

October 5, 2015

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## Heavy Metal Elves

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Long before Howard Shore composed the [music for the live-action \*Lord of the Rings\* movies](#), readers were fascinated by J. R. R. Tolkien's epic fantasy and its music. The trilogy of books, a fantasy set in an Earth-like world called Middle Earth, was written between 1927 and 1949 and published in the United Kingdom between 1954 and 1955. Though the book was slow to catch on in England, where Tolkien was a professor of Anglo-Saxon and English Language and Literature at Oxford University, American audiences, particularly those interested in the growing counterculture movement, agreed with poet W. H. Auden, who deemed the work as masterpiece. *The Lord of the Rings* has sold more than 150 million copies worldwide, has been translated into 38 languages, and has been the inspiration for countless other fantasy novels, artwork, video games, and music. If you haven't read the books or seen the film adaptations of them, you can find a [summary of the story on Wikipedia](#).

During Tolkien's lifetime, the author granted permission to British art song composer Donald Swann to set many of the song lyrics that appeared in the books for voice and piano. The result was the 1968 song cycle *The Road Goes Ever On*, which included the title song, "Upon the Hearth the Fire is Red," the elven song "Namarie," and the poem "Errantry." However, fans of the books noted that the music was somewhat less impressive than what they had imagined for a tale of adventure and danger and magic. When the trilogy reached the United States and became popular in the 1960s, folk groups and rock bands took to it like cats to cream.

*Donald Swann's settings of Tolkien's songs evoke a pastoral Shire of quiet charm and beauty, much like Tolkien's beloved English countryside.*

The band The Hobbits was formed in 1966 and released several albums of songs that traced the quest from *The Hobbit* through *The Return of the King*. Folk singer Chris Wilson created an album about the quest and its characters called *Grey Wizard Am I*, using the stage name Gandalf the Grey. Folk singer Sally Oldfield's album *Water Bearer* was inspired by Tolkien's songs of the High Elves, and Gene Hargrove set all of Tolkien's songs and some lyrics of his own in what he described as "what the music [...] may have sounded like." The music, which is for guitar and voice, uses simple melodies and lots of musical repetition. Hargrove sets many of the songs in a slow march tempo to underscore their status as "walking songs" that the characters in the books sang as they traveled.

Perhaps the best-known band to mine the depths of Moria, er, Tolkien, is Led Zeppelin. The band has publically declared its interest in and love for Tolkien's works, and songs like "The Battle of Evermore," ["Ramble On,"](#) and even parts of ["Stairway to Heaven"](#) are all influenced by and make references to *The Lord of the Rings*. All three of these songs speak to figures out of legend and fantasy, particularly British fantasy and folklore: in "The Battle of Evermore," the band mentions archers and horses converging in a valley for a battle between good and evil, led by the Queen of Light and the Dark Lord. It includes references to the mystical British isle of Avalon, part of Arthurian legend, and of "magic runes [...] writ in gold to bring the balance back," an allusion to the One Ring that is central to Tolkien's stories. In "Ramble On," from 1969, the lyrics describe an encounter in Mordor: "How years ago in days of

old, when magic filled the air. / T'was in the darkest depths of Mordor, I met a girl so fair. / But Gollum, and the evil one crept up and slipped away with her.” “Stairway to Heaven” cites the “feeling I get when I look to the west / and my spirit is crying for leaving,” a reference to the Grey Havens and Undying Lands of the book.

Other bands that have paid musical homage to Tolkien include Rush, which released the acoustic song “[Rivendell](#)” in 1975; Pearls Before Swine, which channeled its Tolkien obsession into “[Ring Thing](#)”; and countless [nerdcore](#) and [filk](#), or fan music, bands like the Hip-hop group Lords of the Rhymes, which produced the album *Straight out of Hobbiton* in 2013. But the genre that has embraced Tolkien as its own more than any other is metal. Not only do mainstream metal bands frequently reference Tolkien or express his influence, but there’s also a subgenre called “[Tolkien metal](#),” said to be “more atmospheric and ambient than original black metal, and the lyrics are about Tolkien’s work.” The site Tolkien Gateway lists [Summoning](#) and [Isengard](#) as two notable Tolkien metal bands, and describes Blind Guardian, Battelore, and Rivendell as Tolkien metal.

Metal has always been influenced by fantasy, be it sword and sorcery, science fiction, or horror. Metal began evolving from other genres—drawing on folk and rock among them—right around the time *The Lord of the Rings* was becoming a cultural touchstone and [animators](#) were exploring options for adapting the books as a film. The new genre, with its desire to depict eldritch evil and fantastic places and peoples, found a soulmate in Tolkien’s work and world. As the Cold War progressed, lyricists found Tolkien useful in metaphorical ways as well, adopting his language and ideas to explore concepts such as good and evil nations, mutually assured destruction, and impossible odds. In an [article](#) in *Lit Reactor* in 2013, Black Sabbath bassist Geezer Butler remembers reading *LOTR* around the same time that the band was forming, and he based his 1970 song “[The Wizard](#)” on Gandalf. Greg Lindstrom, bassist for [Cirth Ungol](#), recalls that all of the possible band names he and co-founder Robert Garven considered were dark or dangerous places and things from Tolkien: “I remember some other possible band names we were considering: Minas Tirith, Khazad Dum, and Uruk Hai, all names from *The Lord of the Rings*. Rob and I both liked J. R. R. Tolkien and Enzo Ferrari, so we knew our songs would cover both those subjects!”

These bands were not subtle in their borrowing from Tolkien. Bands named themselves Burzum (“darkness” in the Black Speech of Mordor); Gollum; Nazhgûl; Gorgoroth (a location in Mordor); Amon Amarth (the elvish name for Mount Doom); Ephel Duath (Mordor’s mountains); and others. They produced albums with titles such as *Nightfall in Middle-Earth* (Blind Guardian); [Battle at Helms Deep](#) (Attacker, aka Wizard); and “Lords of the Ring” (Styx).

New music inspired by Tolkien is made all the time in nearly every style. The [Tolkien Music List](#), which keeps track of Tolkien-related songs, instrumental music, film and video game music, and other forms, updates its listings every two months with new works. Recent additions include art music settings of Tolkien’s poetry from *The Lord of the Rings* and his other books and stories; a symphony based on *The Silmarillion*; New Age instrumental interpretations of elven and other Middle-Earth musics; a psychedelic song about Lady Goldberry; and Swedish jazz about Faramir and Boromir. This road does go ever on.

### **For Discussion**

1. What other Tolkien pieces can you think of?
2. In listening to the examples from metal, what other stylistic influences do you hear?
3. How has hearing these examples changed your idea of the soundscape of Middle-Earth?