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Making sense of metal in the United Kingdom and the future of metal music studies: A case study of Wytch Hazel and Arð

Introduction

Heavy metal in the United Kingdom (UK), as in many countries around the world, is thriving and has become a respectable form of popular culture and its fans and musicians are seen everywhere. When Paul DiAnno, Iron Maiden's original singer, passed away in October 2024, the news reached the mainstream media, and the BBC, which would one have ignored heavy metal altogether previously, provided a respectful obituary (Savage 2024). One month before, Iron Maiden had announced a huge tour around the world where most of the events have sold-out and the rest are on limited tickets (Iron Maiden 2024). The same position of respectability has been gained by academics in the once-mocked subject field of metal music studies. This journal is proof enough of that vitality and relevance, as is the incredible range of inter-disciplinary conferences devoted to metal music, not least the official one of ISMMS, which has grown enormously. In this paper, I try to map metal in the UK today through a case study of Wyth Hazel and Arð, two bands located in the north of England. This sample is, of course, not in any way representative of metal in the north of England or the UK. But the two bands together make an interesting case study that explores the relationship between artists, fans and the media; and an interesting case study in what might be happening in metal away from the mainstream of the entertainment industry. I will argue that metal in the UK is still a space for resistance to the commodification of the mainstream and the construction of imaginary, imagined communities (Spracklen 1996). I will use my own recently published *Sociological Laws of Metal* (Spracklen 2024) as a critical lens to frame the discussion. I will then argue that the future of metal music studies depends on whether metal itself continues to thrive as a place of polyvalent identities, as well as whether academics can negotiate their own epistemological and ontological uncertainties in the marketplace of higher education.

Wytch Hazel

Respected website NWOTHM (New Wave of True Heavy Metal), named to honour the New Wave of British Heavy Metal (NWOBHM) coined by Geoff Barton in 1979, has an advisory note or trigger warning about Wytch Hazel's (2023) latest album (NWOTHM 2023):

Before I can complete my review of the album, I need to address the elephant in the room. This album is just like the other albums in Wytch Hazel's catalogue in that it's heavily rooted in and inspired by Christianity. Christian tropes and archetypes are used to great effect in order to project a powerful and inspiring message. I still highly recommend this album to just about anyone with an open mind. I don't hesitate in saying that because unlike other "Christian" rock acts, I can actually feel the honesty in the band's belief. There's a feeling of hope and triumph here that is just so different from rock and metal that is inspired by high fantasy or other sources. While the songs do mention Christ and Satan specifically, the themes are more universal than one might think. Sin is a powerful thematic subject that has been with heavy metal from its inception. Judas Priest regaled us all with tales of sin and redemption beginning with *Sad Wings of Destiny* in 1976 and they have yet to write an album without at least one song addressing it. Priest is in the name, after all!

Wytch Hazel are an out-and-proud Christian metal band formed by Colin Hendra in Lancaster in Lancashire, in the north of England in 2011. They have played Christian rock festivals around the world (Brainstorm, for example, in the Netherlands), but also secular metal festivals such as Bloodstock in the UK and Muskelrock in Sweden. They have appeared in *Classic Rock*, *Metal Hammer* and *Fistful of Metal*. The music and lyrics are written by Hendra and he sings lead vocals and plays the guitar on their studio releases and

live. The drummer, bassist and second guitarist have all changed since the band was formed, and it is clear that Hendra is the guiding force behind everything the band does. The name itself is a pun on the plant found in many medieval apothecaries and the fashion after Stryper for Christian metal bands to misspell their names by using a y instead of an i. Wytch Hazel released a number of independent splits, a single and an EP before signing with traditional metal label Bad Omen Records.¹

The first album, *Prelude* (Wytch Hazel 2016) received rave reviews by metal fans around the world, with 87% on metal-archives.com.² It also received positive reviews in Metal Hammer (Yates 2016), which brought them to a mainstream metal audience looking for true heavy metal. Listening to it one can see why Metal Hammer and fanzines such as Iron Fist rave about it. This is New Wave of British Heavy Metal at its finest, channelling Wishbone Ash, Iron Maiden, Thin Lizzy, Angel Witch and Judas Priest. There are calls to stand and fight, to be a warrior in armour and shielded from harm, and these are only in the first two songs ('Freedom Battle' and 'Fight'). But we are told to be warriors of the Christian God, and the rest of the album combines Christian theological themes, texts from the Bible and warning about the Dark Ages in which we live, until in final song ('We Will Be Strong') we are told to 'advance by the Sword and Shield of Faith'. When Hendra spits out the name of Satan, we are reminded of every band from Black Sabbath to Watain who have dabbled with Satanic imagery, but we are also made aware of how cool Satan is in the original NWOHBM bands such as Venom.

The second album *II: Sojourn* (Wytch Hazel 2018) delivers more of the epic quality, and opener 'The Devil Is Here' has a chorus that allows us to summon up Ozzy Osbourne with the line 'the devil is here and he wants to bring you down'. On metal-archives.com, it scores higher than the debut with 88%.³ The singing is full-throated Bruce Dickinson and the guitar solos could be performed by any of the Maiden guitarists who played on the first three

albums. But there are also quieter, more reflective moments on this album with acoustic guitars deployed on two ballads. Around this time, pictures emerged of the band dressed in medieval peasant cosplay, and it could be argued that they were playing medieval rock or medieval metal. The third album, *III: Pentecost* (Wytch Hazel 2020), is arguably the one that captures the secular true/NWOHBM feeling most effectively, and is the album that achieves the highest score on metal-archives.com, with 95%.⁴ The album cover has a sword on it, and there are songs that channel Hendra's faith with his love and knowledge of what makes fans want to raise a fist in the air. So on the first song, 'He Is The Fight', Hendra tells us to beware the Angel of Light. Then 'Reap The Harvest' is a dark warning about Death coming for all of us sinners. Finally, *IV: Sacrament* (Wytch Hazel 2023) has the same balance of traditional metal music and Christian lyrics that play with the expectations of old-school fans: the first song, 'The Fire's Control', tells us to be 'afraid of the fires of hell', and the sixth song 'Deliver Us' warns us that Satan is coming. Again, fans on metal-archives.com love the album and rate it at 90%.⁵

Wytch Hazel have attracted a small but dedicated fanbase that is evidenced by the numbers of people who belong to and post on the unofficial Wytch Hazel Fans Facebook page.⁶ Hendra has used the unofficial page to promote a crowdsourcing, fan-funded subscription that allow fans access to exclusive material, an offer that was promoted on the mailing list and the Wytch Hazel official website. Many of these fans are clearly drawn to the Christian theology pasted over the vocal stylings and screeching solos, but others are more ambivalent in their fandom. When I attended a festival in Manchester where the band were the headliner, the mosh-pit was filled with people being moved by the spirit of Iron Maiden even if the lyrics were the word of the Holy Ghost. We all raised our fists and fingers, even if no one used the Devil horns.

Arð

On the release of the second Arð (2024) album, Nick Ruskell (2024), in Kerrang, is very positive in his review of it:

Second album *Untouched By Fire* is a record one can fully imagine being made with similar end results in mind to tell its tale of 7th century Northumbrian warrior king Oswald. Stately and unhurried, with layered vocals that often sound like the chanting of monks, the atmosphere in opener *Cursed To Nothing But Patience* and *Hefenfelth* is as dark and shadowy as it is dramatic. *Name Bestowed* begins with choral vocals, slowly bringing in droning keys, before the metal floods in after three minutes, but this doesn't feel like an intro, it's part of the fabric of what Arð are doing with their self-styled Monastic doom. Similarly, the pipes and chants of *Beset By Weapons* feels as important a part of all this as the banging, more traditionally metal bits of *He Saw Nine Winters*. Arð are different. This is music of clear vision, ambition, a studious approach to how to achieve them, and the skill to pull it all off. They're probably going to need an even bigger organ to properly deliver it all live.

Ruskell clearly thinks Arð are different from other bands, even if some of the songs and the riffs are full-on metal, and Ruskell loves the balance between the doom metal and the choirs and the keys. He also appreciates the way the band is providing a history lesson in the same way other extreme metal bands have been doing, from Bathory all the way to Winterfylleth and Warduna. Arð is a side-project of Winterfylleth's keyboard player Mark Deeks. That the review has been published in Kerrang is proof that this solo project has made some impact in the metal music community in the UK. Deeks joined Winterfylleth in 2014 after appearing as a guest vocalist on the 2014 album *The Divination Of Antiquity*. Deeks

brought to Winterfylleth more carefully considered arrangements, based on his own skills, knowledge and experience as a performer and teacher of piano.⁷ He has been involved in each subsequent album and tour since then. Arð's first album, then, had the backing of Winterfylleth and had Dan Capp from the band playing guitar, but most of the music was played by Deeks himself. Fans of Winterfylleth and supportive promoters and journalists helped Arð get some exposure, but it is the strength of the music and the concept that led to the band signing with Prophecy Records, an independent label based in Germany with a roster of bands ranging from black metal through goth metal to folk metal and neo-folk, with its most famous arguably being The Vision Bleak and the most influential Empyrium.

Take Up My Bones (Arð 2016) is an album coined as monastic doom. On metal-archives.com it is rated at 82%.⁸ The music is everyday doom metal, but the singing through much of it is choral, making a strange but interesting juxtaposition. The lyrics of each of the songs relate to life and death and afterlife of arguably Northumbria's most revered Saint: Cuthbert. The cover is a drawing of Saint Cuthbert's cave, where the bones of the saint were said to have rested after his remains were removed by the monks from the monastery at Lindisfarne after Viking raids rendered the monastery too dangerous. Cuthbert was never a warrior king or war-hero and is known for his piety, and the music reflects that. Towards the end of his life he was made Abbot of Lindisfarne, the Holy Island still separated from the mainland by a causeway, but soon resigned from that position to retreat to a hermitage on Inner Farne, where he died. The final song, 'Only Three Shall Know', seems to indicate cynicism about the holiness of the bones, which clearly reflects a rationalist's view of religion and Christianity, which fits in with contemporary attitudes in the UK where more younger people are secular (Office for National Statistics 2022). But the album overall portrays a sympathetic view of Northumbrian Christianity. Deeks, from the area, obviously feels the need to tell this story about Northumbria's history and heritage at a time when popular

memories of this saint in the rest of the country have been fading. Northumbria was an Anglo-Saxon kingdom that was located in its heartlands in what is now the north-East of England (the traditional counties of Northumberland and Durham), and Yorkshire to the south. The kingdom struggled with its rivals to gain supremacy over Britain. Northumbria can also be understood as geographical region with its own culture, history and dialect (Jackson 2021): a region of coastal plains and small islands, and upland fells and moors, with a rich, contested history.

The second and latest album, *Untouched By Fire* (Arð 2024), is again sung and played mainly by Deeks, and sounds much more epic in terms of the arrangement and the production. On metal-archives.com, it scores 90%.⁹ This time Deeks wants to tell the story of Saint Oswald, the King who reunited Northumbria and extended its overlordship over other parts of the island. Oswald was one of the heroes in Bede,¹⁰ and there is no doubt he was venerated as a Saint after his death in battle at the hands of the Mercians and the British at the Battle of Maserfield. We are given accounts of Oswald's early years and exile, his stunning victory against the British at the Battle of Heavenfield, his just rule, his death and the movement of the 'Casket Of Dust', the dust from the place where he was killed. The theme is more like the traditional warrior masculinity and heroic patriotism that is present in extreme metal, and there are, as Ruskell notes, metal riffs used to great dramatic effect. But this is still a story about a Christian saint, a hagiography, albeit one that allows the band to sell cool t-shirts: Banner of the Saint, for example, provides a row of Anglo-Saxon warriors with spears raised, wearing helmets.

Arð made headlines when they played Huddersfield Town Hall, where the pipe organ was used, played by the resident organist. They had My Dying Bride vocalist Aaron Stainthorpe on stage to add narration alongside Chris Naughton of Winterfylleth on guitar.¹¹ This was put on as part of the Kirklees Year of Music but also promoted as part of the

University of Huddersfield's Cultures of Sound Project. Because of Stainthorpe's involvement, probably the most famous extreme metal musician from West Yorkshire, the news spread around the world and provided the band some traction on social media. Arð undoubtedly make popular these northern English narratives of Anglo-Saxons fighting the British, and the essential role Christianity played, which makes them different from Winterfylleth themselves. But Arð are taking advantage of the taste for medieval history or national history in extreme metal that has given Winterfylleth an audience. Winterfylleth have a song on their debut album that is problematic ('An Englishman's Verse'); and have built close relationships with Drudkh, who are clearly nationalist (Spracklen 2020). That is, Winterfylleth have songs that promote a sense of pride in Anglo-Saxons and pride in the strength of their manly warriors. In earlier research (which I co-authored with Deeks before he joined Winterfylleth: Lucas, Deeks and Spracklen 2011; Spracklen, Lucas and Deeks 2014) I thought that Chris Naughton and the band were not racist and were only performing this hegemonically masculine whiteness and national pride to provoke and make a name for themselves. But 'An Englishman's Verse', as I explain in Spracklen (2020: 154-155), was written by a Victorian nationalist called Tupper and published in 1850 under the title 'The Anglo-Saxon Race' (Appiah 1992). There is no polyvalency at work here. Arð are not creating an essentialist English fantasy based on Victorian nationalists, and they are trying to construct a more inclusive and authentic idea about England in the period to some extent. But they are also selling ambivalence over belonging (Spracklen 2020): who is allowed to celebrate Cuthbert, Oswald and Northumbria?

Discussion

The six sociological laws of metal, published as my contribution to an edited collection (Pichler 2024) about the Laws of Metal, are as follows (Spracklen 2024: 31-32):

1. Metal is a product of modernity and capitalism.
2. Metal is part of the music industry, which is part of the wider leisure industry.
3. Metal has been and continues to be a place where the leisure industry operates to keep people distracted.
4. Metal has been and continues to be a place where inequalities are constructed and hegemonic identity (white, cis hetero male) is affirmed, even if metal historically was marginal and working-class.
5. Metal sells its people an ideology of individualism, non-conformity, and resistance to mainstream popular culture.
6. Metal is an imagined, imaginary community in which people find meaning, purpose and belonging.

Both bands demonstrate the symptoms of metal music in late modernity, and their practices, behaviours and actions can be mapped onto all of the six sociological laws of metal. They each exist in the communicative underground of extreme metal, where bands strive to make a name for themselves for being truly authentic to the rules of counter-hegemonic, counterculture, that is, operating against the mainstream popular culture exemplified by the music and leisure industry. They promote their music as being a real expression of the tastes and ideologies of the extreme metal fan. For Wytch Hazel, the symbol of their belonging to the imaginary community of true metal is their sound and their image, and the lyrics about warriors. Listen without knowing they are Christian and all you get is the occasional words about Satan and fighting battles. It feels like this is a band that is as unashamedly hegemonically masculine as Manowar (Spracklen, 2020). Arð, on the other

hand, are modern in their metal sound but the choirs and the organ and the lyrics make them feel more Christian to reviewers on metal-archives.com.

The bands have clearly made a favourable impression among fans and the metal music media. And this is to be celebrated, as for many years Christian metal was scorned in the UK and around the world (Moberg 2015) for not being true (Moberg 2015). Much true extreme metal had an ideology that was anti-Christian and evil in some way (Unger 2019; Spracklen 2020). Now fans have embraced Wytch Hazel and Arð even if the lyrics and imagery might not resonate so easily as the Satanism of Venom, Deicide or Watain. Extreme metal, then, seems to be more tolerant of difference. I have not found any reviews online that have mocked either band for being un-kult or untrue or being not metal in any way. The reviews on metal-archives of every album by the bands are all positive, even if the theology of Wytch Hazel is always raised.

Wytch Hazel are being individuals and counter-cultural by using the imagery and the sound of traditional metal to promote a Christian theology that seems to be rooted in Hendra's own journey through modern Christianity. There are references in his lyrics to dissatisfaction with modernity and capitalism, and the ballad 'Barrow Hill' tells the listener about the importance of being in the countryside with our loved ones. Wytch Hazel, then, are trying to stretch the ideology of extreme metal in way that make it more inclusive (to Christians, to progressives), even if they are promoting and using hegemonic masculinity. Arð seem to be aligned to the hegemonic identities that are constructed in the imaginary, imagined communities of metal. That is, they appeal to narratives, invented traditions and myths about nation-states and homogeneous spaces. Arð's concept of Northumbria seems to be inclusive on first pass, as they have re-claimed Christian stories from what might otherwise have been an anti-Christian extreme metal band writing songs about pagan Northumbria. But the whole idea of an authentic Northumbrian cultural project based on

essential notions of what Northumbria's history actually was, is problematic. The fact the project is connected to a band that endorses essentialist myths about who can belong, and who is excluded, makes Arð more reactionary than counter-hegemonic.

Both bands are trying to sell themselves to metal fans who no longer buy records every time they get paid. Making money from heavy metal music is now harder and harder with streaming becoming the new illegal downloading (Spracklen 2015), and the millions of other acts and activities that demand our attention and our money and our fandom. Deeks is lucky to have a job with Winterfylleth that helps pay his rent, and it feels like Arð is his attempt to tell the story he has always wanted to tell as a musician. But even he wants Arð to be listened to more widely, otherwise why release any music? Hendra is driven by his faith to make Wytch Hazel records, but he also has a strong and evolving range of merchandise to sell. Both bands' founders would like to make some kind of impression on metal music, its fans and the industry. But here is where the reality of the leisure industry meets their creative urges. Iron Maiden can sell-out headline tours around the world, but the number of fans willing to pay for tickets and albums falls massively, at least in this country, outside the mainstream metal industry. Very few metal musicians can now make a living from their music (just like musicians in other genres). Spotify extracts enormous profits from creators and it is almost impossible for metal bands to make any money from it other than the long-established ones such as Iron Maiden. Without the money from selling records, bands have to try to make money from selling merchandise at gigs or online. And in the UK, at least, venues continue to close as gentrification and eventization make the rents unaffordable (Spracklen, Richter and Leeds 2013), so the ability to make money touring the UK is limited. In Leeds, for example, we struggle to attract established metal bands because our venues are either too big or too small: and the best venue is on the edge of the city centre. So bands with no venues to play, have to sell their music and their merchandise online. Both bands in this case study

have profited from the communicative action at the centre of metal's community. Fans are open to new music, and the metal media have supported new bands coming through. No one is having to pay to play metal radio channels and podcasts. Both bands in this case study have been accepted across the wider metal community, and the reviews are obviously good despite the Christian symbolism, sound and ideology. In fact, it is probably more accurate to suggest their Christianness that has given both bands a way to sell their difference, and sell some records and t-shirts in this unrelenting leisure industry and the strange times of modernity and capitalism, where metal is commodified, globalised and instrumentalized.

Conclusion

Metal music in the UK is still a space for resistance to the commodification of the mainstream and the construction of imaginary, imagined communities. The bands in this case study are evidence of the thriving metal music community in this country: musicians are still making metal rather than pop or rap or folk. Some metal fans are embracing new music atrying to support the bands by buying merchandise. Journalists and other writers are still looking to support bands. Both bands here represent the communicative rationality of the extreme underground. Neither seem to want to be part of the mainstream leisure industry by choosing styles and topics that are resolutely unfashionable – even if there are still fans who seek out bands that sound like or look like more famous bands. So, Wytch Hazel provide music for audiences looking to remember the first time they heard Iron Maiden, and Arð do the same for fans who grew up with second-wave Norwegian black metal and the Peaceville Records Trio. Without fans, metal is nothing. The future of metal music studies depends on whether metal itself continues to thrive as a place of polyvalent identities, as well as whether academics can negotiate their own epistemological and ontological uncertainties in the marketplace of higher education. If metal music is no longer fashionable, or if it stops being a

way that people to resist the mainstream, then metal music studies might well be reduced to metal music history. If metal music becomes completely commodified, or if it retains some polyvalent, counter-hegemonic or communicative identity-making communities at its core, then metal music studies will still be needed. The other problem, the epistemological and ontological uncertainties in the marketplace of higher education, is becoming more acute. Most of us in the first generation of metal music studies were fans of metal who found a way of using our fandom in the pursuit of knowledge. We struggled to justify our research to reviewers of funding applications, editors of journals as well as family and friends, who might wonder why we were indulging ourselves in our leisure lives as subject fields rather than studying things more worthy. We no longer get that reaction – at least for now. But the marketization of higher education is a constant threat to all of us. Heavy metal is fashionable today, and metal music studies is acceptable. There is good news every day from metal music scholars winning research grants, recruiting PhD students and post-docs, and creating impact and engagement. But higher education in every country is still driven by the metrics by which staff, schools and universities are monitored and rewarded. How does metal music studies respond to these metrics? How do we fight back against universities that might decide metal music has no place in its faculties? How do we continue to ensure that metal music studies thrives, and our colleagues are able to thrive? These are tough questions for every one of us with no easy answers. But we need to try or we have no future.

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¹ From the website: Fiercely independent record label dedicated exclusively to Heavy Rock, with a focus on old school values and traditions. <https://www.bad-omen-records.com/>.

² https://www.metal-archives.com/albums/Wytch_Hazel/Prelude/566340.

³ https://www.metal-archives.com/albums/Wytch_Hazel/II%3A_Sojourn/716683.

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⁵ https://www.metal-archives.com/albums/Wytch_Hazel/IV%3A_Sacrament/1127389

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/237883418124111>.

⁷ Winterfylleth now headline shows and festivals around the world.

⁸ https://www.metal-archives.com/albums/Ar%C3%B0/Take_Up_My_Bones/996357.

⁹ https://www.metal-archives.com/albums/Ar%C3%B0/Untouched_by_Fire/1210082.

¹⁰ The Venerable Bede is one of the more well-known Northumbrian Saints, and lived as a monk at the monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow, between modern Newcastle and Sunderland. He wrote the Ecclesiastical History of the English People, which puts Northumbrian Christianity and its saints at its heart.

¹¹ <https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/whats-on/arts-and-entertainment/gig-review-organic-doom-vol-1-ard-pantheist-at-huddersfield-town-hall-4188607>.