

Dirty, soothing, secret magic:

Individualism and spirituality in New Age and extreme metal music cultures

Abstract (145 words)

Taking inspiration from a press article comparing doom metal and New Age music, I explore individualism and magic in these musical cultures, reflecting on the ‘dirty, soothing secret’ suggested in that article’s title. I trace the loosely-defined characteristics of New Age music in the limited academic research on the topic, before situating the music in the wider New Age milieu which centres around the epistemological authority of the seeking self among diverse spiritual resources. Then, I examine the claims made about metal in the news article, drawing out themes which also relate to individualism and magic. Finally, I return to the concepts of the dirty, the soothing and the secret, arguing that these are not merely incidental aspects of the mainstream reception of New Age and metal music, but in fact can be understood as contributing to the magical potential of such music for listeners.

Introduction

In 2012, an article appeared in *The Atlantic*, a middlebrow online US magazine, making a comparison between two styles of music that was at first surprising, drawing a link between the low, slow subgenre of extreme metal known as doom, and the pastoral soundscapes of New Age music. The article discussed sonic similarities such as extended repetition and use of samples from the natural world or from ‘exotic’ (read, non-Western) cultures, before expanding this to compare the transcendental, even spiritual worldviews apparently shared by artists and audiences of these styles. An ambivalence about how this comparison might be received was projected in

the title: 'Doom Metal has a dirty, soothing secret: it sounds a lot like New Age music' (Berlatsky 2012).

This present article takes this 'dirty, soothing secret' as a starting point for examining further the comparison between New Age and extreme metal musics and their depictions or manifestations of magic. In expansive and ambient sound, as well as in their themes of mysticism and ritual, and their different but related focus on the individual, I suggest that each genre culture can be understood as contributing to the formation of personal spiritual technology for listeners. Both New Age music and metal have been widely discredited or derided (while both are poorly understood). I argue that the use of these musics in alchemical self-transformative spiritual technologies, specifically in a context of prevailing mainstream disavowal of each kind of music and any metaphysical connotations, constitutes these practices as magical. Therefore, it is precisely the dirty, the soothing and the secret aspects that construct magic in New Age and metal music.

The first section of the article will discuss features of New Age music, in the *Atlantic* article and, beyond that rather limited characterisation, in the small amount of scholarly research on the music. This will then be connected to themes of individualist spirituality and self-development in the broader world of New Age spirituality and thought, a topic which has received much more academic attention, particularly with reference to religiosity and to sociological ideas about secularity and change in religious behaviour. An important emphasis in this milieu is the conception, design and authorising of individual pathways to personal transformation using a range of techniques made available by religious pluralism. This individualist approach to religious or spiritual aspects of New Age culture can be described as a form of magic, understood as a self-directed process of working towards goals relating to personal wellbeing that is coded in

spiritual terminology. In light of this construction, I return to New Age music in order to situate it in a network of magical tools for self-transformation.

Then, I turn to doom metal, firstly to the three bands (Om, Drudkh, and Esoteric) whose music is chiefly identified in the *Atlantic* article as bearing similarities to New Age music. I consider these examples in more detail, linking musical, aesthetic and thematic characteristics to relevant aspects of wider discourses of spirituality such as Orientalism and Romantic Nationalism. Then, with these three examples as departure points, I explore further examples of distinct but related and overlapping forms of extreme metal that bear sonic similarities to New Age music. Further, I observe that in heavy metal cultures in general, and perhaps particularly in these subgenre cultures, a high degree of importance is placed on individual responsibility, while a concern with magic is a notable component that extends beyond simple thematic interest and involves ideas about self-development that are understood in terms of alchemy and power.

Given the history of heavy metal's reception being marked by misinformation and moral panic, it is still often assumed that listening to metal is bad for you or for society, or at least is a marker of immaturity and/or delinquency, a mere signifier of teenage growing pains to be left behind in an individual's transition to full adult membership of society. Metal is attacked from different sides, denigrated in reactionary popular media fanning moral panic about metal and its audiences as dangerous or antisocial, while also sometimes viewed with disdain from cultural theorists for its apparent lack of overt countercultural resistance. Contrastingly, though similarly dismissive, is the popular depiction of New Age music and its audiences, often derided in mainstream music criticism as bland, self-satisfied, comfortable wallpaper ambience, despite (or because of) its commercial success: New Age musician Enya, for example, is reported to have sold 75 million albums worldwide, and 'was the world's biggest-selling artist in 2001 and 2002 (Deegan 2014).

Depictions in research—in the rare cases it is not simply ignored—often portray New Age music as too readily assimilable into consumerist conformity to be of interest or value. There are significant differences in the broad external perceptions of New Age music and extreme metal, regarding their audiences and the impacts on those audiences-- most notably, an element of danger that involvement in metal music cultures still sometimes evokes, in contrast to the inviting ambience of New Age music. But they share a sense of external denigration that may in fact provide a certain occult (literally, dark or obscured) power. The strange combination of the dirty, the soothing, and the secret in both New Age and some forms of extreme metal music, may instead be what affords them their magic potential.

New Age music's indefinability

Berlatsky's *Atlantic* article does not suggest a great familiarity with New Age music, implying instead a general and rather stereotyped understanding. New Age music is not well researched nor well understood: it is 'difficult to define' (Garneau 1987, 57) and subject to 'highly contested and changing interpretations' (Coaldrake 2012, 50). Prominent musicians reject the categorisation itself (Hibbett 2010, 283), though artists' disavowal of genre terminology is far from unusual across music styles (Coggins 2016). Helfried Zrzavy has even suggested in a rare academic journal article on the music that, paradoxically perhaps, a lack of cohesion is in fact one of New Age music's determining characteristics (1990). Zrzavy did, however, provide some sonic points of reference. For New Age music, in his description,

no set melodic or harmonic structures or even time signatures exist to help classify the music. In fact, it may be more correct to speak of a rather loosely defined, highly eclectic New Age "sound" that features five distinct, common traits: not unlike jazz, New Age is characterised by its emphasis on improvisational pieces in lieu of music that is based on carefully notated scores; not unlike the minimalist music tradition of Terry Riley and

Philip Glass, *New Age* stresses subtly shifting cycles of sound over music dynamics; not unlike instrumental pan-music, *New Age* is identifiable by the consistent absence of vocal pieces; not unlike world music, *New Age* is defined by the infusion of ethnic stylings from a wide variety of cultures; and finally, the incorporation of environmental sounds has become one of the hallmarks of the *New Age* sound. (Zrzavy 1990, 37)

Five traits then, with improvisation, subtly shifting cycles of sound, absence of vocals, ethnic stylings, and environmental sounds, all contributing to music identified by a loose sound rather than through features of musical structure. Four of these five are defined in a tentative relation to other forms of music, though even the fifth could arguably have included the phrase ‘not unlike field recordings’, which were gaining a small amount of commercial attention in the 1980s. The first of Zrzavy’s points is somewhat curious given that improvisation is more commonly associated with music that thrives in live settings, such as jazz which is mentioned in this context. *New Age* music tends to be more based on recordings, and on synthesizers which might at least imply more pre-planning than might be expected of improvisation. However, the term might be intended to suggest expansiveness, ambience and the slow, even unpredictable evolution of *New Age* pieces. The third trait, an absence of vocal pieces, I would perhaps adapt from absence of vocals to instead a deemphasis of the verbal. This could indeed describe the absence of vocals, but would also include examples where vocals are present but in the form of wordless ‘chanting’, or—chiming with the fourth trait of borrowed ‘ethnic stylings’—in non-European languages that the target audience would not be expected to know. As Richard Garneau observes, voices are used in *New Age* music, but ‘for sonority rather than text’ (Garneau 1987, 64).

This lack of cohesion in the eclectic diversity of sounds understood as *New Age* music was for Zrzavy compounded by two further factors, firstly the music’s ‘rootedness in divergent

geographic locales', and a lack of emphasis on the artist (1990, 33). The latter aspect has also been noted by Robert Matthew-Walker, who observes that

the performing personality of the solo singer or group are rarely encountered, certainly in so far as accepted concepts of a singer of songs or a group performing their recent singles apply (2002, 26).

Eclectic sounds, a broad and scattered genre culture, and the subordination of musician to record labels are the three key identifying characteristics of New Age music, and those that explain, according to Zrzavy (1990, 35), its lack of scholarly attention. This academic reticence seems to have largely continued in the decades since the publication of his article. These same factors, he argued, in turn led to more emphasis on the visual characteristics of New Age albums in lending identifiable coherence to the genre, particularly as it became an area of high commercial value to record labels.

New Age music in the context of a New Age spiritual culture

New Age music is related to a broader New Age milieu of holistic practices of spirituality and knowledge-gathering. This 'seeking' is marked by the use and juxtaposition of a plurality of religious and cultural resources, while given the absence or rejection of hierarchical institutions, authority for navigating through or selecting from this diversity is located within the individual. In this New Age context, individuals find their way through eclectic offerings of belief and practice, constructing an imaginative synthesis of religious and spiritual traditions, ideas and practices from around the world and throughout history and mediated in various ways. In the face of this abundant diversity, the epistemological foundation for such practices and worldviews emerges from or is placed in the seeking self, where individuals select and justify such uses according to 'what works for them'. This bricolage draws from the increasing circulation from

the 1960s onwards of mass-market texts about religions in the world, as well as about esoteric or hidden traditions such as Theosophy. A comparative approach tended to turn away from concerns with dogma, orthodoxy and institutions, and towards aspects such as shamanism, mysticism and religious experience. In such areas of interest it was often assumed or at least speculated upon that an essential foundation of similarity between different traditions could be identified, uncovered and elucidated by the Western scholar. This could be supposed in a spirit of rationalist demystification, equalising acknowledgment of cultural difference but proposing a common psycho-physical basis for religious beliefs and practices (Huxley 1945), or, by contrast, in attempts to reinstall diverse practices into a particular hierarchy of mysticisms (Zaehner 1957). These approaches located the unifying element in individual consciousness under the sign of an ‘experience’ uncritically predicated on particular kinds of subjectivity. While the historical and epistemological basis for such essentialist claims has rightly been challenged (Certeau 1995; Sharf 1995), there is no doubt that ideas such as those put forth by Aldous Huxley (1945), Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner and Richard Alpert (1964), Carlos Castañeda (1968) and others, about a vaguely defined shared and universal but disavowed or secret tradition caught on rapidly amongst New Age adherents. Each of these examples combined the ingredients of much influential New Age thought on comparative religion and its relevance for the 20th century world: enthusiastically described ancient and/or ‘primitive’ wisdom with the use of visionary stimulants, a transcendental global religion thus manifested in the intoxicated brains and then the widely disseminated writings of highly educated Euro-American male scholars.

New Age culture, therefore, encourages and provides ‘a worldview that privileges experience over belief, the location of spiritual authority within the self, and a focus on self-realization and human potential’ (Magliocco 2015, 636). Christopher Partridge has called this approach an ‘epistemological individualism’ (2005, 2) where gurus and sacred texts from assorted traditions

‘are not to be understood as external authorities- rather, detraditionalised, they should be understood as aids to assist us on our experiential journey within’ (2005, 70). It is in this context of self-directed self-transformation or self-realization that New Age music exists. This orientation which places the human listener at the centre (rather than, for example, the performing artist, as in much popular music) is suggested by the profusion of albums entitled ‘New Age Music For...’ a variety of personal practices, whether promising a desired state such as calmness, or recommending itself as accompaniment to massage or yoga (Hibbett 2010, 284). New Age music is described as initially being ‘for and about meditation’ before broadening ‘to include music suitable for any quiet mood or activity such as yoga, massage, or unwinding after a long day at a computer terminal’ (Garneau 1987, 57-8). This central focus on the listening individual and the transformation of their self/consciousness is related by one critic to the de-emphasis of both star musicians and of live performances: ‘Generally speaking, New Age is not public music in this sense; it tends to speak directly to the individual listener alone’ (Matthew-Turner 2002:26).

Christopher Partridge writes of attempts to ‘re-enchant’ Western modernity, and in this context New Age eclecticism is an example of ‘occulture [which] itself is not a worldview, but rather a resource on which people draw, a reservoir of ideas, beliefs, practices, and symbols’ (2005, 84), a situation in which popular culture can be ‘a key sacralizing factor which has a far more influential role in the shaping and dissemination of contemporary occultural thought than is often acknowledged’ (2005, 119). New Age music thus becomes one of these resources arranged around the listening self rather than in deference to a star performer (or for that matter, to an external religious authority). It is valued according to what that listener can do with it, rather than in terms of artistic expression by the performer. As an example, in an entire book dedicated to elaborating techniques for meditation with ‘inner space music’ (namechecking many musicians

and recordings elsewhere designated as New Age music), Nevill Drury does not make clear any particular purpose for such practices, beyond interchangeable and somewhat circular appeals to higher illumination and personal revelation (Drury 1985). The value of such states are implied and imagined to be self-evident, literally reliant on the self for evidence of their value.

Such orientations have attracted some scorn for what is viewed as a complacent self-interestedness, easily commodified and absorbed into the late capitalist ideology of individualism, spiritual 'seeking' reduced to the banalities of choice in the market, where 'appeals to self-responsibility start to look like appeals to the sovereignty of the consumer' (Redden 1999, 102). In addition, a blithe Orientalist exoticism is sometimes evident in the presentation of such music, which can often, for example,

continue the imperial narrative of the Westerner's journey into foreign realms, the spoils consisting of spiritual wisdom and inner peace rather than the festive, tourist-like experience and sexual thrill offered by exotica. (Hibbett 2010, 291)

Nevertheless, it is clear that New Age music, its uses and its audiences, are brought together in what may be described as a self-conscious form of magic. For Sabina Magliocco, in New Age movements, magic 'thus becomes a technology for human growth and potential, for transforming human consciousness and creating a new perception of the world as sacred and enchanted. Adherents, she continues, 'actively seek to alter their consciousness by following specific techniques' (Magliocco 2015, 635-6), with the use of New Age music recordings among those techniques. A shift in focus away from music as art to be appreciated by an audience and instead towards music used as tools and techniques for specific purposes, is paralleled in a shift away from the primacy of the musician, and instead towards the listener as focal point of the musical culture. These developments create the potential for New Age music to be used as a technology for self-transformation. The combination of the metaphysical goals of such work

with the denigrated, disavowed and dirty status of New Age music as a tool, move this technology away from socially acceptable and scientifically legitimated techniques, and instead therefore into the realm of magic.

Magical and religious associations in extreme metal: Om, Drudkh, Esoteric and beyond

Not all forms of extreme metal bear close similarities with New Age music, as Berlatsky points out. He mentions in the introductory paragraph the examples of death metal bands Autopsy and Deicide, presented as aggressive and off-putting in order to set up the ostensibly surprising comparison with other metal bands who do indeed display sonic and thematic congruence with New Age music. These claims are mainly based around three examples of contemporary metal bands, Om, Drudkh, and Esoteric, who respectively represent the extreme metal subgenres (or sub-subgenres) of drone doom metal, atmospheric black metal, and funeral doom metal. These and other forms and outgrowths of extreme metal do bear certain similarities to New Age music, both in Berlatsky's terms and in the depictions outlined in the few available academic articles on the subject as described earlier.

The band Om, originating in California, receive the most attention in the *Atlantic* piece, its publication likely prompted by the release of Om's album *Advaitic Songs* (2012) ten days prior. This particular album, the band's fifth, was a continuation of the band's development from an unusual and austere doom metal duo of bass and drums, to a more varied sound still rooted in those instruments but more richly infused with sonic signifiers of an eclectic and esoteric religiosity. Om's initial albums were stark and ascetic meditations on bass guitar (largely distorted) and percussion, overlaid with cryptic, fragmented lyrics which brought in references to kabbalah, holy mountains and various mystical traditions. Their early style is neatly encapsulated

in their album title *Variations on a Theme* (2004) describing their somewhat severe extemporisations, while *Conference of the Birds* (2005) refers to a Persian Sufi poetic allegory, in which a collection of birds, each connoting different human qualities, seek the mythical bird Simorgh, before realising that they themselves collectively make up the Simorgh. On subsequent albums, there are longer periods of undistorted bass guitar (unusual since all subgenres of metal tend to prominently feature heavily distorted guitars), and a more explicit religious orientation in the neo-Byzantine style of iconography adorning the album covers and the titles, *Pilgrimage* (2007) and *God is Good* (2009). With the title referencing the Vedic tradition in Indian religion, *Advaitic Songs* (2012) introduced a greater sonic diversity, including a range of instrumentation and additional vocals provided by new member Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe. Much of this added texture comprised sonic and symbolic references to religion, including recorded samples of Islamic prayer, a Sanskrit mantra, as well as lyrical references to Sufi religious practice, together with original bassplayer and vocalist Al Cisneros' lyrics about pyramids and enlightenment. The 'minor key', similarity to 'world music samplers' and instrumentation featuring tabla and flute are mentioned by Berlatsky in combination with a cheerful mood and a sense of 'warm, fuzzy enlightenment', embellished for apparently humorous effect with references to camels. The author then portrays an expected disjuncture between these supposedly New Age elements of the Om album and the values and qualities of metal.

This, then, should be the moment where I fulminate against the bland tyranny of the mainstream and damn all false metal [...] The only problem is that, as someone who listens to a fair bit of metal, I am forced to admit that Om isn't really all that unusual. (Berlatsky 2012)

This set up is subverted, opening out to his broader suggestion about confluence between such aspects and other examples of metal, yet still retaining a sense of begrudging distance, with the soothing, 'kind of pleasant' sonic signature of this music described as an 'uncomfortable truth'.

Here something of a tension is revealed in rock music's reception, where ostensibly a heroic disruptive intervention is made, transgressing norms and accessing a deeper authentic connection to Romantic ideals of autonomy and aesthetics. However, this become, the disruption formalised into conventional patterns and expectations, until what is heard as 'pleasant' itself becomes shocking to those who expect and value a noisier kind of shock. Another author, Peter Bebergal, in a book on the occult in rock music, apparently completely independently of Berlatsky's article, makes exactly the same connection between Om's religious bricolage on *Advaitic Songs*, an affiliation with New Age music, and a listener-centered conception of magic:

The lyrics reference Eastern, Islamic, Jewish, and Christian mysticism, invoking the kabbalistic feminine attribute Shekinah, Ezekiel's vision of dreadful angels, astral travel, the Hindu concept of *prana* (breath or spirit), and reincarnation. One song, 'Addis,' is the complete mantra for the invocation of the Hindu god Shiva. While these religious ideas are fairly disparate, Om brings them together in a way that is more than just fanciful New Age collating. Om weaves their own spiritual mythology, driven by the heavy power of their music. Some might even call it magic, causing change in the audience's consciousness by means of Om's mighty riffage. (Bebergal 2014, 228-9).

The next example mentioned is Drudkh, a Ukranian black metal band who are known as leading proponents of a loose subcategorization known as 'atmospheric black metal'. Their music features long, slowly building, midtempo repetitive tracks of gradually evolving progressions overlaid with the energetic buzz of black metal's signature tremolo-picking style. In line with the conventions of this style, folk instruments, arrangements, lyrical sources and thematic references are used, with the band releasing at least one album (*Songs of Grief and Solitude*, Drudkh 2006) which has been described as 'folk music' as it features no traditional 'black metal' passages constituting heavily distorted tremolo-picked guitar riffs. This interest in 'folk' runs from the

sonic to the ideological, involving for example lyrical inspiration taken from Ukrainian nationalist poets. This has even included allusions on two albums to Stepan Bandera, a Ukrainian Nationalist leader who allied himself with Nazi Germany in seeking independence for Ukraine, was associated with genocide against Poles and Jews in the 1940s, but was later arrested by the Gestapo and sent to a concentration camp-- a dedication in *Blood in our Wells* (Drudkh 2006), and clips from a film about his life in *Estrangement* (Drudkh 2007)--. This in particular has led to rumours and accusations that the musicians involved hold far-right political views, and that to an unspecified extent the band and its music are vehicles for such ideals: see, for instance, discussion on ‘turning a blind ear’ in black metal (Socialism and/or Barbarism 2009). While the band are extremely reticent about publicity, interviews and even sharing their lyrics, and have stated that they are a ‘non-political band’, this remains a concern for some listeners, particularly given that outright fascism and neo-Nazism is sometimes claimed by proponents to be ‘non-political’. That Drudkh ‘may ideologically flirt with quasi-fascist nationalism’ is mentioned by Berlatsky, who implies an expectation that an ambiguous affiliation with political extremism would be associated with a different kind of sound than Drudkh’s ‘lyrical and sweeping’ music. As well as contributing to the general claim that metal might sometimes unexpectedly resemble aspects of New Age music, this implies that a sound that is ‘less remorseless assault than transcendent sublime’ would be unexpected for a band with nationalist sympathies. In fact, such sweeping lyricism is frequently an element in the aesthetics of Romantic nationalism, conjoining ideas of pastoralism and the nation through linking the land with membership of a people, an imagined golden age to be retrieved, and the possibility that warfare may be needed to protect this once and future utopia from those outside the strictly circumscribed group. A glance at Drudkh album titles traces this pattern, hinting at nostalgia for the past and criticism of modernity in *Forgotten Legends* (2003), *Estrangement* (2007), and *Anti-Urban* (2007); an aggressively defensive militancy in *Blood in our Wells* (2006), *Eastern Frontier in Flames* (2014); strong hints of ethnocentrism in *Slavonic Chronicles* (2010) and ‘Ukrainian Insurgent Army’ from *Blood in our Wells*

(2006); and a mindset which powerfully ties these elements together as a unifying and cosmically justified whole in *Microcosmos* (2009) and *Eternal Turn of the Wheel* (2012). Whether bands or genres or particular songs ‘are’ fascist or ultra-nationalist, for example, has been much discussed without conclusion due to the difficulties in finally ascertaining intention and meaning to musical sounds in their uncertain relation with language and an openness to interpretation. But it is perhaps a sustained ambiguity, supported in practice by the use of an artistic form, music, which resists straightforward political interpretation. Indeed, like New Age music, the dramatic, sweeping yet expansive and atmospheric sound subtly moves the focus to the listener as the determinant of the music’s meaning (see Coggins 2018, 77-82). The withholding of further information, together with evocative but vague hints such as those in the track titles affords plausible deniability for both covert proponents of extreme ideologies as well as those who wish to enjoy the music under the presumption that art is politically neutral.

The next band mentioned, with comparisons drawn to lullabies and film music, are Esoteric, a funeral doom group from Birmingham, UK extant since 1992. The band developed a sound influenced by the death metal style of frenetic and aggressive palm-muted guitar playing and double-kick drums that was a major force in underground metal at that time, while taking additional inspiration from the slower, doomy passages in records by Morbid Angel as a focus of their entire sound rather than as occasional interludes. The band’s albums have been consistently ambitious, each taking several years to complete, and many of their releases-- *Epistemological Despondency* (1994), *The Pernicious Enigma* (1997), *The Maniacal Vale* (2004), and *Paragon of Dissonance* (2011)—have been released as double CDs, an unusual choice in metal but fitting for Esoteric’s complex and expansive sounds. These recordings have attracted description as psychedelic (Göransson 2017), another relatively rare feature in metal discourse, certainly in the context of 1990s and 2000s metal though becoming more prevalent since 2010. This descriptor is

complemented by the acknowledgement by Greg Chandler that the band had always been influenced by Pink Floyd and King Crimson, themselves notably identified as touchstones by Nevill Drury in his book on New Age 'inner space music' (1985). In interviews, Chandler has also mentioned the band using drugs such as LSD and psilocybin specifically for purposes related to developing their sound (Göransson 2017), a connection which relates to ideas from the 1960s counterculture of drugs as enhancers of self-discovery and creativity.

Other metal bands appear in Berlatsky's *Atlantic* article, in addition to death metal bands Autopsy and Deicide who are mentioned at the beginning for contrast, and Om, Drudkh and Esoteric discussed in a little more detail. There are passing mentions of two other bands, SunnO))) and Sleep. The former, misspelled in the article as Sun O))), are known for their drum-less washes of extreme amplifier bass distortion. The latter released an hour long, single track meditation on Holy Land pilgrimage and marijuana rendered in dirge-like riffs, alternately titled *Jerusalem* (1996, 1998) and *Dopesmoker* (2003, 2012). Sleep are only briefly mentioned due to the rhythm section of that band later going on to form Om, though their 'slow, stoned' nature is a feature which appears later in the description of the 'slow-motion revelation' of Om's 'New Age soul'. Beyond these examples, there are further areas or offshoots of extreme metal which bear some similarity to the description of New Age music outlined earlier. Doom metal in particular could well be described as based on 'subtly shifting cycles of sound' in distorted slow riffs, with more extreme forms of drone doom featuring the abstract expanses of sound suggested in Zrzavy's sense of improvisation. The absence of vocal pieces is certainly evident in metal, again amended to indicate the absence of intelligible words. While much underground metal eschews vocals altogether, in black metal and death metal particularly, the words are often disguised in screaming or growling. That is, even if lyrics are in a listener's native language, they may be completely indecipherable. This relates in some ways also to the recentring of New Age music around the

listener rather than the musician. Metal, as with the wider rock music from which it emerged, still features a strong ideology of the creator/artist as producing an authentic expression of their artistic creativity. However, with black and white 'corpse paint' make up used by black metal musicians, with the distortion of their vocals, and even in illegibly scrawled band logos, there is a masking effect which deemphasises the musician's everyday identity, moving the musician to a more imaginative sphere. In black metal, 'ethnic stylings' are also common, with the globalised features of black metal localised by the use of folk instrumentation from regional music cultures. Environmental sounds are also frequently used, including rain on Drudkh's *Eternal Turn of the Wheel* (2014) and forest and bird sounds on *Autumn Aurora* (2004), harking back to the thunderstorm that introduces the mythical origin point of metal, Black Sabbath's track 'Black Sabbath' (1970) as well as overlapping with tropes also familiar in New Age music.

The emergence of Black Sabbath as a heavy metal band at the very end of the 1960s is often seen as a marker of distinction between the hippie counterculture and a new darker, more nihilistic turn in ideology and sound at the outset of the 1970s. However, in Black Sabbath's music and in these later diverse forms of underground extreme metal, there is a consistent if varied focus on paganism, pantheism, occultism, esotericism, and visionary experience, which certainly inherits many aspects of the New Age milieu even if the associations of metal and those of New Age may be rather different. A similar anti-institutional position can be discerned, again found in Black Sabbath in the reception as oppositional of their uses of crucifixes for example. Strongly present in the ideology of metal since its earliest days has been an individualism in direct opposition to the perceived rule-based orthodoxies of law and religion, which yet finds space for exactly the kind of discerning individualist approach to ideas about spirituality, mysticism and ritual as can be found in New Age culture. The sonic and symbolic trappings of religion are repositioned and redeployed in firmly individualist assemblages, with the combination of

meanings justified and validated finally by each listener who encounters them. The power of religion, rejected in structured forms but raided for aesthetic inspiration and symbolic recombination, is drawn upon in personalised ways and thereby transformed into magic.

Responses and oppositions: Reception of the Atlantic article's comparisons

Comments, presumably by metal fans, on a Reddit link to the article are not favourable, the first simply opining 'Terrible article' (Daemonicus in Reddit 2012). Others point out errors such as in the spelling of the band name SunnO))) ([deleted] in Reddit 2012), and in the Om lyrics that have since been corrected (amberthecat in Reddit 2012). The article also refers to the vocal style of 'Ozzie', presumably intending Black Sabbath singer Ozzy Osbourne, the spelling error small but significant in relation to one of the most important bands in metal history, especially given the high value metal fans place on accuracy and historical detail. In addition, the discussion of the Esoteric implies that the track 'Silence' is featured on their 2011 album *Paragon of Dissonance*, when it in fact appears on 2008's *The Maniacal Vale*. As with practically any online discussion about metal in its broader context, there is also contestation of the original writer's genre designations, of Om as doom metal, and of Led Zeppelin's 'Battle of Evermore' as metal (MaxRenn, amberthecat, Daemonicus in Reddit 2012). More seriously, some of the comparisons and analysis, as well as the descriptions, seem somewhat flippant, a point highlighted by a further commenter who takes issue with Berlatsky's statement that Om evokes 'happy camels swaying as their riders achieve a warm, fuzzy enlightenment' instead of the apparently more metal-appropriate image of dinosaurs, the commenter denying that this represents their own listening experience (Widd3rshins in Reddit 2012). These issues are clearly shortcomings in areas important to metal listeners, though it also seems as if Berlatsky has a fairly superficial picture of New Age music, with Mike Oldfield the only representative musician mentioned in order to contrast his famous tubular bells with the feedback washes of drone metal band SunnO))).

Berlatsky suggests several sonic and contextual points of convergence between extreme metal (or at least, the examples of Om, Drudkh and Esoteric, and by extension their respective subgenres). Much of this comparison is based on an implicit assumption of shared understandings about what New Age music signifies, with these assumptions largely unsupported and presented almost entirely without examples. Instrumentation choices such as flute and tabla are suggested as unlikely for metal but by implication associated with New Age music, with the sounds from these instruments then linked to ideas about ‘warm and fuzzy enlightenment’ in Orientalist hue. Overall, the comparison is effected through implied binaries which oppose on one side purported expectations of metal, and on the other, characteristics of the metal bands mentioned that instead align with elements of an imagined New Age music: brontosaurus vs happy camels; aggressive and offputting vs pleasant and soothing; remorseless assault vs lyrical, sweeping, transcendent sublime. Clearly this neat opposition of imagined depictions of both metal and New Age music is rather artificial, and the implicit portrayal of New Age music seems particularly lacking in foundation; but nevertheless perhaps this characterisation shows how each are imagined in popular media discourse.

There is evidence beyond the *Atlantic* article of New Age music’s overlap with extreme metal music (or at least, some outposts of it). Ukrainian label and distribution (or distro) Depressive Illusions Records sets out the genres within its remit on the front page of its website: ‘Black Metal/Dark Ambient/Drone Noise/Shoegaze Post-Rock/Funeral Doom Metal’, while listing even more detailed category divisions and subdivisions in its clickable menus: ‘black metal/pagan metal/blackgaze’ is one option, ‘doom metal/sludge/shoegaze/industrial metal’ and ‘dark ambient/drone/experimental’ are others. Clearly a wide range is catered for, but a range which centres upon extreme metal in its diverse forms. Alongside recordings by underground metal

bands with names like Empire Satanicum, Endless Blizzard (sic) and Eternal Sacrifice, however, can be found releases by Enya and Enigma. The latter two are highly successful musical projects associated with New Age music, respectively Irish singer Eithne Pádraigín Ní Bhraonáin's solo project, and German ambient dance group led by Michel Cretu, famous for combining Gregorian chants and other religiously-inflected field recordings with soft electronic beats and textures.

Further, there are echoes in metal of the instrumentalisation of music that is common in New Age music's compilations or albums explicitly presented as being for relaxation, for meditation, for mindfulness and so on. A number of extreme metal yoga classes or groups have emerged, including Black Yo)))ga in Pittsburgh, Metal Yoga Bones in New York, and Do.om Yoga in London. Each example includes a conflation or convergence of extreme metal aesthetic with signifiers associated with New Age-related spirituality: the brackets in Black Yo)))ga referencing drone metal band SunnO))) and, by extension, the amplifiers that the band are named after; the logo for Metal Yoga Bones' promotional materials which features a skeleton doing yoga, and the foregrounding of the Sanskrit syllable Om within the extreme metal genre term doom. Such uses of metal have been criticised by some, with the antagonism expressed by some listeners provoked by the perceived functionalist use of metal (see for example comments on Kelly 2015). In this view it is argued that any use of metal is illegitimate where metal music and metal culture are not the goal in itself; incidentally a frequently expressed concern that is often voiced in relation to Christian as well as overtly far-right political sentiments in metal.

Paradoxes of individualism: Turning towards or away from the human?

The conclusion of Berlatsky's argument is that both extreme metal and New Age music effect a 'turn away from the human'. For Berlatsky this turn, whether articulated through thematic focus on corpses or dolphins, is in direct contrast to other popular music genres which are generally more positively appraised. Both New Age and metal, we hear,

tend to elicit contempt from non-believers—and for similar reasons. Those reasons can perhaps best be summed up as spiritual earnestness. Rock, hip hop, R&B, punk, and other broadly validated pop tends to focus on swagger, style, irony, and heartbreak—if any belief is intended, it's belief in the self. In contrast, New Age opts for starry-eyed transcendent murmurings—and so, in its own much louder way, does metal. (Berlatsky 2012)

Whether such an orientation can be read into these vast and varied forms of music as a whole is beyond the scope of this article, though it seems likely that such a generalisation is unwarranted.

In any case, Berlatsky's claim that metal and new age music both turn away from the human can be questioned. Metal music and metal communities particularly value personal agency and responsibility in both real-life genre practices around the music, in rhetoric and in musical/lyrical narratives. In addition, New Age music, perhaps more than any other form of modern popular music, is frequently employed in a functional way which reorients the focus of the music away from the artistry or aesthetic mastery of the composer, artist, or musician, and towards the listener, whether in the mode of a generalised self-transformative 'experience' promised or sought, or in supporting particular practices of bodily consciousness such as yoga, massage, mindfulness or relaxation. Similarly, a criticism of New Age music and culture has been that it centres on individual experience, which can lead to just this kind of self-interested, self-justifying, even self-important exaltation of personal subjectivity. Such attacks go further, suggesting that

ideologies of personal wellbeing associated with New Age music and culture tend to capitulate without resistance, perfectly assimilable into a late capitalist ideology of choice, consumerism and the primacy of the individual self.

While these tendencies of ‘turning’ appear to be opposed, it can be suggested that a higher-order individualism may wish to turn away from the trivially personal and instead to a more fulfilled, enlightened self. It may certainly be doubted whether this is in fact a more real state, but this suggestion does resolve the apparent contradiction in the turn towards and away from the individual, by recognising that the individual that is turned away from and the individual that is turned towards are situated on different planes for the listener. The tendency for New Age album artwork and indeed, many extreme metal album covers to depict forests, mountains, oceans and other landscapes devoid of people, can be seen in one sense as turning away from humans in that they are not visually represented in such images. The person, however, who is centred in this absence is the one looking at the image, perhaps while hearing the music: the listener.

The dirty, the soothing, and the secret in constructing ‘magic’

For the purposes of this article, I have argued that the centring of the music around the individual listener, in combination with a widespread contempt of both forms of music, allows the self-transformative uses of New Age music and metal to be understood as magical practice. Magic, in this sense, is an individualist, self-directed and self-authorising iterative path towards personal empowerment within a hazily defined sphere relating to terms such as spirituality and ritual, and distanced from traditional institutional systems of religious authority. While over several decades some of these practices have certainly become mainstream (certainly yoga, for

example), their selection and combination with other elements remains personalised for each individual, therefore perpetuating a certain fragmented marginality. I suggest, therefore, that the elements Berlatsky's title identifies are crucial in imagining how each form of music might be understood to be magical. New Age music and metal evoke magic differently, in sometimes converging and sometimes diverging ways, though in each case through the dirty, the soothing and the secret.

That metal and New Age music have both been treated as critically and even socially 'dirty' should be clear from the frequency in everyday discourse with which New Age music is used by critics as an unquestioned slur for bland, outdated, over-earnest, naive Muzak, and by the seemingly eternal recurrence of moral panic media stories holding metal responsible for all manner of deviant and delinquent behaviour. Both New Age and metal are often ridiculed for being outside a mainstream consensus of musical value, yet can simultaneously be considered as dangerous. New Age music is a danger—sometimes to a surprisingly anger-inducing degree—to deeply held ideological beliefs about popular music and how artistic creativity is imagined to relate to personal identity affiliations. In this way, New Age music and metal can be positioned as critically 'dirty'. As Mary Douglas outlined in *Purity and Danger* (1966), dirt as 'matter out of place' can accrue magical power in ritual. This power is highly ambivalent due to its troubling of categories, and is magical exactly due to its externality to locally established structures of meaning. Dirt and secrecy both therefore relate to exclusion, and are therefore both victims of and threats to institutionalised structures of knowledge, value and propriety. The criticism and mockery that are still levelled at New Age music and metal, then, can in fact afford them power for adherents, albeit an unpredictable, unreliable form. Deena Weinstein has described the metal fan's 'proud pariah' stance (Weinstein 2000), which draws on specifically this power of the excluded. Regarding secrecy, further contradictions appear, in that New Age music has been

extremely commercially successful but critically ignored, and metal similarly so. There is also in both music cultures an overt discourse of occultism, which suggests reflexive aspects of their secrecy- hinting clearly and overtly at their discourses of magic, the esoteric and the occult, but in ways that might be expected to be ignored by many who have already accepted a mainstream dismissal of these forms of music altogether. As in Douglas' formation, this dangerous aura that surrounds the marginalised, that provokes strong responses of aversion or adherence, is magical because of its power to transform listener consciousness that exists outside of the "proper" hierarchies and channels of power.

While both are positioned as marginal, other manifestations of dirt and danger in New Age and metal music diverge. New Age music has been criticised for 'avoidance of complexity, dissonance, and minor chords', which for Frank McConnell amounts to a refusal to acknowledge the existence of evil (1994, 8), while these sonic and thematic features could be argued to constitute much of metal's dirt and noise. In Berlatsky's title, New Age music is implied to be 'soothing', and appears further loaded with associations of shame, with excessive calm even dramatically associated with medical emergencies in the title of one article about New Age music: 'Soothing music: for those in a coma' (McConnell 1994). The idea of soothing music being somehow problematic is particularly evident when metal too is argued to have this sonic characteristic. The person-centric implications of 'soothingness' is also presented as abrasive to conceptions of what metal 'should' sound like and what its effects on the listener should be. Again, category-troubling, expectation-defying characteristics become dirty or noisy sources for magical power. Just as dirt in Douglas' conception--and noise in the related work of Michel Serres (2007) and Jacques Attali (1985)--can hold oddly shifting and ambivalent positions in an unstable logic of ritual and magic, similarly a 'soothing' quality can play a counterintuitively provocative role in this light.

Metal, more than New Age music, is figured as explicitly dangerous in spurious associations with violence, suicide, depression and so on. Dirt has even been discussed as a key component of an explicitly magic-based analysis which pictures black metal as instantiating a version of the *nigredo* stage of the alchemical process, a blackening which is a necessary stage of magical purification, which here can be understood as again a transformation of the self. Jocelyn Godwin, discussing magic in music, before going on to laud the potentially positive aspects of popular music explicitly referencing 'New Age' spiritual culture, also mentions alchemy in discussing aspects of rock which were amplified in metal:

[a] concentration on the outcast, the misfit and pervert, the harshness and violence of life [...] What we have here is the very stuff of the alchemical *Nigredo*: the Putrefaction, the journey through the Inferno where one must behold Man's every sin without which the Work cannot proceed with its purgative process and its paradisal conclusion.

(Godwin 1987, 114)

Black metal in particular has been described as fulfilling this *nigredo* role (Thacker 2012, 111), with the key object of this purification through degradation being the individual (Coggins 2014).

New Age and metal may have extreme differences, such as in how a sonic palette might evoke aspects of metaphysical orientation. New Age music often depicts an optimistic worldview in its ambient soundscapes, where some forms of extreme metal might suggest a more thorough engagement with violence and alienation, through similar musical structures but with added elements of subtle distortion. Both, however, may diverge from prevailing notions of artistic communication as music about magic (and therefore derided for dealing with subjects viewed as non-rational, superstitious and silly), though this may in fact hide the possibility that the music itself can be part of a selective magical practice. In acknowledging and even revelling in critical and social disavowal and denigration, in finding paths away from established structures of religious authority, in the creation of underground or ignored musical technologies of self-

empowerment, both New Age and metal, in different but related ways, indeed draw on dirty, soothing and secret magic in music.

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