Doom metal and ways of remembering in popular music

Oral history provides important sources of information when looking at the development of a particular genre of music. This idea becomes more pronounced when the genre of music in question may be tentatively considered a popular music. While one has to be careful in labelling a genre of music ‘popular’ (Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2006), in this case labelling extreme metal and more in particular doom metal music popular music proves to be beneficial rather than detrimental, and the discussion of this label is beyond the scope of the current essay, thus it will not be discussed. Considering doom metal music a popular music then helps to see the ways in which the history of this genre of music is constructed through different media, and observing the methodology of these oral histories gives insights to how these oral histories question and shape a narrative that becomes part of the larger narrative of extreme metal music, metal music, and popular music of Europe tradition. This inspection also showcases how a bottom-up strategy works in the bottom level of a specific kind of public history. This essay provides different theories about constructing oral histories, memories, and remembering that already exist in academic literature, and also looks for examples of these ways of remembering and the creation of a popular music genre history in the case of doom metal.

Because the topic of discussion in this essay is music, it becomes important to look at musicological and ethnomusicological methodology regarding the construction of popular music histories. However one recognises that while ethnographic research and the idea of a
social history of music emerge early on as a method of doing popular music research (Cohen 1993; Russell 1993), the ideas of heritage, memory, canonisation, and democratisation become trends much later on (Brandellero & Janssen 2014; Cohen 2013; Kärjä 2006; Meyers 2015; Roberts & Cohen 2014). Musicology may be said to lagged behind to incorporate oral history techniques into the discipline (Perlis 1994).

Oral historical methodology emerges as an important tool for popular music histories, because of the fact that popular music is an oral tradition in its core. While the definition of popular music is out of scope for this essay, one may state that popular music is the type of music that is wide spread during a time period in a specific locality (Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2006). This definition, however, is only one of many other available definitions (Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2006). More importantly, when doom metal is concerned, this and other definitions of popular become much more problematic, because doom metal is inherently a ‘non-popular’ music, and it usually, if not always, resides out of the mainstream culture, and thus has a cult following. One needs to keep these in mind, however, for this essay, these issues are not as important considering the fact that doom metal music is an oral tradition similar to jazz, and other genres of popular music in that the music and learning of this music does not entail a written culture. Exactly as in jazz, the tradition is handed down through oral history encompassing the genre history as well as learning of the music (Prouty 2006, pp. 317-318). Doom metal music also passes on information through playing with other musicians, or more specifically bands in this case, or word of mouth (Prouty 2006, p. 318).

There appears to be oral histories of popular music in general in different media types. These media types are relevant in seeing how doom metal oral history differs from other popular music genres, and more specifically extreme metal music, to which doom metal can be argued to belong (Kahn-Harris 2007; Wallach 2011). In extreme metal music, one may find oral histories in media such as community websites (Encyclopaedia Metallum n.d.),
books (Mudrian 2004), magazines (Terrorizer 1993), radio programmes (Christe 2015), and documentaries (Lundberg 2008). In doom metal music, these media types reduce to community websites (Encyclopaedia Metallum n.d.; doom-metal.com n.d.), and magazines (Terrorizer 1993). These are discussed later on in this essay. Before going into specific examples and discussion of these examples in doom metal music, however, considering theories regarding heritage, archiving, tradition, memory, and social histories in popular music in general is crucial to then see these in practice.

One can argue that artistic narratives are credible in a different way than written sources (Portelli 1998, p. 66). The public stage provides an important source for oral history construction (Popular Memory Group 1998, p. 76) and because popular music has to happen on a public stage by its definition, oral history emerges as an important tool for popular music history. As popular music is a vast umbrella term for many different and usually – musically or aurally – separate genres of music, the idea of giving the people, and through people different genres of music, that are previously unheard, or under-heard, a voice can be done through oral histories (Portelli 1981). An example of this approach is observed in American popular music from Nashville in 1950s, where the author also tackles racial issues present in that particular society and their implications (Wald 2005, p. 331). It is also important to consider that organised music of all kinds, whether it is amateur or commercial, requires historical study in order to construct a memory or to remember these scenes of music (Russell 1993, p. 145).

This essay tries to articulate the distinction between heritage and memory in popular music, before going into the importance of interviewing and specific examples of oral histories in doom metal music. Heritage is a source of identity in a community that acts as a receptor of value and tradition, thus heritage becomes a manifestation of culture that is hierarchically constructed through an active selection process (Brandellero & Janssen 2014,
This hierarchy mentioned is born from the selection process in question. When the official agents, such as cultural policies, museum curators etc. become the sole selectors in this process, this hierarchy becomes more pronounced. For example, popular music exhibitions in museums are designed to have an important role in educating society in its social history, and broadening access to these memories (Leonard 2010, p. 172). The material and the sound present in these exhibitions trigger and thus help the public to remember, and help in the process of creating a popular music heritage (Leonard 2010, p. 178; Brandello & Janssen 2014, p. 230). As Tia DeNora argues music is a memory retrieval tool, and when it is ‘reheard and recalled, it provides a device for unfolding, for replaying the temporal structure of that moment, its dynamism as emerging experience’ (Cohen 2013, p. 580). Especially starting with museums, the hierarchy mentioned in heritage largely stems from the idea of inclusivity/exclusivity (Leonard 2010, p. 172). Depending on the selection of any heritage, extended inclusion helps this selection to be relatable, and reachable by wider audiences, thus making the heritage a more generally accepted and a democratised one (Leonard 2010, p. 180; Brandellero & Janssen 2014, p. 226). Because the concept of heritage contains more ownership than just the knowledge of the past (Cohen 2013, p. 581), this democratisation process plays a significant role in constructing a heritage. Heritage also informs a personal and collective sense of place, and because popular music and popular music making encompass many types of everyday activity, heritage becomes an important tool to remember many aspects of the social history of a community (Brandellero & Janssen 2014; Cohen 2013). Popular music heritage with its focus on iconic figures (Brandellero & Janssen 2014, p. 228) provides a ‘surrogacy of a “real” social relationship’ with the musicians (Meyers 2015, p. 70), this helps the ownership process in becoming more of a reality than a social construct.
As examples of both the democratisation process of the heritage construction and the ownership of a popular music heritage, one may look at the United Kingdom. Popular music in Britain has been an important phenomenon especially after 1960s. Hence Britain becomes an important field to observe a popular music heritage. British popular music has been quoted to be ‘a great tradition with keen class consciousness, [and] a political-economic explanation […]’ (Russell 1993, p. 146). While there have been attempts to officially select a British popular music heritage, through placing plaques commemorating important musical phenomena by British governments (Roberts & Cohen 2014, p. 246), this attempt to formalise a popular music heritage also gave birth to the democratisation of the selection process in question, giving way to the existence of both official and unofficial plaques in 2000s in Britain (Roberts & Cohen 2014, p. 248). Roberts and Cohen call this type of heritage a self-authorised heritage. A concrete example of this appeared in the British Music Experience exhibition in O2 Arena in London (which ended as of this writing). In this exhibition, inclusivity plays an important role, and British popular music is portrayed from as many angles as possible, such as early British popular music, the rise of British popular music, British-influenced popular music, and global influences on British popular music. This concept of self-authorised heritage becomes especially handy in extreme metal music oral histories, because these oral histories are researched and constructed within extreme metal music scenes. There is never any official intervention or involvement of any kind present in extreme metal music. This both further strengthens the idea of orality in extreme metal and doom metal, and shows these genres of music to be examples of self-authorised heritages. However, before going into doom metal music examples of oral histories, one needs to distinguish memory in popular music from heritage in popular music.

According to Kaufman Shelemay, ‘memory is an individual cognitive faculty in which resides traces of one’s personal autobiographical experiences’ (Kaufman Shelemay
This idea can be further supported by the phenomenological concept of retentive memory, which suggests that a person’s memory is the reflection through a collection of seemingly unconnected phenomena (Husserl et al. 1964), thus a memory can only make sense in a historical context as it is that context that proactively forms the memory in question. In this way, memory and heritage are connected, because ‘heritage produces something new in the present that has recourse to the past’ (Meyers 2015, 61). Collective memory, on the other hand, is the combination of these individual faculties in a community (Kaufman Shelemay 2006, p. 18), and these memories, which can also be termed popular memory, are both produced and shared within these communities (Lashua 2011, p. 136).

History in popular music emerges as an important objective in the latter half of the twentieth century. In popular music memory, one encounters two approaches to constructing these memories. Historical consciousness is important in both legitimising popular music as a proper object of study, and the ideas of ownership and heritage, thus this historical consciousness may be constructed through a physical site, it may be observed (Meyers 2015, pp. 62-68). These sites and ‘musicscapes’ work out principally as ‘landmarks of memory’ (Lashua 2011, p. 148). The example of constructing a site is already discussed as part of heritage above. The second approach to popular music memory is through the selection process again. As a historiographical method, selecting the best albums, bands, musicians etc. is a generally accepted one (Kärjä 2006, p. 3). This canonisation process, of course, is not a democratic one as it depends on certain tastes of people in power. However, Kärjä argues rightfully that history and memory are selections, thus a ‘total history is impossible’ (2006, p. 4).

According to Kärjä, genres of popular music can have three different types of histories: a social one, where the music is discussed as a powerful social, cultural, and political force; a stylistic one, where the music is taken as the combination of the music
industry, the music scene, musicians, and the audience; and finally a biographical one, where
the music history is told through the biographies of great artists and great music, focusing
mainly on musicians, bands, and albums (2006, p. 3-7). In light of these types of histories,
this essay discusses next the different approaches present in doom metal oral histories via
examples of specific materials.

Doom metal, as discussed above, is a subgenre of extreme metal, which also acts as a
genre by itself. I use all these terms tentatively as there has not been a significant study on
doom metal as a genre, thus I apply these terms just to paint a more clear picture for people
outside the doom metal music scene, and without these terms the relationship between the
genres in question becomes increasingly difficult. It also proves to be a good example of the
historical consciousness present in popular music. While doom metal history has not been
researched or studies yet in academic circles, there are two major examples this essay
discusses, that show the potential uses of oral history in doom metal history, the doom metal
history as part of the larger narrative of extreme metal, and by extension the popular music
history and public and social histories connected to these.

The first example comes from the magazine titled Terrorizer, which is based in
United Kingdom, and has published 258 issues as of this writing (Terrorizer 1993).
Terrorizer has published three special issues dedicated to doom metal. These issues differ in
their approach to oral history. The first issue discussed has the title ‘Terrorizer’s Secret
History of Doom Metal’, and as it is seen, it is an issue that is completely dedicated to doom
metal history. The editorial starts (Terrorizer 2012, p. 1):

‘On Friday 13, 1970 the world changed forever. The “summer of love” – already ravaged by
political murders, civil unrest and Vietnam – was finally put out of its misery. The assasins
were Black Sabbath [the doom metal band], whose debut album was released that very day.
But the misery didn’t stop there. In fact, the misery had only just begun. In the new dark age,
pain took the place of platitudes against a soundtrack of desolation, drudgery and despair with [Black] Sabbath leading the way.’

As seen from the quote, the history of doom metal is very much connected to the social context of the music, and it is constructed as a story rather than just stating the facts. This type of oral history puts the authors in the position of power, however, in this issue’s case, the ‘historians’ always support their arguments with little facts, or with quotations from interviews with doom metal musicians. The history is also supported by ‘essential’ doom metal albums with small reviews attached to them pointing out the importance of each of those albums, the related subgenres of doom metal and their individual music scenes, the music industry, and great musicians. This issue shows all the characteristics that are described by Kärjä (2006), and it combines the different histories together. The other two issues are regular issues but with ‘Doom Special’ sections within the regular content of extreme metal music journalism. These issues are numbered 142 (2006) and 253 (2014). They both differ in their approach to doom metal history; while the issue number 142 tries giving the story of the origins of doom metal without relying on biographies as much, the issue 253 relies heavily on interviews about the music genre, the music scene, the music industry, musicians’ personal lives, and their backgrounds to provide the biographical history of doom metal.

The final major oral history of doom metal that this paper discusses is the website, doom-metal.com (doom-metal.com n.d.). This is a community website run by volunteers from around the world, where they publish reviews of albums, interviews with musicians, and news from the doom metal music scene, as well as music industry, while also providing a platform for doom metal fans to post messages related to doom metal, other extreme metal genres, other music genres etc. The website’s aim is to be a comprehensive source for doom metal (doom-metal.com n.d.), and its history. Because this is the case, the website posts
three-four interviews a month, interviewing both the more famous bands which have larger musical outputs than the rest, and the bands who are just starting out, even with bands that do not have a full length album released. However, there is a different style of interviewing between these two types of bands. For example, a band who is only planning to record their first extended play is interviewed using a standard interview structure about basic information asking them only their names, their band information, their simple biographical information, and their influences (Doom-metal.com 2015). For a more established band, there usually appears to be named interviewers, rather than just the phrase ‘interviewed by doom-metal.com’, and the interviews are usually much longer, and specific to the band being interviewed (Sonders 2013). Because doom-metal.com aims to be exhaustive in the doom metal scene, their short introductory interviews prove to be highly valuable in any larger doom metal history project that may take place.

In conclusion, as discussed, popular music histories tend to specialise in order to bring out the larger narrative of both the music history and social history. This paper discussed different theories related to approaches to popular music theory. Doom metal oral histories mentioned also show some of these theories in practice, and how one may use these oral histories in order to construct larger public histories.
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