

Metalheads

Ruben Louis, 19, sporting a jet-black Bathory t-shirt that is emblazoned with an image of a goat head in front of a pentagram, yells a primal battle cry as he charges full pelt into the mass of flesh in front of him. His sparse, patchy beard blows in the wind as he leads around fifty others at his back into a sea of bodies. He then collides, left shoulder first, with the colossus of a man that was running at him. He has no chance against such a man; Ruben is swept off his feet like a mere fly, and lands face first in the dirt. Seemingly unfazed by the pain in his left shoulder, the adrenaline allows Ruben to rise to his feet, yell a cry of exhilaration, and raise two sets of devil horns towards the band playing on the stage in front of him. He ignores the stinging pain in his shoulder, as he revels in the heavy, aggressive music that is being emitted from the instruments of the corpse-painted rock stars in front of him.



Behemoth performing live in 2012; an example of the Satanist imagery and theatrics found in typical black metal shows¹

A couple weeks later, Ruben finds himself wearing a sling around his arm, diagnosed with a badly dislocated shoulder. At this point, the adrenaline is long gone, and he has come back down to Earth. But he is unwavering in his faith to the music that he loves. “I’d definitely do it again,” he says, defiantly. “It was such a surreal experience. The adrenaline was just flowing through my veins. Being a part of a wall of death makes you feel at one with the metal community.” A wall of death, for the uninitiated, is a typical practice in extreme metal concerts, in which a large group from the crowd splits into two parts, and proceeds to charge towards each other until they collide. This might seem like a barbaric and extreme practice to many, but, as Ruben knows fully well, there is far more to heavy metal than violence and inverted crosses.

Ruben’s musical tastes vary within the world of metal, but he finds himself always drawn towards black metal, which focuses on lo-fi production, screeching vocals and Satanic lyrical themes.

¹ Die Hexe, Natalia. “Behemoth Live.” *Flickr*.

“The genre is more about creating an atmosphere and emotion rather than just playing perfectly,” he explains. Ruben is, of course, referring to the infamous black metal scene that emerged in Norway in the 90’s. Many of these pioneers of the genre intentionally used cheap, low quality recording equipment in order to create a “prehistoric” vibe with their music. In essence, black metal acts as a form of rebellion against the established process of making an album, which includes mastering and editing tracks. Black metal bands abandoned this completely and released their music to the world exactly as it was in the studio; raw and untouched. Ruben elaborates: “on the *Filosofem* album, for example, Varg [Vikernes, the musician behind black metal project, Burzum] purposefully left mistakes in the final recording to capture a sense of ‘realness,’ which to me exemplifies the ethos of the genre.” The poor production and gritty sound is enough to turn most away, but for Ruben, these aspects make up a great deal of black metal’s charm and individuality. “Sure, it’s abrasive and extremely inaccessible,” Ruben admits, “but once you learn to appreciate it, the raw, primitive feel of the music really strikes a chord. [...] Black metal is phenomenal.”

Being such a dark form of music, black metal has, naturally, become a topic of great controversy not only in the metal world, but in mainstream media as well. This stems from a series of criminal activities committed by members of the Norwegian “second wave” of black metal. The aforementioned Varg “Count Grishnackh” Vikernes was the most famous (or infamous) case: he was sentenced to 21 years in prison, the maximum sentence in Norway, for the arson of three churches, as well as the murder of fellow black metal musician, Øystein “Euronymous” Aarseth of Mayhem. Ruben puts it aptly when he says that some of these musicians were “completely mentally unstable, but still created great art.” The Satanic themes explored in most black metal lyrics only furthered the media outrage against the black metal scene, especially amongst Christian circles. Black metal listeners were victimized by being labelled “evil Devil worshippers” left, right and center. But, as Ruben explains, black metal heads are a deeply misunderstood group of people, as most do not associate with the extreme aspects of the genre at all. “People don’t really understand the complexity of metal music and its subgenres and just associate the entire genre with [...] stereotypes,” Ruben says, with a defeated shrug.



The cover of Darkthrone's "Under A Funeral Moon" album (1993); an example of the dark and macabre atmosphere black metal attempts to evoke²

Yet, Ruben readily admits that Satanism is an integral part of the genre, despite his efforts to disassociate himself with it. "Black metal without the Satanic aspect wouldn't really be black metal," he says frankly. "I don't take any of it seriously, but it definitely adds to the image and the act that these bands put on, so I can't say I'm against it. Personally, though, I'm not one to wear corpse paint and inverted crosses, so I respect it purely musically." On Darkthrone's signature track "Transilvanian Hunger," Ted "Nocturno Culto" Skjellum wails, almost incoherently, "so pure... and so cold"; a perfect thesis statement for black metal from one of the pioneers of the style.

However, black metal represents only a small fraction of the diversity metal has to offer. Samar Singh, 20, is a self-proclaimed metal since the ripe age of nine; yet, he does not associate with extreme metal genres at all. "I find death metal and black metal to be a bit too noisy for my tastes," he explains. "It's the singing style that I have a problem with. I just don't enjoy growling or screeching vocals." Samar explains that the part of metal which appeals to him is the melody and energy of a song, which leads him to enjoy a wide variety of music, including electronic and alternative. Suffice to say, Samar doesn't fit the mold of most people's preconceived image of a metal head. In fact, he is a successful college student who is passionate about international economics, video games and sports: nothing unseemly by the standards of most. But hearing he likes metal leads to people assuming the worst. "Unfortunately, a lot of people have this preconceived notion that all metal music is just screaming and noise, and metal fans sacrifice goats and whatnot," he laments, with a tad bit of hyperbole thrown in for good measure. "It's frankly really annoying whenever people assume those things of me, even though the type of metal I listen to has no association with that stuff." Contrary to the belief of most, metal lyrics don't *always* center around violence and Satan; the lyrics range from history (Anthrax's "Indians") to literature (Iron Maiden's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner") and even to a love of metal music itself (Manowar's "Warriors of the World United").

Samar's interests shift towards other subgenres of metal, namely classic metal, thrash metal, alternative metal and power metal. These genres, in stark contrast to something like black metal, focus on energetic riffs and catchy choruses. Samar remembers his first exposure to the genre with a sense of nostalgia; he recalls playing the videogame "Guitar Hero 3" when he first stumbled across a metal song. "[Metallica's] "One" was probably the song that really stuck with me. I don't really know why. I mean, I was nine years old," he reflects. "But for some reason, I absolutely loved it. I made my mom take me to a music store where I picked up a couple of albums." Samar's fondness for Metallica still remains to this day, as he cites them as his favorite artist of all time, but he also enjoys other well-known radio-friendly acts like Judas Priest and Iron Maiden. "I guess the reason I love Metallica is how dynamic their sound is and how diverse their albums are," he says. He goes on to clarify that, in his eyes, Metallica's discography essentially summarizes the diversity that metal has to offer; from "thrashy and fast" masterpieces like *Ride the Lightning*, to the "concise and radio friendly" catchiness of their 1991 self-titled LP, and even to the "bluesy and alternative sound" of *Load*. This led to the band finding widespread success throughout the 90's, becoming a household name and spawning the best-selling album since 1990 to date (the aforementioned self-titled.)

² Nagell, Gylve Fenris, and Ted Skjellum. "Under A Funeral Moon." *Wikipedia*.



Metallica performing live in Moscow in 1991 for a crowd of 1.5 million people at the height of the genre's popularity³

The dynamic quality of metal essentially sums up what Samar, as well as hundreds of thousands of metal heads around the world, love about the genre; it is far deeper and more diverse than most are willing to give it credit for. Samar continues, "there's something for everyone. If you like EDM, there's industrial metal; if you like rap, there's rap metal and nu metal; if you like folk, there's folk metal and Viking metal. The possibilities are endless, more so than any other genre of music." Yet, these diverse forms of musical expression go unnoticed by most, as many write metal off as just "noise." Even though there is, ironically, a subgenre of metal called noise, these people only see the tip of the iceberg without bothering to explore this rich and dynamic style of music. While it may not be a genre of music with the mainstream appeal of pop, everyone should at least try and dip their toe into it without preconceived stigmas. You never know what could happen; you may even find yourself becoming a part of the metal community.

Even metal heads whose interests focus on extreme metal, like Ruben, respect other subgenres as well. This is what, according to both Ruben and Samar, makes the metal community an especially tight-knit one. Samar, who frequents the Metal subreddit, says that the online community is "incredibly supportive and kind." He says that he "feels an instant sense of kinship" whenever he meets another like-minded individual. These sentiments are echoed by Ruben, who describes the community at the aforementioned Behemoth concert: "People were constantly reaching out to help up anyone that fell over or got injured, like myself," he says. "After I dislocated my shoulder, a couple guys helped me to get medical attention. I ended up making a bunch of friends that day too." According to both, metal heads are some of the friendliest people they've ever met, regardless of the stereotypes typically associated with the community in mass media. This helpful, kindhearted atmosphere permeates the genre: both Ruben and Samar, who are on opposite ends of the metal spectrum, are united by a mutual respect and understanding of the other's tastes.

Just like Ruben and Samar, I too am an avid metal head, whose interest falls somewhat in the middle of these two extremes; I enjoy classic and thrash metal, but also enjoy listening to black and death metal at times. Both Ruben and Samar have, over the years, become two of my very close friends;

³ "Metallica Live at Moscow 1991." *Tumblr*.

a fact that I attribute mainly to our shared love of metal. In fact, I was the one who initially exposed Ruben to metal by giving him a copy of Metallica's self-titled album, and he later returned the favor by introducing me to black metal. In this way and more, the metal community allows people to build strong, lifelong relationships while also opening minds to new forms of musical expression.