

Raising the devil horns:

Coven and the Occult's Influence on the Development of Metal Music

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Introduction

“I’ve been hidden for a long time, but that doesn’t mean you can change history.” (Dawson, in Selzer 2017)

In the mid-2010s, Coven, a Chicago band from the late-1960s with a cult following, made a resurgence with a series of live performances as a part of the occult rock revival. The band’s founding member and lead singer, Jinx Dawson, used this comeback as a way to ‘set the record straight’ and lay claim to heavy metal’s occult aesthetics, bringing into question the claims about pioneering bands, such as Black Sabbath, as the originators of these themes in metal music. In an interview with *Metal Hammer*, Dawson made the above statement, confessing that she felt ignored within metal’s history and that others had attempted to take credit for what she had brought to the genre in its formation, ostensibly trying to erase her and “change history” (Dawson, in Selzer 2017). Dawson’s claims introduce a new origin for heavy metal’s adoption of the occult, with current discourse attributing the eerie aesthetics of early metal to the horror movie genre, while Dawson and her original fellow band members took inspiration from their experiences as practitioners within a Left-Hand Path coven.

This article aims to: investigate the lack of academic exploration of Coven’s work through engaging with feminist metal scholarship; and interrogate Coven’s claims to metal’s occult aesthetics by analysing their use of the horned-hand gesture and the Black Mass with the aid of a feminist metal theoretical framework. By doing so, a new appreciation for occult themes within early metal music will be gained, which sees the occult in metal as not merely a gimmick to achieve a level of shock value, but also a method of practicing esoteric beliefs. Furthermore, this analysis is significant as it places a woman at the centre of a discussion on metal history that is not limited to her gender and revises the metal timeline to include a female as a pioneer within the genre.

Coven was formed in 1967, where their original line-up consisted of Jinx Dawson, Oz Osbourne, and Steve Ross. They released their debut album, *Witchcraft Destroys Minds and*

Reaps Souls, in February 1969; however, the album was never given the opportunity for commercial success, because it was stripped from store shelves as a result of the Satanic Panic triggered by the Manson Family murders. Regardless of this setback, the band continued to perform and toured with bands such as Black Sabbath and Alice Cooper. A defining feature of the band was their mission to enlighten people through the Left-Hand Path [LHP] (Coven 2015). Granholm defines LHP as “a current of contemporary esotericism characterized by its extreme individualism and adherence to ‘dark’ symbolism” (2012: 131). There are three guiding principles of LHP including: “the ideology of individualism, the goal of self-deification, and an antinomian stance” (Granholm 2012: 144). Despite sharing imagery with Satanism, this form of occultism does not worship a deity and instead uses this imagery to establish LHP as antithetical to mainstream or ‘Right-Hand Path’ beliefs (Granholm 2012: 502). LHP owes much of its principles to Indian esoteric traditions found in Tantra. Granholm identifies LHP’s understanding of the feminine as an aspect appropriated from Tantra, where the feminine is situated as “aggressive and dangerous”, opposing “the passive feminine in Western contexts” (2012: 512). To achieve their mission, *Witchcraft* includes nine songs all with lyrics themed around the occult and a tenth track which is a thirteen-minute recording of the Black Mass. Additionally, during live performances the band would dress in hooded-robos, greet the audience with the devil horns gesture, and dedicate a portion of their performance time to a staging of the Black Mass. Regardless of the early inclusion of these occult elements, some of which went on to be main staples in metal music particularly with the emergence of Black Metal, references to Coven are scarce and Dawson’s solo crusade to gain recognition for her contributions to the genre’s formation have largely gone unnoticed within the field of metal music studies.

Feminist theory and metal music studies

The presence of feminist theory in metal music studies has been gaining prominence in the field for the past ten years. It has provided needed criticism to combat the hegemonic masculinist subculture metal music is centred on, and interrogated the experiences of female metal participants, particularly in the area of fan studies. Despite the significant contributions feminist theorists have brought to metal music studies (Berkers & Schaap 2018; DiGioia & Helfrich 2018; Hill 2016; Hoad 2017; Vasan 2011), this type of feminist theory has yet to be applied to heavy metal’s musical canon and mythos to produce new origin points for the genre and some of its practices. By applying such a lens to metal music, new figures are able to come out of the woodwork, with Jinx Dawson and Coven being just one example.

The initial emergence of metal music studies has received widespread criticism for its erasure of women, either participating as fans or as musicians. Deena Weinstein's *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture* (2000) was the first monograph dedicated to metal music, and while it provides a positive overview of the genre and its subculture at a time when metal was the target of conservatives and rock critics, it fails to adequately address women and their place within the genre. In an appraisal of women's role in rock music, and by extension metal music, Weinstein dismisses their contributions to masculine music genres by stating that "women have never been important factors in rock music" (2000: 67). Weinstein's views on women in metal have seen minimal development, with her 2016 chapter, in *Heavy Metal, Gender, and Sexuality: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, problematically features her positing that "gender is no longer as salient an issue as it had been through much of the twentieth century" (2016: 22). Weinstein's comments display little investment in the real experiences of women in metal and no intention to reevaluate her initial assessment on women in metal, which is further troubling as Amanda DiGioia and Lyndsay Helfrich suggest that "her claims are harmful to the current direction of the metal music studies is taking" (2018: 366). The absence of a thorough review of Weinstein's comments blocks an adequate understanding of women's contributions to metal, as their place is not appropriately acknowledged.

Despite there being a surge in academic engagement on women in metal music, fan studies is the dominant mode to engage with this, resulting in female fans being favoured over female performers. Women are oftentimes only permitted temporary access to or positions within metal, which often takes the form of a romantic connection with a male member of the scene. As this access is only temporary, it is presumed that women will only remain interested in metal for as long as they are in a relationship (Sarelin 2016: 74). Despite women being presumed to be either "the girlfriend" or a groupie, many women have entered metal without connections to male participants and have gone on to contribute to metal music as performers. Nevertheless, in metal music studies, women performers are still rarely discussed as progenitors or acknowledged for their contributions to the genre, with their contributions only being acknowledged if they have directly impacted other women. For example, throughout metal scholarship, Angela Gossow is a widely referenced performer when metal and gender is being discussed; however, because of her gender, she is only praised for being a role model to other female musicians and helping other women to gain access to metal as performers (Berkers & Schaap 2015: 314; Berkers & Schaap 2018: 77). Furthermore, the example of Gossow is utilised to highlight the hardships of women metal performers, as it is established that her status

in the death metal subgenre is diminished by male participants, as they only ‘compliment’ her through comparing her to fellow male performers (Heesch 2012: 175). This signals that men are automatically positioned above women within the metal subculture as they are granted the right to appraise performances by women on a scale based on male excellency, which women must match or perform greater than to be accepted. Women’s status as performers is further minimised as individuals like Gossow are inherently perceived as sexual objects, which reinforces their status as temporary participants (Hill 2016: 151). Vasan highlights that women are incapable of partaking in metal on their own terms, with regards to women performers stating that “female artists attempting to infiltrate male-dominated music spaces have been forced to mimic the behavior of male artists in order to obtain a measure of respect” (2011: 335). This reveals that women in metal are subject to strict conditions that permits their involvement; however, with discourse not having yet included in depth case studies of woman musicians, how they navigate such structures cannot fully be understood.

Metal is not solely reliant on its musical form to define it; a stringent authenticity code has been developed within the subculture over time to function as a tool which can be employed to classify songs, albums, participants, and practices as metal. Initially, this code was born out of a need for metal devotees to defend metal, as rock critics discredited the quality of the genre’s music (Walser 2014: 10-11); nevertheless, it has since developed into a barrier which blocks the participation and acknowledgement of individuals who do not reflect the code’s hegemonic masculinity. Allen Moore posits that authenticity “is a matter of interpretation which is made and fought for from within a cultural and, thus, historicised position. It is ascribed not inscribed” (2002: 210). This ascribing authenticity is the crux which bars women from originator status in metal music, as it creates division in metal as participants fight over what is metal and what is not. Walser states that the key reason for this division, and to a greater extent the reason for all debates on authenticity in metal, comes down to gender and sexuality (2014: 130). The hegemonic masculinity that the authenticity code mandates places gender and sexual subversions in opposition to normative gender roles, thus presentations of such subversions jeopardize metal’s identity as a whole. Assigning women significant roles in metal history remains a challenge which feminist metal studies has yet to properly resolve. Throughout the literature, women from all phases of metal’s development have been referred to but their inclusions are often minimal. Berkers and Schaap highlight that there has yet to be an academic history of women’s involvement in metal produced, an issue which they somewhat remedy by providing a brief overview of some of metal’s women (2018: 28). Furthermore,

Berkers and Schaap acknowledge “women such as Dawson—despite predating Black Sabbath’s self-titled debut—rarely make it into the canon of rock music” (2018: 29). The need for authenticity in metal directly impacts those who do not sustain the hegemonic masculinity; therefore, women, queer, and BIPOC fans and performers are marginalised within metal’s subculture and cannot at current be considered for pioneer status.

A figure such as Dawson is ideal for appraisal because of her proximity to the emergence of metal, which enables a questioning of metal’s male-dominated history, and because of her performance of occult traditions, which like metal, produced sexual and sexist representations of women. The structures which Dawson navigates in her performance of both masculine music and LHP ritual provide more nuance to feminist metal studies and a template for future in depth analyses of women and their performance of metal music.

The current understanding of metal’s history with occultism

The inclusion of occult themes and practices is not unique to heavy metal music, with other forms of popular music presenting themes and imagery taken from occult and satanic sources. It is through this common engagement which provides a starting point for metal’s use of occultism. In the late 1960s, metal emerged from rock music, which had been influenced by blues music. African-American blues musicians promoted themselves as having a connection to Satan or other ‘evil’ figures linked to voodoo beliefs and claimed to have received their musical abilities from this alliance (Farley 2009: 75). However, the blues’ alignment with the devil was further perpetuated by African-American preachers, who saw the blues as a rival to gospel music and so incorporated warnings of the blues into their sermons to increase the attendance at services (ibid). Heavy metal followed a similar trajectory, with the genre’s formative bands, such as Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin, producing music with references to the occult and Satanism; however, Granholm argues that conservative detractors frequently linked metal with occultism, providing the genre with a darker image (2013: 6). Furthermore, Granholm states that:

Some artists have engaged more deeply with the occult, explicitly using their music to mediate occult philosophies or even using it as a tool for magical practice. Such artists have, however, remained isolated exceptions in a genre where most artists have claimed nothing more than being fascinated by occult symbolism. (ibid)

The lack of sincerity within metal’s early usage of the occult is also evident with how Black Sabbath, the band frequently cited as the genre’s key progenitor, interacted with such

themes. From their debut in 1970, Black Sabbath utilised imagery in their lyrical content and album artwork which evoked a connection to the occult, and with the progression of their career, this imagery was further developed and infused into band members' physical appearances and costuming, as well as their live performances. Furthermore, Black Sabbath's lead guitar, Tony Iommi, made frequent use of the devil's interval when writing the songs for the band, placing further emphasis on the band's affiliation with the occult and Satanism (Arp 2013: 186). Nevertheless, Secord labels Black Sabbath's employment of the occult as having "taken generic forms, inspired and sanctioned by the presence of demons and sorcerers" (2020:158). Furthermore, Farley notes that Osbourne openly stated that the band was not serious about its involvement with the occult, likening himself and his band members to actors (2009: 80). Farley concludes that Black Sabbath "exploited the shock value to augment their audiences without an underlying belief in the ideologies described in their lyrics" (2009: 81). With Black Sabbath being positioned as pioneers in metal's mythos, their co-opting of occult beliefs to further grow their audience is applied to metal as a whole. By having no other canonised figures to counter this, metal's early expressions of occult interest are read as inauthentic and gimmicky.

The inauthentic portrayals of occult themes are not persistent throughout metal's history, with academics citing the period between the 1980s and 1990s when the black metal scene in Norway saw an increase in engagement with occult practices (Granholm 2013: 17; Secord 2020: 158). Secord states that this period involved bands engaging "more directly and creatively with the occult traditions, and with the ancient sources of wisdom" (2020: 158). Commonly in black metal, occultism is incorporated through the practice of Christian inversion. Gardenour Walter argues that Satanism is a frequent yet misunderstood element of black metal, which is "often oversimplified as 'Christianity upside down'," (2015: 14). Black metal has adopted Satanic thought to oppose Christianity and modern Western society, which Shakespeare and Scott posit as "it directly [allying] itself with the Satanic, or else with pagan and esoteric traditions suppressed by the church (2015: 4). Current black metal practices demonstrate "undertones that can more clearly be categorized as religious" (Granholm 2013: 17), which is more in line with Coven's approach to infusing LHP tradition into their musical practices.

The current account of heavy metal music's history with the occult, as outlined here, suggests a surface-level understanding of occultism, with more recent black metal bands being the exception. By neglecting Coven's Left-Hand Path practices, which they displayed in rock

and metal spaces, this history of metal musicians superficially deploying occult aesthetics to gain a semblance of edge has been prolonged.

Coven’s claim to being the “First Occult Band” in rock and metal

The sincerity to which Dawson and Coven applied to their merging of LHP beliefs with their music and performance practices was not seen from other pioneering bands at metal’s beginning. In the minimal references Coven have received within rock and metal music academic discourse, their approach to music as a form of esoteric worship is not mentioned, as the focus is on Dawson’s gender. It is significant that a woman such as Dawson was present at the emergence of metal music; however, her absence from the metal canon is more revealing of how metal’s authenticity code works to erase women and their contributions from the narrative, skewing metal’s history in the process. The interviews which Dawson took part in between 2016-2017 demonstrate a seriousness which early bands did not have in regards to using references to occult themes.

Dawson appears to hold some hostility towards other bands from metal’s formative years because of their participation in diluting esoteric beliefs by bringing them into the mainstream. This ire is particularly directed at Black Sabbath, who intentionally or otherwise share several features with Coven. Similarity between the bands include referencing the 1963 horror film, *Black Sabbath*, which Coven used as a song title on their 1969 debut album which Black Sabbath were still performing under referring the name Earth (Herron-Wheeler 2014); and, Coven having a bassist named Greg ‘Oz’ Osbourne while Black Sabbath’s front man was John Michael ‘Ozzy’ Osbourne. These coincidences are an odd part of rock history but are not where the association ends. The bands toured together in 1970 and high-profile rock critic, Lester Bangs, referred to Sabbath as “something like England’s answer to Coven” (1970). In a 2017 interview, Dawson expressed disappointment over not being recognised for her contributions, saying that “the music might not have been quite the same but the occult situations where there, as well as the photographs and lyrics” (Norton 2017). In a 2016 interview, Dawson was asked to speak on her public image and how integral it was to the band, to which she responded with:

I am the head of The Coven. I am the Magus High Priestess among the ancestral LHP, one of very few left. My now passed family coven named me as the messenger when I was 13. To keep the flame alive. But sadly, the true flame hath been almost extinguished-tarnished and

misinterpreted over the years and become an entertainment public relations novelty instead of a serious notion of enlightening people to a more scientific and intelligent future. (Sadler 2016)

Dawson's reaction to the gimmick nature of occultism in metal displays that her use of the themes and practices came from a place of authenticity, with her further stating that their debut album, *Witchcraft Destroys Minds and Reaps Souls*, was intended to be a "definitive scholarly work on the subject of Witchcraft and the Occult in recorded form" (ibid).

Dawson has remained a vocal commentator on her removal from metal history, while members of Black Sabbath have shrugged off any connection to the band as mere coincidence. Nevertheless, there is a clear distinction to be made behind the intentions of each band with Black Sabbath filling the role of actors and Coven functioning as authorities on LHP practices.

'The Sign of the Horns' and the debate over its connection to the occult

For the back album artwork of *Witchcraft*, the members of Coven pose with their arms outstretched, with their index and pinkie fingers extended, forming horns. The origin of this gesture has been a highly contested one, which like finding the definitive originators of metal, will never be answered. Like with all LHP practices Dawson uses in her performance, she is purposeful in her use of the gesture which is different to how it is understood in the broader metal community.

Commonly, Ronnie James Dio is credited with popularising the gesture within the subculture while performing with Black Sabbath (Farley 2009: 73). Gene Simmons of KISS disputes Dio's supposed claim as the gesture's populariser, by stating he had created it and attempted to trademark it in 2017 (Nowakowski 2020: 66). However, Dawson and the album which shows Coven performing the gesture disproves both claims, and Dawson readily speaks on this. In regards to Dio, Dawson says: "I think many more people are now aware that Ronnie was not the first. There are live shots of Coven onstage in 1968 and on our 1969 debut album there are photographs of Coven doing the Sign of the Horns" (Sadler 2016). In response to Simmons' failed trademarking, Dawson posted an impassioned statement on Facebook stating that Coven had been using the sign as early as 1967 and provided photographic proof (2017). Furthermore, Dawson referred to the sign as "MY sign" to further emphasise her ownership of it and further degraded Simmons' claims by stating "Gene does not even DO the sign properly. He [sic] is doing the deaf sign for 'love'" (ibid). As preposterous as it sounds that a rock legend attempted to trademark the American Sign Language sign for love, it highlights the significance of the sign, and the importance of being its originator. Dawson's lack of

recognition as the gesture's originator demonstrates the continued barring Coven experiences from metal history, and to a further extent, the barring of all women progenitors or innovators within the metal subculture.

The origins of this sign in metal may sound like petty drama, but who introduced the gesture to metal's subculture has significant implications on the sign's meaning and whether or not it has connections to the occult. Nowakowski's study (2020) of the gesture highlights the longevity of the gesture and its varying definitions which are dependent upon cultural context. The gesture itself traces back to the sixth Egyptian Dynasty, where it is depicted in the Qar tomb and is said to represent "the day and the night, the beginning and the end" (Nowakowski 2020: 65). Dio's understanding of the sign and its meaning came from his Italian grandmother who would have grown up with the gesture being a protective charm (Nowakowski 2020: 66). Nevertheless, when explaining the gesture to a concert audience in 1980, Dio stated that the sign was being misunderstood, potentially because it was being seen as a shorthand for "hail Satan" (A Metalhead's Journey 2019). Dio reinstates that its true meaning was "long live rock and roll" (ibid). Through defining the gesture this way, Dio takes it out of the Italian cultural context that he has borrowed it from and assigns it a new meaning, making it a symbol that indicates heavy metal. Nowakowski posits that the horned hand has evolved within the metal subculture to have five overall meanings or functions, which include Dio's original usage, as well as being used by metalheads "to display their identity and/or community, greet and bid each other farewell, show appreciation and/or respect" (2020: 78).

Herron-Wheeler credits Dawson with the introduction of the sign and states that it was taught to her by a Creole babysitter who would share with her traditions from hoodoo practices and customs (2014). In a 2017 interview with *Metal Hammer*, Dawson states that the sign's true purpose is to identify practitioners of LHP and acknowledge them (Selzer 2017). By performing the sign of the horns onstage, Dawson is acknowledging her audience as a part of her coven and as pupils of LHP teachings. However, since the sign's false attribution to Dio and Simmons, the gesture has been divorced of its original meaning. Dawson expresses annoyance at the sign being mistaken for the Italian protection sign, because of its association with Dio (ibid). Dawson recognises that while the Italian sign is similar to the gesture she had introduced to the genre, there is a slight variation in how the two signs are performed, with Dawson explaining "I do agree they have a similar sign in Italy, the hex, but that is not the same as the sign of the horns, which is raised up high" (ibid). In an earlier interview, Dawson mentions that she is disgusted by how the gesture, and even the term coven, have become

devoid of their original meanings because of metal and mainstream culture's appropriation of them (Sadler 2016). These aspects of Dawson's beliefs for her have been "bastardized" (ibid). Nevertheless, despite the gesture's meanings shifting from its intended purpose, the gesture plays a crucial role in forging a bond between members of the metal community, and its function still holds a semblance of its original meaning, as metalheads use it to acknowledge and welcome one another to a space they are claiming on the behalf of the metal subculture.

It is important to acknowledge the occult origins of the devil horns, not only because it enables for recognition to be given to Coven and their early proto-metal, but it also displays the depth in which occultism is entrenched within metal practices. Despite how bands from the 1970s through to more recent black metal have used Coven's occultist symbolism as gimmicks and means to shock and isolate the genre from the mainstream, this understanding of these symbols brings more appreciation to their usage in present-day metal, which is being utilised as a method to perform esoteric belief systems.

Performing the Satanic Mass

At the opening of the final track of Coven's debut album, six chimes of a church bell are sounded, followed by the chimes of a hand-held bell. What follows is a thirteen-minute recording of the Satanic Mass, to which the band would also dedicate a portion of their live performances. The staging of a Satanic/Black Mass is not an uncommon spectacle in metal and rock, with bands such as Black Widow and Led Zeppelin also performing the ceremony (Farley 2009: 79); however, Coven's frequency in their performance of the ceremony and Dawson's claims to not use the occult as a gimmick but rather for scholarly purposes (Sadler 2016) makes Coven's use of the Mass prime for investigation as an authentic expression of occult practices.

The invention of the Black Mass is widely contested, with practitioners of esoteric customs arguing it has pagan roots; however, academic explorations have found it to be "a trope of Christian mythology" (Laycock 2021: 44). Laycock argues that Satanism and the customs attributed to it "have historically been deployed to support certain forms of Christian hegemony" (2021: 38). In this sense, Satanism functions as an inversion of the Christian faith which legitimises Christianity and delegitimises those who oppose it by labelling them as Satanists and positioning them as the evil that good Christians must overcome (ibid). This is akin to Gardenour Walter's argument that Satanism in black metal is mistakenly understood as "Christianity upside down," (2015: 14). This explanation extends to the Black Mass, as Melton posits that the ceremony "is the product of the creative imagination of medieval inquisitors"

(2008: 28). As previously mentioned, Dawson and Coven do not identify as Satanists, but rather practice under the label of the Left-Hand Path. Nonetheless, their staging of the Mass makes frequent references to Satan and Lucifer, which is evident at the end of the ceremony where all members present chant “Hail Satan” (Coven 1969). Granholm explains that LHP shares its aesthetics with Satanism, which is seen through the use of symbols like “inversed pentagrams and crosses”, and terms such as “Satan, the Prince of Darkness, and Black Magic” (2012: 131). When speaking on this connection, Dawson states “To left hand path people Satan is more like a mascot...I don’t believe in a real Satan” (DiVita 2021). One of the earliest accounts of the Black Mass was in Paris during the reign of Louis XIV, when police were investigating a series of assassination attempts on the king through poisoning (Introvigne 2016: 36). The investigation detailed a number of characteristics which continue to be used or claimed to be used in modern Black Mass. The most widespread characteristic of the Black Mass is that it borrows its form from the Catholic Mass, with Introvigne defining it as “celebrating the Catholic Mass in an ‘inverted’ form, turning it into a demonic Mass” (2016: 35). Reports collected from accused Satanists have also detailed additional elements of Black Masses, including “sexual orgies, using nude women as alters, [and] abusing consecrated hosts” (Laycock 2021: 44). Regarding the abuse of consecrated hosts, the Parisian Black Masses supposedly began sacrificing doves; however, the doves were soon replaced by aborted fetuses which were then switched with living infants (Introvigne 2016: 40). France produced another account of a Black Mass in the form of the 1891 novel *Là-bas*, translated to English as *The Damned or Down There*, by Joris-Karl Huysmans. The mass in Huysmans’ novel takes the form of an inverted Catholic mass which climaxes with an orgy over urine-soaked bread (Introvigne 2016: 148). Introvigne states that this fictional Black Mass has gone on to inspire modern masses with “a significant number of Satanist groups [using] it as a model to be reenacted” (ibid).

Traits from the Paris and *Là-bas*’ Black Masses are identifiable within that of Coven’s ‘Satanic Mass.’ Across the recording of the ceremony, a priest can be heard giving a sermon, hymns are sung, and a woman is used as an alter and baptised into the coven. The wording of the priest’s sermon is a clear inversion of the Catholic Mass, similar to what was reported from the Paris and *Là-bas*’ Black Masses. At the commencement of his sermon, Coven’s priest states:

In the name of Satan, ruler of Earth, the King of the world, the Chief of the Serfs, I command the forces of darkness to bestow their infernal power upon us. Save us, Lord Satan, from the

Treacherous and the violent. Oh Satan, Spirit of the Earth, God of Liberty, open wide the gates of Hell and come forth from the abyss by these names: Satan! Beelzebub! Leviathon! Asmodeus! Abaddon! (Bill Traut, in Coven 1969)

The opening line of this excerpt mirrors that of a Catholic Mass by replacing the traditional “in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” with an acknowledgement to Satan. This referencing is further developed upon when a woman is brought forward for baptism and is asked to recite “I deny Jesus Christ the deceiver and I abjure the Christian Faith, holding in contempt all of its works” (Bill Traut, in Coven 1969). These elements position the Satanic Mass and LHP as an adversary to Christianity. In a 2017 interview, Dawson elaborated upon her opposition to religion by claiming “I think it’s a path to destruction. It doesn’t bring people together. It tears them apart” and “Maybe we can embrace pagan things that are more intelligent and respectful of nature” (Norton 2017). Coven’s performance of the Black Mass, while being in line with their LHP beliefs, is presented more as a critique on Christianity through it being an inversion.

The inversion of Christian traditions is not fully realised within performances of the Black Mass, which can be highlighted through women being represented in sexualised and sexist ways. Sex and nudity are integral elements of all versions of the mass discussed, which functions as a critique on Christianity’s valuing purity through virginity. By inverting this belief through utilising naked women as alters, women are cast as sexual objects to be acted upon by the male priest. In this instance, the roles women play in Christianity and occult worship reflect that of Sigmund Freud’s Madonna-Whore Complex, which is described as when “male dichotomize female sexuality into extremes of virtue and vice” (Hertler et al. 2023: 1). This complex is also prominent in metal, with Walser detailing two roles for women in metal music videos, the first being the absent woman and the second being the seductive woman (2014: 115-116). In this binary, the absent woman is metal’s version of the Madonna, who is representative of the world young men are preparing to participate in once reaching adulthood, where women are not present as they remain at home as a dutiful wife and mother (Walser 2014: 115). The seductive woman, as Walser posits “serves as a reminder of why exscription is necessary: the greater the seductiveness of the female image, the greater its threat to masculine control” (2014, 116). In fan studies it is theorised that women must enact gender in accordance with metal’s masculinist code (Berkers & Schaap 2018; Hoad 2017; Krenske & McKay 2000; Nordström & Herz 2013). Due to this another set of roles for women have been

identified, that being the den mother and band whore (Berkers & Schaap 2018: 17; Nordström & Herz 2013: 465). Berkers and Schaap further elaborate by defining these roles as:

(1) ‘*den mothers*’ who adopt a traditionally masculine style of dress and demeanour to be ‘one of the boys’ or (2) ‘*band whores*’ who over-emphasise their sexuality in the way they dress and behave, likely resulting in being looked-at as sex objects. (2018:17)

All of these roles view women from a masculine perspective, further demonstrating the lack of agency women are allowed in both metal fan participation and performances of the Black Mass.

In women’s performance of metal music, these dualities and doing gender on men’s terms persists. Weinstein argues that women musicians, either performing as frontwomen or instrumentalists, “do not transcend their primary role as sexual objects” (2000: 68). Jasmine Hazel Shadrack’s autoethnographic monograph, *Black Metal, Trauma, Subjectivity and Sound*, provides a more nuanced discussion on the roles women performers occupy. Shadrack identifies another duality in the female members of her band Denigrata. Shadrack performs as Denigrata Herself and is the band’s lead vocalist and guitarist, Manea is the band’s keyboardist and provides operatic vocals, and both performers portray themselves as witches in a similar fashion to Dawson. Shadrack states that her and Manea have chosen to present themselves as witches because witches are “a patriarchally loathed female archetype who embodies freedom of will, sexual desire and power” (2021: 119). Despite both performers modelling their appearance after witches, Denigrata Herself and Manea are treated differently at live events because of the roles they fill (Shadrack 2021: 145). Manea is “seen to perform a historically feminine role’ and Denigrata Herself is ‘fulfilling a perceived masculine role’” (ibid). Shadrack posits that if she only performed as the band’s vocalist and was not a guitarist, her disruption of metal’s masculinist code would not be as pronounced and therefore more accepted by male participants (2021: 152). The duality in Denigrata demonstrates the impact metal’s authenticity code has on female performers, as acts of intentional disruption to the code have their impact minimised through elements such as instrument choice. Dawson operates as a vocalist which in the metal space is less-prestigious than the role of guitarist, which women are often barred from (Bayton 1997: 37; Berkers & Schaap 2018: 66). Herron-Wheeler describes Dawson’s appearance as “part sorceress, part temptress, and her look was all contrast...a look that was both scary and sexy” (2014). Dawson, like all women in metal, has to navigate these dualities, and while Dawson’s status as a woman in a masculine space shows a level of subversion, her appearance and occupation in the band display a level of conformity to metal’s codes.

Coven is situated in a conflicting position as they are heralded as a band with a female member, yet their performance of the Black Mass furthers sexist narratives. Dawson's role in the Black Mass is not as the high priestess, but rather a male priest performs this role. Dawson surrenders the authority she holds as the band's frontperson for the last thirteen minutes of the album, disrupting a key element of the band's subversion within masculine music norms. Furthermore, this surrendering of authority is in opposition with how Dawson identifies herself as the 'high priestess.' On a related note, while being placed in a position of authority through her frontperson status and 'high priestess' title, Dawson is only credited as a cowriter on three of the album's songs, with Jim Donlinger being the principal songwriter for the album, demonstrating that the band gave the appearance of subverting masculinist norms in rock but still adhered to such norms at the writing and producing level. In portraying hegemonic gender norms, Coven's performance of the Black Mass also opposes elements of LHP, as LHP is said to value nature and the feminine rather than devaluing them like monotheistic religions do (Granholm 2012: 149). While the Black Mass is an inversion on Christian ritual, in iterations like the ones discussed in this section, it fails to subvert gender roles which the Christian tradition inscribes in their practices. Likewise, Coven are not able to subvert and overthrow metal's masculine code merely by placing a woman as the head of their band, which is shown through how easily Dawson is removed from her position of authority.

Conclusion

Jinx Dawson has been cited as the first woman in metal and Coven as one of the first metal bands (Berkers & Schaap 2018; Herron-Wheeler 2014), but when this is the only detail of their career and influence present in the literature, their importance to metal's music, gender norms, and occult influences are not properly addressed. Dawson's claims and explanations behind elements, such as their occult themed lyrics, use of the devil horns, and staging of a Black Mass, are essential in understanding the genre's developing connection with occultism. Dawson so also integral to acknowledging metal's diversity which has oftentimes been overlooked in an attempt to maintain the masculinist culture of the genre. While many of the practices and symbols which Dawson centred in her performance have repeatedly been appropriated by metal bands, to the point of them being employed as cliché and gimmick, there is still a rich meaning to be uncovered from them, especially as some subgenres of heavy and extreme metal move towards utilising its music and subculture as a practice of esotericism. Additionally, by featuring Dawson, a woman performer, within the history of metal, it is possible that the genre can continue the opening-up that metal has been undergoing over the

past two decades. Through performing a sexualised version of a black mass, which foregrounded traditional gender norms, Coven was unable to subvert gender expectations present in metal and the wider community; however, they did sow the seed for other bands to be more subversive in their performances of esoteric-infused metal. A continued and conscious use of Left-Hand Path elements in metal gives the genre further access to means of critiquing mainstream religion, establishing the importance of the feminine, dedicating focus onto the individual, and bolstering its association with in-depth knowledge of occult traditions.

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