tampa and Beyond

The end of the 1960s marked the closure of a cultural and musical era. In 1970, with the break up of The Beatles and the deaths of Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, a new period of scepticism replaced the peace, love, and happiness of the “hippie” generation. Heavy metal bands such as Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, and Deep Purple emerged from large urban centres (mostly in England, particularly Birmingham and London) with a fast, sinister, blues-influenced sound. These groups played with some of the most highly charged themes available in western culture such as the occult, sexual excess, and substance abuse, which attracted condemnation from right and left and was the subject of media and state-sponsored ‘moral panics’ (Miller 1988; Richardson 1991 in Harris n.d.). These pioneering groups attracted a wide fan base in North America where, by the mid-1970s, KISS, Alice Cooper, and Aerosmith, among others, gave heavy metal a more pop-influenced, theatrical flavour and brought it fully into mainstream markets.

In the 1980s, heavy metal fragmented into multiple sub-genres. The most influential among these, “The New Wave of British Heavy Metal” (NWOBHM), represented a new movement towards melody, high-soaring vocals, dual guitar work, and increasingly complex song arrangements. Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, Motörhead, and other NWOBHM bands set a new standard for musicianship, challenged the acceptable norms of lyrical content, and helped to crystallize what would become known as “classic” heavy metal. Meanwhile, in Los Angeles and elsewhere, bands bent on excess, pop hooks, and glamour such as L.A.’s Van Halen, Australia’s AC/DC, and Germany’s Scorpions, were rising up the charts. These acts broadened the audience for heavy metal (primarily by attracting a largely untapped female fan base) and for many fans stretched—or violated—the boundaries of the genre.³

In response to heavy metal’s flirtations with pop sounds and styles, several distinct but related “underground” sub-genres emerged concurrently in the early 1980s. Thrash, black, and death metal were fuelled by dissatisfaction

with the glamour, spandex, and pomp of lite metal. Thrash metal, based primarily in the San Francisco Bay Area, took the melody and complexity of the NWOBHM bands and combined it with the speed and “street attitude” of punk. Led by the “Big Four” of Metallica, Slayer, Megadeth, and Anthrax thrash metal introduced new levels of speed and aggression and explicitly dealt with issues of environmental destruction, atrocity, and injustice. Thrash metal was raw, primitive, visceral, and largely “underground.” “Stage costumes and other showbiz trappings went out the door as ‘bangers tucked their heads down and concentrated on the music” (Christie 2003, 137).

The term “black metal” had begun to be used in the 1980s to refer to overtly Satanic bands that played extremely fast with trebly guitar sounds, simple riffs and song structures, and often minimal production. The term was coined by England’s Venom who, in 1982, released the definitively titled *Black Metal*. Venom’s early recordings featured rudimentary — at times sloppy — musicianship with debauchorous and soft-pornographic lyrics. Although Venom used overtly Satanic iconography, the band later confessed that it was all for show.

Early black metal bands such as Venom and Sweden’s Bathory had an enormous influence on a new crop of young bands (mostly from Scandinavia) seeking to push the limits of speed, extremity, and controversy. In the early 1990s Norwegian bands such as Mayhem, Emperor, Darkthrone, Immortal, and Enslaved crystallized black metal as a distinct form of extreme metal. Adding orchestral passages and choral arrangements, Norwegian black metal music and iconography mimicked the cold, bleak environs of the north. Indeed, Quorthon Seth (of Bathory) found Scandinavia’s relative cultural isolation to be a creative asset:

Had we been from New York, we would have gotten gigs and contracts and gotten caught up in trends. We didn’t have those kind of pressures—so we were able to add acoustic guitars and backing harmony vocals and the sound of a seagull flying by. Slayer would never get away with doing that, but we could. (Christie 2003, 270)

However, Norwegian black metal is perhaps most widely known for a bizarre string of church burnings in the early 1990s. Driven by contempt for Christianity and a desire to return Norway to a pagan, Viking past, several members of the Norwegian black metal scene (centred primarily in Oslo and Bergen) torched and desecrated dozens of historic wooden churches. These acts of arson—as well as a series of grisly murders and suicides among members of the scene—attracted international media attention and garnered Norway the reputation as being the centre of “true” black metal.



Photo credit: Peter Beste
www.peterbeste.com

Since the early 1990s, black metal has spread throughout the globe with bands hailing from such diverse nations as Israel, Mexico, and Thailand.⁴

Death metal emerged as a distinct style in the mid-1980s. The term was coined in 1983 by members of Switzerland's Hellhammer (later Celtic Frost) who started a fanzine called "Death Metal." In the same year, San Francisco's Possessed released their aptly titled debut demo of the same name, and two years later would release their debut full-length, *Seven Churches*. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, Tampa, Florida was the first death metal "hotspot" and produced such bands as Death, Morbid Angel, Obituary, Cannibal Corpse and Malevolent Creation (who both migrated to Tampa from their native Buffalo), Deicide, and Monstrosity. While American thrash metal often featured social commentary (Metallica's "Master of Puppets," for example, dealt with themes of political deceit and the futility of war), the early death metal bands from Tampa delved deep into the grim and horrific. A sample of early death metal album titles from the Tampa scene demonstrates an indulgence in gore and the arcane: Death's *Scream Bloody Gore*, Morbid Angel's *Altars of Madness*, Obituary's *Slowly We Rot*, and Cannibal Corpse's *Eaten Back to Life*. The bands from the Tampa scene successfully set the standard against which other death metal bands were judged throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The main magnet to the Tampa area was Morrisound Studios and producer Scott Burns whose production and engineering work "played a crucial part in creating the 'clean,' precise guitar sounds that dominated Death Metal in that era" (Harris 2000). Bands from as far as Canada (Gorguts) and Brazil (Sepultura) travelled to Florida to capitalize on the high-quality production at Morrisound. As Christie comments, "life in Florida did not revolve around any significant social scene, but dozens of bands had their albums produced or engineered by Scott Burns and the staff at Tampa's Morrisound Studios" (2003, 242). Morrisound Studios was thus critical in establishing the Tampa sound, which was widely copied by death metal bands elsewhere in the United States and other countries.

By the 1990s, through tape trading and letter writing, the death metal sound had spread to many parts of the globe.⁵ New York's Immolation and Suffocation built on the Tampa sound by offering extremely deep vocals, churning "breakdowns," and anti-Christian themes, which would become trademarks of the New York scene. In England, Napalm Death and Carcass took the aggression and "brutality" of death metal and played it at blistering speeds, pioneering what became known as "grindcore." While Napalm Death's lyrics focused on social issues and political corruption, Carcass devoted itself to gore-centred themes using elaborate medical terminology. By the fourth full-length release *Heartwork*, however, Carcass had moved

towards a slower, more melodic sound that effectively combined elements of “traditional” North American death metal with the rhythms and lead work of the “classic” European metal bands.

Gothenburg and the “New Wave of Swedish Death Metal”

The melodic direction of European (mostly Swedish) death metal bands in the 1990s challenged the boundaries of the genre for many metal fans. Bands such as Entombed, Dismember, At The Gates, and In Flames combined “brutality” and callous vocal styles with more conventional song structures and clean vocal passages. Indeed, the complex guitar riffs and guttural vocal style may be the only aspect of the “New Wave of Swedish Death Metal” (NWOSDM) that links it with the Tampa sound. Nonetheless, the NWOSDM movement has stimulated new directions for metal over the past ten years especially in Europe and the United States. According to heavy metal historian Joel McIver (2003, 14),

Death metal can be divided into old and new schools: Eighties death follows the guttural, barked template... while the “new” death of the mid-to late-Nineties includes much more melody in the guitars and often a clean vocal style. This development originated in Gothenburg, Sweden (becoming the “Gothenburg sound”) and triggered the NWOSDM – the New Wave Of Swedish Death Metal, a very much in-vogue style.

This newer, more accessible sound of the NWOSDM has drawn many mainstream non-metal fans into the depths of death metal. (Christie 2003, 251)

Gothenburg, Sweden is thus widely recognized by metal fans, the music press, and Internet guides as the “home” of melodic death metal (Popoff n.d.; All Music Guide 2003; Ayers 2002; Christie 2003). Even the *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, an online general information source, recognizes Gothenburg as the centre of the melodic death metal movement (*Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia* 2003). Although several important bands associated with this sound originate from Stockholm (namely Entombed and Dismember), Gothenburg has become labelled by fans, the music press, and record labels as the “home” of this specific style. One reason for this labelling is that, similar to Tampa, Gothenburg is also the location of an important studio — Studio Fredman — and principal producer/engineer, Fredrik Nordstrom. Like Scott Burns, Nordstrom is credited with shaping a particular sound through the production of key melodic death metal albums like At The Gates’ *Slaughter of the Soul*, In Flames’ *Jester Race*, and Arch Enemy’s *Wages of Sin*. Although these albums vary greatly in their production styles and Nordstrom has produced a wider range of

metal bands (Dimmu Borgir, Opeth, Spiritual Beggars), Studio Fredman has served as key factor in the development of an identifiable Gothenburg sound.

Why Tampa and Gothenburg?

There have been hundreds if not thousands of local “face to face” scenes that have produced heavy metal bands and generated local fan bases and fanzines. It is likely that most cities in North America and Europe (and to some extent South America and Asia), especially during the 1980s, have had some kind of metal scene. However, there are very few local scenes that have gained global attention from fans, journalists, and record labels and that have been credited with producing a particular sound. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Black Sabbath and Judas Priest appeared out of the Birmingham, England area creating the “classic” metal sound. Later, in the early 1980s, San Francisco was the home to the “Bay Area” thrash metal sound. Apart from these disparate examples of so-called “core” scenes/sounds (Harris 2000, n.d.), heavy metal bands have typically originated from (or relocated to) major centres of musical consumption and production, primarily London, Los Angeles, and New York.

As discussed earlier, the presence of a successful recording studio has been a critical factor in the development of the Tampa and Gothenburg scenes. Morrisound Studios and Studio Fredman have provided a space for the development and nurturance of a particular sound that has become associated with a specific locality. In their global analysis of the relationship between music, place, and identity Connell and Gibson (2003, 103) argue that “[t]he combination of an unusual location and a highly successful recording studio could stimulate a particular association between music and place....” But is the presence of these studios the only factor in the development of these two scenes?

One of the few analyses of the relationship between metal, place, and identity is provided by Michael Moynihan and Didrik Söderlind in their book *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground*. In a thorough documentation of black metal music and culture in Europe, North America, and the Middle East the authors attempt to understand the roots of black metal and ask why black metal developed in Norway. They provide the following explanations (Moynihan and Söderlind 1998, 39-44):

1. Deep historical roots of Christianity (Protestantism, Evangelism) have contributed to anti-Christian music and actions.
2. Cultural legacy of Norwegian folk tales (trolls, witches, foreboding forests) have influenced black metal groups.
3. Cultural censorship of violence and the macabre (e.g. censorship of horror

films) has contributed to black metal's appetite for such imagery.

4. Cultural distance from Europe might explain why black metal was carried to its logical conclusion in Norway.

According to Moynihan and Söderlind, these developments in Norway have combined to create a fertile historical and cultural context for black metal to flourish. Norwegian black metal bands have thus explicitly drawn on history, place, and "Norwegian culture" in lyrics and iconography, and have attempted to mimic the bleak northern landscape through thin, raspy guitar tones and atmospheric keyboards. The following excerpt is from the Norwegian black metal band Immortal:

On many ships we have sailed
Far beyond the north waves
On the high northern seas
We have found our way
The shadowing voices of our gods
Singing on the calling wind...
Where the cold waves and the longboats brought us far
The saga of the warriors from northland
Speaks of greatness and strength
The saga of the warriors from northland
Are the saga of many great a man
(“Sons of Northern Darkness”, *Sons of Northern Darkness* 2002.)

Using images of battle, Vikings, the sea, and the “north,” Immortal constructs a masculinized past that draws heavily on the notion of place. Similar themes can be found throughout the catalogues of many Norwegian black metal bands.⁶

This analysis provides an interesting point of comparison for the study of the death metal scenes in Tampa and Gothenburg. Similar to Norway, both Florida and Sweden have strong roots in Christianity and may also be considered distant from the cultural centres of Europe and the United States respectively. However, bands from these scenes have not drawn explicitly on place or local/national history and culture in their lyrics or iconography. The following lyric from the song “Leprosy” by pioneering death metal band Death provides an example of the social commentary-meets-gore themes that were popular among the Tampa death metal bands in the late 1980s and early 1990s:

Bodies deformed way beyond belief
Cast out from their concerned society
Flesh contorting day after day
Freak of the dark world is what the people say.
("Leprosy," *Leprosy* 1988)

Death uses graphic imagery to comment on the social and physical effects of the disease leprosy.⁷ In an example from the Gothenburg scene, At The Gates use symbolism to tackle more general issues of deceit and corruption:

Never again
On your force fed illusions to choke
You feel my pain
Feed off my life

There won't be another dawn
We will reap as we have sown

Always the same
My shattered eyes seen enough
Of all your lies
My hate is blind

There won't be another dawn
We must reap as we have sown.
("Slaughter of the Soul," *Slaughter of the Soul* 1995)⁸

These two examples illustrate the notable absence of place in the lyrical content of Tampa and Gothenburg death metal bands. Unlike the bands from the black metal scenes in Oslo and Bergen, Norway, death metal bands typically do not draw on themes rooted in local/national "place" but rather address subjects of broader societal significance (e.g. disease, corruption). This provides an example of Connell and Gibson's observation (2003, 124) that "[n]ot all nations had, or sought to have, their national identity reflected in a particular music tradition." Particularly in the case of Sweden, these authors have argued that Swedish pop has "built on an almost placeless internationalism," it is "culturally anonymous" (Connell and Gibson 2003, 125). This cultural anonymity also appears to be the case with Swedish and Floridian death metal. Thus, unlike the black metal scene in Norway, death metal from Tampa and Gothenburg does not articulate any specific historical/cultural experience unique to these places.

The remainder of this section attempts to show the ways in which the Tampa and Gothenburg death metal scenes have been constructed by a variety of texts. These other sources demonstrate that the notions of the Tampa and Gothenburg death metal scenes are highly contested concepts. There are clear tensions in the ways that the music press, musicians, and even academics talk and write about these scenes.

Metal writers have attempted to explain the prominence of the Tampa scene by drawing on essentialist, environmental arguments. Ian Christie suggests that:

Maybe the boundless energy came from the water – as Ponce de Leon believed centuries earlier during his doomed search for the Fountain of Youth. In any case the climate was a torrid cauldron for musical agitation, an unholy promised land as far from the cool mist of grunge Seattle as geographically and philosophically possible. (2003, 242)

Christie clearly mythologizes the link between music and place. But he also hints that there are social and cultural differences between Seattle and Tampa that may explain the differences in the two cities' respective music scenes. The Tampa death metal scene, Christie suggests, provided an alternative to the (mostly) independent "alternative" music movement that was hugely popular in the United States during the early 1990s. "An unholy promised land," Tampa (and more generally Florida and the southern United States) may have served as a breeding ground for youth disillusioned and discontented with Christian values and upbringing. This illustrates Connell and Gibson's observation that "[t]he idea that a deterministic relationship between place and culture exists—as musical styles and sounds emerge from different locations, and as musicians relate to their environment—remains powerful" (2003, 90-91). Given the historical presence of Christianity throughout Sweden and the southern United States, this suggests the need for further research into the linkages between religion, place, and the development of music scenes.

Death metal musicians from Tampa and Gothenburg have contested the notion that they operate within a local, cohesive, identifiable scene. For example, Jensen of the Gothenburg-based band The Haunted comments that "some people call us death metal, some call us thrash and others even say we sound Gothenburg. We don't care what people call us as long as they think we're good" (Perri 2003). Similarly, Peter Wichers, guitarist with Soilwork (also from Gothenburg), resists the homogenizing effect of being categorized as part of the Gothenburg scene: "Yes, I think the whole Gothenburg thing is over-saturated. I also think it's over-exaggerated. There's just too much coming from there. I think the label uses the term

'Gothenburg Scene' for sales. If a band is from Sweden, they now get pigeonholed into the Gothenburg mold" (Perri n.d.). Wichers' comment illustrates the effects of mythologizing place by record companies, which use place as a strategic tool to attract listeners and to sell product. The "place" of the Gothenburg scene is mythologized, romanticized, exoticized and as a result, "made." These examples bring to life Connell and Gibson's observation that "[w]hile some within the music press, record companies, retailers and even local authorities may be keen to promote the growth of particular local 'sounds,' performers may distance themselves from the kinds of unity, homogeneity and determinism implicit in these representations of local culture, and its inherent commercialism" (2003, 100).

Wichers' comment in particular also points to the processes by which local scenes become "dis-placed"; the processes by which concepts such as the "Gothenburg scene" shed their rootedness in a specific place and instead refer to a particular sound that is generated across multiple places. The next section addresses the relationship between the concepts of scene and sound and raises questions for further research on the discourses that produce and contest these concepts.

Rethinking Scenes and Sounds

It is important to note that despite the geographical labels applied to classifications of Death Metal, the classes are now based more on musical style, for styles that originated in particular areas spread far and wide throughout the [United States]. (Purcell 2003, 16)

Throughout this discussion of the Tampa and Gothenburg death metal scenes, I have used the concepts "scene" and "sound" interchangeably. Indeed, most popular music research (and the texts it examines) tends to collapse the two terms, and there have been no previous attempts to specifically tease-out the relationship between these concepts. But are scenes and sounds one and the same? Is the Tampa/Gothenburg scene the same as the Tampa/Gothenburg sound?

A close analysis of the Tampa and Gothenburg death metal scenes challenges the common practice of using scene and sound to describe similar phenomena. Rather, in the case of death metal from Tampa and Gothenburg, the concept of "scene" refers to the local contexts of music making and consumption (bands, gigs, studios etc.) and the concept of "sound" describes a common set of musical practices that are *attributed* to a particular locality through texts such as fan and musician discourse, music press, and record company promotional materials. For example, the Gothenburg sound refers to a

group of artists (most, but not all, of whom originate from Sweden) who combine a particular set of musical styles and technical practices; these artists have adopted many of the same attributes of the earlier Tampa sound (low, guttural vocals, downtuned guitars, rapid-fire drums) but have added melodic guitars, more conventional song structures, and, in some cases, clean vocals. Bands that are described as representing the Gothenburg sound originate from a wide variety of localities within Sweden — including Gothenburg, Stockholm and several smaller towns — and more recently from the United States such as Darkest Hour (Washington D.C.), Shadows Fall (Massachusetts), and God Forbid (New Jersey). Thus, the Gothenburg sound delineates bands with a set of stylistic attributes and not necessarily a shared or common geographic space.

How then do sounds get constructed and promoted? An analysis of the Tampa and Gothenburg death metal scenes would suggest that sounds get constructed through the “representational power” of texts such as the music press and record label websites (Bennett 2000, 24). Using the concept of sound as a device to “mythologize” and “exoticize” particular localities, these sources play an effective role in attracting fans and potential consumers. This process illustrates Connell and Gibson’s argument that “[s]pecific ‘sounds’ are also bound up in wider processes through which places are mythologized: a fetishisation of localities” (2003, 110). Promoting a sound is thus a marketing strategy to endorse artists and sell products. The marker of a sound provides a convenient shorthand for a set of musical characteristics to guide fans.

Conclusion

This paper is part of a larger project to document the history of heavy metal music and culture.⁹ Death metal constitutes one particular sub-genre/subculture of heavy metal. The larger genre (or “metagenre”) of heavy metal consists of a vastly diverse and complex set of styles and practices that has been one of the most important — yet relatively intellectually neglected — genres of music in contemporary times. This paper is thus a small piece of a larger project to track the history of heavy metal that also includes a documentation of its relationship to place.

In this paper I have sketched an approach to understanding the complex relationship between scenes and sounds. While scenes generally refer to local contexts (or national/global networks) for music production, consumption, and exchange, sounds are linked to place through a process of mythologizing or, using Gupta and Ferguson’s phrase, “imagining.” While most death metal fans around the world may not have access to the Gothenburg scene (e.g., venues for performance, radio programs, local “hang-outs,” rehearsal

or “jam” rooms, music shops, and recording studios) they can access the Gothenburg sound through recordings of artists (CDs, MP3s, DVDs) who may or may not be *actually from* Gothenburg. If we adopt Lawrence Grossberg’s characterization of a scene as “usually defined less by a sound than by a social style and/or set of social relationships and allegiances” (2002, 50), then we need better tools to analyze how and why sounds are constructed. My analysis suggests that sounds *travel* through recordings and the proliferation of artists who adopt elements of a sound, but who are not situated within a “core” local scene (e.g. the Gothenburg scene).

Using the examples of Tampa and Gothenburg death metal scenes and sounds, I have also argued that these concepts are constructed and contested by a range of discourses, particularly those of musicians, record labels, and music press. Thus, popular music researchers are charged to critically address the multiple discourses that inform the construction of scenes and sounds, and the relative power and impact of these discourses. What is at stake in the production and contestation of scenes and sounds? My analysis suggests that the concepts of scene and sound do not originate purely at the level of the social or technological (e.g. through a critical mass of artists from a particular locality or the presence of prominent recording studio). Rather, texts play a powerful role in seducing listeners to consume particular sounds. Listeners are not necessarily passive consumers in this process; indeed, death metal fans are highly knowledgeable and finicky about the music (Purcell 2003). But in the case of death metal, the concept of sound appears to say more about the interests and motivations of the music press and record labels than categorizations produced by fans of the genre. This discussion identifies the complex ways in which discourses shape the production, consumption, and exchange of popular music within and across localities.

Notes

- 1 Purcell (2003) provides detailed discussion of death metal history, lyrical content, and fan culture.
- 2 There are several excellent sources on music scenes including Connell and Gibson (2003), Harris (2000), Olson (1998), and Shank (1994).
- 3 For full-length discussions of heavy metal music and culture see Walser (1993) and Weinstein (2000).
- 4 Space does not allow for a thorough discussion of black metal music and culture. See Moynihan and Søderlind (1998); Baddeley (1999); Beckwith (2002); Steinke (1996).
- 5 Harris (2000, n.d.) has written extensively on the global spread of death metal and its manifestations in “peripheral” local scenes. My paper focuses on what Harris has called the “core” scenes of death metal.
- 6 For other specific examples, see Enslaved “Frost,” Emperor “Anthems to the Welkin at Dusk,” and Darkthrone “A Blaze in the Northern Sky.”
- 7 See also Obituary “Slowly We Rot,” Cannibal Corpse “Eaten Back to Life,” and Morbid Angel “Altars of Madness.”
- 8 See also In Flames “The Jester Race,” Arch Enemy “Wages of Sin,” and Soilwork “A Predator’s Portrait.”
- 9 This project, entitled “Metal: A Headbanger’s History,” is the first comprehensive, multimedia history of heavy metal music and culture. The project includes a feature length documentary, DVD set, CD box set and book.

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