

## The Sound of Perseverance

Matt Schering

Is pop culture equipped to deal with complex social issues? In this article, Matt Schering examines an unlikely source, heavy metal lyrics, to see if pop culture is capable of discussing the issues important to our daily lives, issues including drug abuse and animal rights.

When I mention the genre of heavy metal, what is the first thing that comes to your mind? Do you think about neon spandex? Gratuitous amounts of hairspray? Satanic worship? A cacophonous combination of caustic chords? Lyrics attuned to the complex social issues that dominate our society? Wait, what was that one about social issues again? If any of those examples sound erroneous, it is probably the last one, but to me, that is the definitive aspect of this genre. It can be easy to write off heavy metal as the sound of white noise, but, like so much in this world, music is often overlooked for the unique way it can address issues we face every single day. With the rise of **multimedia** in writing, it seems worthwhile for teachers and students alike to examine the merits of media, music, and, in this case, metal. Writing is a pragmatic act, and when writing you generally want to connect with an audience. Can music provide a bridge to engagement? By using some aspects of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), what can we learn about the merits of metal music? In this article, I will examine the perceived value of heavy metal music, so put on your favorite Slayer shirt and throw up the devil horns as we jump into the mosh pit of heavy metal and writing!

## Disclaimer

I will be the first to admit, I may be a bit biased on the merits of heavy metal lyrics, as I am a headbanger (an endearing term for a fan of heavy metal) myself. Additionally, I was also a member of a thrash metal band, Dark Entropy (see Image 1 below).

In my band, I was one of the primary lyricists, and I composed lyrics dealing with topics common to the metal canon: the futility of war, political and economic corruption, literature, and complex contemporary social issues. With my lyrics, I always try to write about events that are important to my life and to other people in this world since connecting with your audience is critical to your success as a writer. Using topics about real life issues to inspire lyrics is quite common in heavy metal music, and a great example of these sorts of lyrics can be found in Death, the appropriately named death metal band.

Death frontman Chuck Schuldiner, affectionately known as “The Godfather of Death Metal” and “The Philosopher of Metal,” wrote a great deal about real life issues until his untimely passing from brain cancer in 2001. Schuldiner’s mother, reflecting on his music, commented, “his lyrics came from his feelings about life happenings . . . and things he felt was wrong in the world. He was a very concerned person for the wronged people in this world, and it saddened him” (Scapelliti n.p.). Writing about real things that happen in the world is an important concept for not only metal, but also any creative outlet. People need to feel a connection to your creation, and Schuldiner knew that and used it as a basis for his lyrics. Be it a thrash metal song, billion-dollar movie, or a paper for your English class, people need to see why your topic matters to you (and to them). For me, music is a great



Image 1: Dark Entropy rocking the Star Bar. Photo by David Star.

outlet for discussing the issues we all face, and there are some scholars that see this value as well.

## Let's CHAT about Metal Lyrics

Before we start a circle pit (a common genre of mosh pit where people, fittingly, run around in a circle) and blast some Annihilator for the benefit of society, let's take a moment to think about how media and song lyrics can operate in an academic sense. Over the next few pages, I am going to break down two songs to show off some of the depth of heavy metal lyrics. Being a huge metal fan, I am aware of the value in these lyrics, but will others see the value in these verses? To examine this form of media effectively, I'll be using a version of **cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)** developed by the ISU Writing Program as an approach to understanding writing that looks at the whole process of creating and sharing texts, whether those texts are print-based or based in some other media. From the perspective of a teacher or a student, CHAT can help us understand the importance of lyrics and give us some ideas on how to present lyrics to an audience as well.

## The Merits of Megadeth

For this article, I have decided to examine two songs: "Poison Was the Cure" from Megadeth's 1990 platinum-selling masterpiece, *Rust in Peace*, and another Megadeth song, "Countdown to Extinction" from the 1992 double-platinum album of the same name. The lyrics to both of these songs are included in appendices to this article so that you can follow along. These songs are packed with poignant lyrics carefully crafted to not only tell a story, but also to provide people with an opportunity to reflect on pressing social issues. While some may think metal lyrics fall into a stereotype of finding glory in gore, or satanic supplication, the genre actually typically asks us to pause to reflect on complex social issues, like drug abuse and animal rights.

## Methodon't

This is certainly the case with the song "Poison Was the Cure," which was written in response to Dave Mustaine's (Megadeth's founder and primary songwriter) drug abuse. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Mustaine went to rehab several times to try to kick his addictions only to find himself addicted to methadone, a drug used to assist people battling opioid addiction. His

lyrics provide a description of his struggle to find sobriety. Using CHAT to examine these lyrics, we can see how others can take up this song in ways that ask them to consider the seriousness of opioid abuse and addiction as a social issue.

In the CHAT model, **reception** “deals with how a text is taken up and used by others” (Walker 75). With Megadeth’s lyrics, and the lyrics of other songs, we can think about how they can be used by others for their own **uptake**, meaning their ability to “take up” or learn new things. In the following Megadeth songs, the lyrics are penned not only for entertainment purposes, but also to allow others to receive the lyrics in a way that gets them to contemplate these complex issues and form their own thoughts and opinions about these issues. While you can still enjoy the music without paying close attention to the lyrics, doing so can deprive you of chances for self-reflection.

“Poison Was the Cure” is a song full of raw emotion, and it tells a genuine story about someone living through withdrawals and addiction. The lyrics begin with the lines, “I miss the warm embrace I felt/The first time you touched me/Secure and safe in open arms/I should’ve know you’d crush me” (Appendix B, lines 1–4), providing a cautionary tale to others. Mustaine shows how drugs once provided him with a pleasure, but now he is haunted by their presence. Mustaine continues with the lines, “Serpent swims free in my blood/Dragon sleeping in my veins/Jackyl speaking with my tongue/Roach egg laying in my brains” (lines 9–12) to further illustrate the dangers of abuse, as Mustaine shows how he is no longer in control of his life. The song here is not looking to glamorize addiction, or draw pity for abusers, but, rather, Mustaine seeks to provide a real glimpse of the agony of addiction. There is no glamor; there is no pleasure; there is only the depressing reality of waiting for the next fix.

## Reception and Uptake

People may turn to music to find solace in their lives and to see issues they are facing told in familiar pattern and represented in music; Mustaine’s work here would resonate, as it is full of authenticity from an actual addict. Given the prevalence of opioid addiction in the United States, this song is as relevant as ever and can be useful to raise awareness about the dangers of addiction and to provide solace to the afflicted. The sincere and brutal honesty of addiction is depicted in the lyrics here, which can be quite useful to many people suffering from addiction and to those that are concerned for the safety of others.

## Animal Rights

While drug abuse is a nearly ubiquitous topic, the second song we will examine, “Countdown to Extinction,” deals with something we may not think about often, if at all: trophy hunting. Though this topic doesn’t come up as often as addiction, it still conjures up intense emotions. In recent years, Walter Palmer, “a dentist from Minnesota is said to have paid \$54,000 to bow-hunt Cecil, a . . . black-maned, 13-year-old lion who lived in Zimbabwe’s Hwange National Park . . .” (Actman n.p.), causing an uproar on social media. Additionally, Donald Trump’s children, Donald Jr. and Eric, have crafted an ignoble reputation for participating in pseudo safaris, as you can see in Image 2. Megadeth’s “Countdown to Extinction” discusses the impact of these types of hunts on certain species and shows the dangers of inviting this type of activity. “Countdown to Extinction,” in addition to being a commercial success, also won the 1992 Doris Day Award for showcasing issues related to animal rights. The audience’s uptake is such that they reflect on the ethics of big-game hunting and trophy hunting. For some, the chance to hunt and kill wild game may seem exciting, but is this really sport? What challenge is there when prey is merely presented to you, and you hold a supreme technological advantage? As Mustaine sings, “Technology the battle’s unfair/You pull the hammer without a care/Squeeze the trigger that makes you man/Pseudo safari the hunt is canned” (Appendix C, lines 5–8). Mustaine clearly intends for his audience to consider some of the problems with hunting in their reception of the song. Yes, in some cases hunting is necessary, but is that true in every case? This unique philosophical dilemma manifests itself in the cases of Palmer and the Trump boys, and Mustaine’s lyrics give us an opportunity to consider this subject, a subject that may not cross our minds otherwise.

In addition to raising questions about canned hunts, “Countdown to Extinction” also draws our attention to sustainability. The chorus of the song states, “All are gone all but one/No contest nowhere to run/No more left only one/This is it, this is the countdown to extinction” (lines 10–13), and the lyrics here give the audience another chance for reflection as they receive the song. Though some may say these lyrics are somewhat vague, such vagueness



Image 2: Donald Jr. and Eric Trump kill a leopard.

offers a chance for many types of uptake. These kinds of lyrics can invite many questions with more than one answer and can incite many different actions on the part of the audience. For example, a person might read or hear these lyrics and think, what impact am I having on the world? With our desire to hunt, kill, and tame the world, are we starting the countdown to extinction? Should we shift our focus to more renewable forms of food? All of these questions, and many more, are sparked from these lyrics and may lead to variety in responses and generate valuable discussion about the issue of trophy hunting.

As a heavy metal fan, I am privy to much of this information, and my **antecedent knowledge** (which is what I already knew about the genre) of the musical genre helps me appreciate the value of these songs. But, does this translate to the uninitiated? Can people see past unflattering stereotypes of thrash metal icons like Megadeth and give their lyrics a chance? This is where CHAT can once again be useful.

### The Ecology of Thrash

The musical genre of heavy metal is very unique, and the music itself exists in a very unique ecology. **Ecology** is an aspect of CHAT that asks us to consider “the physical, biological forces that exist beyond the boundaries of any text we are producing” (Walker 76). Heavy metal is a very powerful genre of music, and the jarring nature of its sounds might prevent its audience from seeing the merit of the arguments within its lyrics. While writing these

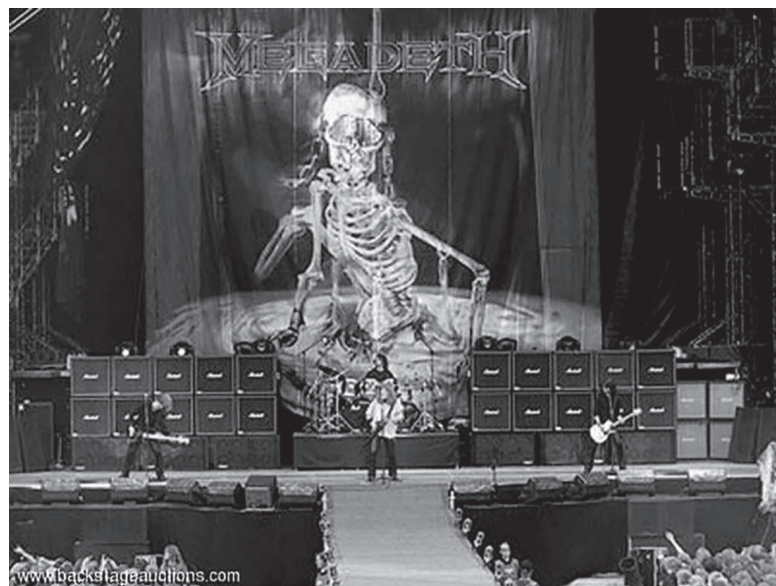


Image 3: Megadeth on stage at a concert for their tour *The World Needs a Hero*.

songs, Megadeth was picturing an ecology of a heavy metal concert. Now, I don't know if you've ever been to a heavy metal concert, but things can get a bit loud to say the least. Articulation can be difficult when you have a wall of speaker cabinets at your back, as you can see in see Image 3, which is from a Megadeth concert in 2001.

I own the same model of speaker cabinet you see in Image 3, a Marshall 1960 series, which contains four separate 75-watt speakers. Just one of these speakers provides more than enough volume to play any small or medium-sized venue (or to cause some serious hearing damage). So, when heavy metal fans are seeing a band live, more of an emphasis may be placed on a kinetic connection between the band and the audience through performing and through moshing, or headbanging. In this environment, the articulation of lyrics is still important, but can easily be lost in the wall of sound the other instruments produce. As such, the ecology of our source material might not necessarily match the needs we may have as authors.

The ecology of metal can be quite a shock to those new to the genre. While writing this article, I interviewed two colleagues of mine, Charles Woods and Shelby Ragan, both PhD students at Illinois State University. In the previous pages, I discussed the merits of heavy metal music, but I am a die-hard headbanger. I have spent many hours listening to this genre, writing my own songs, and contemplating the meaning of metal lyrics. With all this experience, I see the value of metal, but will that translate to others? I set off to find out.

Charles Woods, a PhD student in rhetoric and composition and my first interviewee, isn't a huge metal fan. When asked about his genres of choice, he mentioned listening to 1960's rock and country. I asked Woods to listen to "Poison Was the Cure" to see what his uptake of the song would be. The song itself can be difficult for those new to this genre of metal, as it is incredibly fast. This song is played at around 163 beats per minute (bpm), with a double-time feel for the guitars, making the song sound like it is played at over 300 bpm; if you don't have a music background, that's about 5 notes a second. Given the sheer speed of sounds here, it can be difficult to understand the song, and that was reflected in Woods's response to "Poison Was the Cure." I asked Woods what he thought of the lyrics, and he was unable to decipher most of the lines in the song, stating, "I couldn't understand most of it," which is something I expected. With rapid drumming and lightning-paced legato guitar riffing, there is a lot going on aurally. Through listening to the song, Woods's uptake was limited, and he saw much more value in the song after reading the lyrics. In fact, after reading the lyrics, Woods stated, "Instead of it being something inflicting harm, it seems like someone is inflicting harm

on themselves with drug abuse or something like that.” So, Woods was able to take up the important topics discussed here, albeit through the lyrics as opposed to the performance. Given the nature of the performance of the song, I expected some may have trouble taking up the lyrics, even when reading them, but Woods was able to find a lot of value for potential addicts in this music, showing that there just may be some value to metal lyrics.

In addition to Woods, I also interviewed Shelby Ragan, a children’s literature student at ISU. Ragan, like Woods, did not typically listen to heavy metal. She “grew up listening to country music . . . and top 40 kind of stuff, and some indy-folksy pop.” These genres are about as far away from thrash as you can get. For this interview, I had her listen to “Countdown to Extinction,” and her uptake was much more similar to what I think Mustaine originally intended for his lyrics. This gets at another important CHAT term, **representation**, which, according to the ISU Writing Program, describes how writers think about and envision their piece before they write it (and during the writing process as their ideas and, therefore, their writing change). Mustaine’s representation included his desire to talk about important social issues and to communicate with an audience in a way that would prompt them to critically reflect on those issues.

Now, “Countdown to Extinction” is much less cacophonous than the “Poison Was the Cure.” Countdown has a much more subdued vocal style. As Ragan herself puts it, “It was far less screamier than I thought it would be.” In addition to the clearer vocals, the first verse is delivered over clean guitars (guitars without distortion), and a simple bass line; this song also clocks in at a much more manageable 128 bpm. With this song, a much stronger emphasis is placed on vocal melody and lyrics. This more palatable style changed the audience’s uptake, as evident by Ragan’s answers, and also tells us a little about Mustaine’s representation and how he did potentially care about getting his lyrics across to the audience; he cared enough to put the emphasis on the lyrics in this song and not on a fast beat or distorted sound. Thus, Ragan was able to pick up on the key issues presented in the song. Ragan states she thought the lyrics centered on the theme of “hunting as a sport but taken to the extreme,” which is the precise message Mustaine was discussing here. Ragan elaborates more when she deciphers the lyrics, “When you have super rich people collect game and put them in an enclosed space . . . you weren’t hunting, you were just killing,” which matches up well when Mustaine sings, “Killed a few feet from the cages/Point blank, you’re so courageous” (lines 20–21).

With the songs here, uptake was varied, but still present. Woods was able to pick up on some of the key themes of “Poison Was the Cure” after reading



the lyrics, while Ragan was able to grasp the concepts of “Countdown to Extinction” from listening to the song alone. These interviews show that people unfamiliar with metal can still take up the key themes in these songs, but the differences in their uptake (reading lyrics vs. listening to music) leads us to one final aspect of CHAT, **production**. Production “deals with the means through which a text is produced. This includes both tools...and practices” (Walker 74). With writing, we typically imagine tools like a word processor, or a pen and paper, but Megadeth doesn’t follow that path. Megadeth is looking for a more unique way to express their thoughts, and they make use of distorted guitars and double bass drumming in addition to using the written word. While these may be a bit unconventional, the music they compose helps set the mood for their topics. I mention production here specifically because the sheer shock of the aural power of this music can leave people a bit confused. With metal in general, most people can be taken aback by the power, speed, and mass amounts of distortion. So, production, and the tools used to make these songs, needs to be accounted for; what does a massive wall of guitars, bass, drums, and vocals do to an audience? For my interviews, I didn’t really discuss the nature of the songs before playing them. Had I discussed the style, speed, and techniques used in these songs, my audience may have been in a better position to understand the lyrical themes.

## Conclusion

So, where does my exploration of metal and its lyrics leave us? Well, as a fan of heavy metal, I will forever appreciate complex amalgamation of guitar solos, double bass drums, and raspy vocals. But, what’s more, this genre of music offers a lot of unique critiques of social situations and can be a great way to provide inspiration for writers looking for potential topics. While many may ignore the value of this genre of music, I hope the preceding pages provided some insight not just on the merits of heavy metal, but also on how representation, ecology, production, uptake, and reception are complex processes that affect one another. Mustaine’s representation with regard to his songs may have included a desire for the audience to take up those songs in certain ways, but the ecology of the performance of those songs and the audience’s consequent reception of those songs may have changed the audience’s uptake. So, I think this shows us that it’s important to consider what media you use when composing any sort of text, as that media shapes how the audience receives the text, how they take up the text, and what they then do with that text. I believe the sort of uptake that Mustaine likely envisioned is possible with metal music; however, when invoking

heavy metal, or any form of media, it is important to think about audience, production, and ecology. How you present your media can significantly affect audience uptake.

## Works Cited

- “Donald Jr. and Eric Trump Kill a Leopard.” *New York Daily News*, 2015, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/pics-rump-adult-sons-hunting-game-africa-resurface-article-1.2308107>.
- Megadeth. “Countdown to Extinction.” *Countdown to Extinction*, Capitol, 1992.
- Megadeth. “Poison Was the Cure.” *Rust in Peace*, Capitol, 1990.
- Ragan, Shelby. Personal interview. October 13, 2017.
- Starr, David. “*Rocking the Star Bar*.” Chicago Ridge, IL, 2015.
- Walker, Joyce. “Just CHATting.” *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 71–80.
- “The World Needs a Hero Tour.” 2001. <http://www.goldminemag.com/articles/guitars-memorabilia-headline-megadeth-countdown-extinction-auction>.
- Woods, Charles. Personal Interview. October 9, 2017.

## Appendix A: Interview Questions

- What kinds of music do you typically listen to?
- When I mention the genre of heavy metal, what comes to mind?
- Based on the name of the band, and title of the song, what do you think it is about?
- After listening to the song, what are your initial reactions?
- What did you think of the lyrics?
- After reading the lyrics, did your perception of the song, or its value, change?
- Do you feel music is a viable way to address complex rhetorical situations?

## Appendix B: Poison Was the Cure

*Music & Lyrics by Dave Mustaine*

I miss the warm embrace I felt  
First time you touched me  
Secure and safe in open arms  
I should have known you'd crush me

A snake you were when we met  
I loved you anyway  
Pulling out your poisoned fangs  
The venom never goes away

Serpent swims free in my blood  
Dragons sleeping in my veins  
Jackyl speaking with tongue  
Roach egg-laying in my brain

Stalked beneath your shadow  
Sleepwalking to the gallows  
I'm the sun that beats your brow in  
Till I finally threw the towel in

Never knowing if I'd wake up in a  
Whirlpool got redundant  
My brain was just some driftwood  
In a cesspool I became dead  
From a rock star to a desk fool  
Was my destiny someone said  
Life's a tide pool  
Taste the waters life's abundant  
Taste me

## Appendix C: Countdown to Extinction

*Music & Lyrics by Dave Mustaine, Marty Friedman, David Ellefson, and Nick Menza*

Endangered species, caged in fright  
Shot in cold blood, no chance to fight  
The stage is set, now pay the price  
An ego boost, don't think twice  
Technology, the battle's unfair  
You pull the hammer without a care

Squeeze the trigger that makes you 'Man'  
Pseudo-safari, the hunt is canned  
The hunt is canned

All are gone, all but one  
No contest, nowhere to run  
No more left, only one  
This is it; this is the Countdown to Extinction

Tell the truth, you wouldn't dare  
The skin and trophy, oh so rare  
Silence speaks louder than words  
Ignore the guilt and take your turn  
Liars' anagram is "lair's"  
Man you were never even there  
Killed a few feet from the cages  
Point blank, you're so courageous  
So courageous

All are gone, all but one  
No contest, nowhere to run  
No more left, only one  
This is it; this is the Countdown to Extinction

"One hour from now  
Another species of life form  
Will disappear off the face of the planet  
Forever, and the rate is accelerating"

All are gone, all but one  
No contest, nowhere to run  
No more left, only one  
This is it; this is the Countdown to Extinction

**Matt Schering** is an English studies PhD student at Illinois State University focusing on rhetoric and composition. Prior to attending to ISU, Matt taught composition at several community colleges, while also playing in the thrash metal band Dark Entropy. The highlight of Matt's tenure in Dark Entropy came when the band opened for master watchmaker and ex-Anthrax lead guitarist, Dan Spitz.



