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Does This Mix Sound “Trve” To You?

Authenticity, Retro Culture and Metal Mixes



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Abstract

Despite the rapid development in technology that enables metal music producers today to create “perfect” sound mixes, many bands, artists and producers choose to make their creations sound old or “retro”. A song is created for this study and mixed in two different ways, one with a more “retro” direction and the other with a more “modern” direction. Five respondents were then made to listen to both mixes and were interviewed on what they thought of each respective mix and why they think retro culture is so prevalent today. The data gathered from the interviews show that the respondents describe retro mixes as dirty, saturated and raw while they described modern mixes as clean, hi-fi and overly compressed. The respondents associate old sounding mixes to authenticity, genuinity and honesty but don’t describe modern mixes as fake or dishonest. The respondents comment that the streamlined nature of music production today leads to very uniform sounding mixes and the abundance of similar sounding mixes creates a demand for more honest, authentic and genuine music. The respondents claim that retro culture would not be possible without the aid of modern technology.

Keywords

Authenticity, Technological Determinism, Hauntology, Retro Culture, Retro and Modern Metal Mixing

1 Introduction	3
1.1 Objectives and Research Questions	6
1.2 Background	7
1.2.1 How “Should” a Metal Mix Sound?	8
1.2.2 Discontent in Modern Metal?	9
1.2.3 Technological Determinism	9
1.2.3 Hauntology	11
2 Theory & Previous Research	12
2.1 Previous Research	12
2.2 Social Semiotics and Mixing	14
2.3 Aura and Authenticity	15
3 Methods	18
3.1 Semi-structured Interviews	18
3.2 Transcription and Analysis	20
3.3 Ethical Considerations	21
4 Analysing What Retro and Modern Sound Like	21
4.1 Immortal Rites - Morbid Angel	23
4.2 Born For One Thing - Gojira	27
5 Results and Analysis	32
5.1 Describing The Mixes	32
5.1.1 Retro	32
5.1.2 Modern Mix	35
5.1.3 Authenticity	37
5.1.4 Technology	42
6 Discussion and Conclusion	44
6.1 Method Discussion And Criticism	46
6.2 Further Research	48
Bibliography	50

1 Introduction

With each generation that came of age in the modern era, different trends, cultural norms and attitudes developed with them and one aspect that many of the youths of the 1960s to the early 2000s heavily identified with was the popular music of the time. So strongly does a large part of a young adult generation identify with their music, that trends and “scenes” became associated not only to these generations but also to the time periods. When one mentions the 1960s and popular music, one wouldn’t be faulted for thinking of The Beatles, the British Invasion and the summer of love. With the ‘70s one might think of disco or hard rock or the beginnings of heavy metal. The 1980s can trigger thoughts and images in neon, spandex, hairspray, synthesizers and guitar solos.

When I first started listening to music, I frequently flipped channels on the television and was exposed to the radio and heard what was popular at the time and the music style that spoke to me was music with loud electric guitars, drums and vocals. You guessed it, *rock music*. Specifically popular and modern rock music that received radioplay. Come age 13, however, things began to change. With the help of the internet, a 13 year old me accessed a vast cornucopia, a boundless smorgasbord of music from decades past. I was drawn almost immediately to the hard rock, heavy metal and extreme metal of the past. I was known in my teenage years as the person who liked “old music” and the “rocker” or “metalhead”.

All this happened from the mid 2000s up until the late 2013s. From 2013 onwards, I was stuck in my own world of music, listening to only what I found interesting since the internet is so incredibly handy in finding the music that caters *exactly* to what my current tastes are in the blink of an eye. When I began writing this study, I began to look up and around me and pull my head out of the hole I stuck it in many years ago and *observe*. I observed that “scenes” are not as common anymore (Hogarty, 2017:89). Not only that, some teenagers have begun dressing the same way my grandparents would dress. I’ve come into contact with bands that strive (and succeed) in sounding like their musical heroes from the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and more.



Two album covers, the left from 1985 and the right from 2019.

I've also observed this trend of looking into the past in my little bubble of heavy metal. Take for example the above images. The left is the album cover of Anthrax's *Spreading The Disease* and the left being Toxic Holocaust's *Primal Future:2019*. Both band logos are designed in a very pointy and sharp manner and the logo on the right image can be seen as a very exaggerated interpretation of the left logo. Both album covers also have a faded character and look like paintings.

A closer analysis of the two images reveal more on what they may be referring to. The image on the left and the title *Spreading The Disease* depicts a man being checked for radiation levels suggests some kind of dystopia or perhaps a coming nuclear dystopia which the agonized man may have found himself in.

The image on the right uses aneon digital grid is very common imagery to illustrate "1980s-ness". The figure in the center appears to be a cyborg, possibly a reference to RoboCop and other similar action films from the '80s. The title *Primal Future:2019* and the nuclear power symbol suggests a dystopian future, with "primal" suggesting a deterioration or total collapse of civilization and the nuclear symbol suggesting that the collapse was brought upon by nuclear warfare. The dystopian future setting is also a common theme featured in 1980s action films such as *RoboCop*, *Escape From New York*, *Terminator*, *Blade Runner* and more. The *Primal*

Future:2019 cover appears to be a very exaggerated interpretation of the *Spreading The Disease* cover.

Aside from these album covers, The term “retro-thrash” (Thrash being a subgenre of heavy metal that was popular in the 1980s) is also being thrown around and even an article written about it (Krovatin, 2018) where the author makes a short walkthrough of thrash metal bands’ early history, it’s revival in the early 2000s and the genres “second puberty” as the title describes. Heavy metal derived from the past is making a statement.

Revivals of a sound and image prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s seem to have returned and production choices are now being made in modern metal (and rock) mixes to sound older. The term “true” used as an adjective by metal fans to describe something as “authentic” comes to mind. Do metal fans think modern metal lacks authenticity and isn’t “true”?

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that the phenomenon of modern culture borrowing and deriving ideas, styles, aesthetics and more from the recent past is not unique and has occurred not only with music but also in fashion, furniture, architecture and more. An is *Art Nouveau*. *Art Nouveau* is described as “an ornamental art style that flourished between 1890 to 1910 throughout Europe and the United States” (Britannica n.d.) and experienced a revival in England in the 1960s. Guffey (2006:8) states “as popular culture in the 1960s began to change, the remnants of this musty 80-year-old movement became the syntax of sexy, youthful rebellion.”.

Even further back in history, architecture in the 17th to 19th centuries had their own revivals. The Gothic Revival, for example, was a movement between the 18th and 19th centuries where architects sought to revive the architectural style associated with Medieval Europe.

From art to architecture and more. Human beings are fond of looking into the past in their quest of achieving their best way of self expression. What separates art nouveau and architecture from heavy metal is that heavy metal, in comparison, is young. The phenomenon of looking into the past is spurred on with the great accessibility to the past with the help of the internet.

It is also worth pointing out that this study was written by a person who is heavily involved with heavy metal music, subculture and music production. This can lead to confusion to those who are new to these territories.

1.1 Objectives and Research Questions

Mixes of extreme metal from the 1980s sound the way they do because of the technological limitations at the time. One can map the progression of what mixes sounded like from records released as early as 1983, such as Metallica's "Kill em All" up to the release of Metallica's self titled album in 1992, which is considered one of the most well produced albums in the metal genre and beyond. As recording and production technology developed and advanced, the possibility of making more refined, tight and "clean" productions became more widespread and easily attainable. Professional sounding mixes can now be attained with not much more than a laptop and a pair of headphones in your bedroom. However, there also seems to be a rising popularity/trend in rock and metal subcultures of "retro" sounding productions despite the possibility to make very clean, modern and "perfect" sounding records.

This study was made in order to document and further understand the tastes, preferences and mindset of metal fans today in relation to the growing influence of retro culture. With the growing popularity of retro sounding music, one can guess that some element of music prior to the spread of retro culture did not suffice in catching the listeners' interest. This study can then serve as background for future studies investigating what listener's tastes were like in 2021 and led to the popularization of the next big music trend of the future.

The research questions this study aims to answer are:

1. Why is retro culture in metal so prevalent today?
2. What parameters do listeners associate to retro productions?
3. Why do they see these parameters as important?

In order to answer these questions, one heavy metal song was produced and mixed in two ways. One in a more retro style and the other in a more modern style. The song is then presented to the respondents and a discussion is made afterwards based on their opinions over the mixing styles of the song.

1.2 Background

‘It doesn’t feel as if the 21st century has started yet. We remain trapped in the 20th century’ laments Mark Fisher (2014), and he has a point: it’s the second decade of the twenty-first century, and Roger Waters is rebuilding his Wall, and The Who are talking about their (re)generation, and Mick Jagger and company still can’t get no satisfaction. (Hogarty, 2017:1)

As of the writing of this text, vinyl sales in Europe have been on the rise in recent years and there are a handful of record stores in nearby cities. Teenagers can be seen dressed the same way as their grandparents would while eagerly flipping through vinyl records in those same record stores. After some reflection, I’ve also realised that I myself have been swept up by this somewhat recent trend of “retromania”. Being a fan of Swedish rock and hardrock, I follow and listen to acts such as “The Hellacopters”, “Imperial State Electric”, “Blues Pills”, “Dead Lord” and more. Many of the acts listed all, to varying extents, nod to contemporary music from decades past in songwriting and production

Heavy Metal bands have also been releasing their latest and classic albums on vinyl in recent years. Music is also being released or re-released in cassette format. This isn’t an isolated trend in it’s own little niche in the outskirts of popular culture either. Bands and artists such as *Lik*, *Vampire* and *Henrik Palm* are visible outside of the underground, with *Lik* recently winning P3 Guld’s Rock/Metal Act of the year award in 2021, Henrik Palm being a candidate for Gaffa Priset’s Solo Artist of the year, Hard Rock/Metal Act of the year award and winning Delcarlia Music’s Album of the Year award.

Retro culture is also felt and quite visible in the music gear business. The BOSS HM2 distortion pedal, made famous being the distortion pedal of choice for late ‘80s and early ‘90s Swedish

death metal bands is making it's official comeback in the near future. There are also numerous copies of this legendary pedal. Companies produce an ever increasing amount of tape saturators and analog console simulators to add the well sought after "analog warmth" in the mixes of many bedroom producers. Electric guitar companies release brand new guitars made to look like they've existed since the 1960s.

In order to understand this phenomenon in modern metal, it is necessary to understand "retro culture" more and to understand what makes a metal mix "metal".

1.2.1 How "Should" a Metal Mix Sound?

With extreme metal songs typically being loud, fast and chaotic, intelligibility and clarity have been the target qualities needed since the beginnings of the genre. Scott Burns, producer of many "landmark" death metal albums in the late 1980s and early 1990s comments on this with the band Cannibal Corpse as an example.

These Guys (Cannibal Corpse) really wanted to be faster and heavier and be taken as legitimate but from a purely technical and production standpoint, it's hard to make things that are fast and noisy sound clean. (BANGERTV - All Metal, 2015)

Alex Webster, bassist of the death metal band Cannibal Corpse, regards Morrisound Studios (a studio famous for producing many landmark Death Metal albums in the late '80s to early '90s) in Florida to be one of the first studios to achieve the desired clarity. To quote Webster from the Youtube video "Metal Evolution - Extreme Metal";

Morrisound was the first studio that really mastered a sound that would work well with fast double bass. The kick drums were audible. That was a big deal because I just don't think that a lot of those producers back then knew what to do with fast double bass (BANGER TV - All Metal, 2015)

Mynett (2016) points out that significant processing is required to achieve the desired sound:

To provide the drums, bass, and vocal signals with the qualities that will enable them to remain intelligible, a significant level of processing and ‘technological mediation’ is often required. As a result, modern metal music productions are often as heavily processed as commercial pop or dance music regularly is (Mynett, 2016:110).

One can perceive these two quotes as a “cause and effect” scenario. At first, there is the recognition that the music is difficult to properly produce due to its fast and chaotic nature and there was a desire for clarity. With the help of technology throughout the years, the resources now exist to achieve this sound and a lot of mixing and processing is needed to “tame” this chaotic sound. The heavy use of processing to control the music became widespread and not all metal fans were pleased with this.

1.2.2 Discontent in Modern Metal?

In the book “Extremity Retained”, actors in the metal scene have expressed dissatisfaction with the state of contemporary metal, commenting on how metal productions were all beginning to sound similar to one another as a “formula” was found.

It’s noticeable today with the newer death metal and death-ish metal, that ... What a shock, they make the bands use all the same guitar amps, they use the same drum samples, and of course their records then all start to sound the same. - Jim Morris (Netherton, 2015:267)

This sentiment is also found among the younger generation units interviewed in Jean Hogarty’s book *Popular Music and Retro Culture in the Digital Era*, with them lamenting over the perceived lack of originality and the uniformity of popular music.

1.2.3 Technological Determinism

Technological Determinism is a somewhat polarizing term among academics and researchers. Detractors of the term object to the idea that the development of technology follows its own “logic” and is entirely independent of the agency of people. Technology, quite simply, steers the narrative of whatever framework it finds itself in. (Dafoe, 2015:1052).

The heavy criticism towards this definition of technological determinism is steered towards the blatant disregard of human agency in the narrative. So harsh was the criticism in fact, that the term had with it negative connotations, and possibly still does today. The stance I believe that is appropriate for this study is neither the hardest nor the softest stance, but it must be present somewhere in the middle.

Dafoe (2015:1053) suggests that Technological Determinism is an umbrella term that includes the different forms of technological determinism in varying levels. The form that disregards the agency of people is called “Artifactual Determinism” wherein the artifact (In the subject of music consumption, Spotify can be viewed as an artifact) shapes social relations. On the other hand, “technological politics” suggests that artifacts are designed by people with specific intentions and goals, making the “logic” of technological development more based on human agency.

For example, the idea behind the creation of Spotify is for people to have unlimited access to almost all music in history. An unexpected result might be the lopsided preference of older music by listeners in the present day.

Hogarty argues that modern technology is a key actor and determinant in the rise of retro culture. Hogarty states:

I argue, then, that new technologies such as the Internet and mobile devices are part and parcel of the retro phenomenon and the hauntological structure of feeling because they provide easy access to the vast discography of older popular music and therefore potentially drown out and temper the emergence and/or awareness of new music. (2016:33)

It is suggested that the existence and easy availability of old music is a key factor in making music listeners choose to listen to older music and become less aware of the contemporary music of the time. Streaming services such as iMusic and Spotify come to mind as “artifacts” that steer narratives.

More specifically for this study, the existence of artifacts related to the production of mixing such as ProTools, Plugins, EQs, Compressors etc can be considered to be steering the narrative of how music was mixed before, is mixed today and possibly how it will be mixed in the future.

According to Hughes (1983, 295)

...As systems mature they seem to gain inertia. This inertia follows the logic of sunk costs: assets have been bought, standards set, infrastructure built, employees trained, interactions routinized, and interests entrenched, all of which constrain subsequent decisions. (1983, 295)

Hughes' quote can be tied in with the state of music consumption and production today. With professional mixes becoming more easily accomplished with a fraction of the cost and need for equipment when compared to the 1980s.

1.2.3 Hauntology

This term is coined by French philosopher Jacques Derrida and according to Hogarty (2016:32) is defined as:

...“hauntology” indicates a paradoxical harking back to a lost future. Written after the end of history in a land where nothing happens forever, Derrida (1994) posits that the “spectre of communism” will continue to haunt Europe, eventually prompting its inhabitants to become more nostalgic for the futurism and utopianism of the recent past.

In the case of popular music, the “spectres” of artists from years past are currently haunting modern times. Hogarty frames hauntology in the domain of popular music and argues that the “forward momentum” of popular music has diminished and that younger generations seem to lack a collective “identity” the same way generations in their youths did from the 1960s to the 1980s. Hogarty then claims that the 21st century is haunted by the ghosts of stars in decades past, giving the example of Jimi Hendrix existing on the same realm (the internet) as Amy Winehouse. Immortalized, although having lived decades apart.

The idea of hauntology also ties in well with the idea of inertia caused by the increasing sophistication of modern technology. If or when technology reaches its threshold and can't be developed any further, what is "future" now then, if nothing changes in the now? This can be applicable to music. We have all the tools that help us emulate old sounds, vast libraries of vintage samples, information and tutorials to achieve this retro sound.

Aside from artists of the past being more relevant than ever among the youth, the idea behind Hauntology can also be used for mixing styles or specific parameters and choices regarding mixes. Fisher describes the works of the artist "The Caretaker" applying distortion and delay (degradation, as Fisher describes) to 1930s tea room pop in order to evoke a feeling of the past. Fisher describes this degradation.

...one of sonic hauntology's signature traits, the conspicuous use of crackle, which renders time as an audible materiality. (Fisher, 18:2012)

The use of crackle I believe ties in with social semiotics and signifies a feeling of the past. More semiotic resources in music production/mixing is explored in the study. The ideals of metal mixing and production in the 1980s are haunting modern metal bands.

2 Theory & Previous Research

2.1 Previous Research

A similar study has been made by Jean Hogarty on listener's attitudes and opinions towards the rise of retro culture. A series of interviews were made from September 2011 to June 2012, and the summer of 2015 with forty music fans aged between 18 and 62 years old on their love for old music. (Hogarty 2017:53) The interviews did not focus on the characteristics of mixes and focused less on "revival" acts instead focusing on the "source" bands instead.

One concept used by Hogarty in his study is the concept of the “structure of feeling.”. The structure of feeling is described as the lived experiences of a certain generation in a certain era/period of time. Hogarty describes that young fans of older music long for a “hauntological structure of feeling”, that is, longing for a lived experience for an era they never actually lived through. (2017:81) This longing is expressed by younger respondents in Hogarty’s study. In some of the interviews made, respondents were asked why they preferred older music and their answers point clearly towards hauntology and authenticity.

A respondent named Laura was asked if there was any new music they listened to. Laura answered and explained that the lyrics of some bands in the past spoke of revolution and a brighter future that made sense before but might seem silly today, and then points out that “at least they had ‘soul’”. She also says that she makes a point to not watch programs like The Voice and American Idol, stating that she’s “sick of that stuff”.

Another respondent named Jason builds further on this by commenting that The X Factor didn’t involve any new ideas or “a vision to do something a bit different.” He adds that The X Factor doesn’t allow creative freedom. (2017:90)

Some respondents also expressed disappointment that many contemporary acts borrow too much from previous acts, with a respondent named Simon saying that much of the music today is regurgitated. (2017:92)

The article also points out how technological determinism is a large factor in the rise of retro culture. The study emphasizes the importance of the access the young fans have to older music and also the lack of access to music the older fans had in their youth. Older fans in their youth listened to contemporary music because for many of them, music was mainly consumed via listening to the radio. Aside from radio, older fans also stated that needing to purchase albums also made it difficult to be exposed to a very large and diverse selection of music since they couldn’t afford that many records. (2017:105)

With younger fans on the other hand, they state that websites helped in their exposure to older music. Several respondents commented on the influence of the website YouTube has on youth and exposing them to older bands such as The Beatles. Also, in contrast to the previous statement of not being able to afford music, one respondent commented that “...it would be ridiculous to have to go into the city and pay fifteen euro for something that you could get in minutes for free.” (2017:108)

Tying in technological determinism and authenticity, several respondents describe why they prefer and enjoy purchasing and listening to physical media. One respondent states that the presence of physical formats of music (CD, cassettes, vinyl records) is something he sees as more desirable as compared to an .mp3 file which he feels as less permanent compared to a CD one can own for 30 years (2017:111). Other respondents commented on .mp3s sounding too “cold, clinical and clean” and praising the pops and crackles of vinyl records and the old and musty aromas and worn out sleeves of vinyl records. Hogarty (2017:110) states that these characteristics are the closest one can get to “physically grasping, smelling and hearing the authentic structure of feelings in these unlived eras.”

2.2 Social Semiotics and Mixing

Social Semiotics is used as a tool in understanding listeners’ relationship and perspective with music. Van Leeuwen presents (2005:3) “semiotic resource” as a key term in Social Semiotics and that it was traditionally referred to as a “sign”. A sign is a connection of two concepts, the signifier and the signified. An example of a signifier is the color red, which can be interpreted as a warning or a sign of danger. This interpretation of red as danger is what is “signified.”

Van Leeuwen states (2005:4) that social semiotics is not limited to speech, writing and images and that “almost everything we do or make can be done or made in different ways and therefore allows, at least in principle, the articulation of different social and cultural meanings.”

Mixing/Production choices and parameters are then also subject to the principles and ideas of social semiotics, although descriptions, associations and interpretations can begin to become vague in this territory due to the very subjective nature of music. Van Leeuwen also describes

that different ways of walking “seduce, threaten, impress and much more” (2005:4) and a specific choice of reverb or a certain level of compression on a mix is no exception to the conveying of emotions, attitudes and more.

Machin (2011:1) states in his lecture “*A Social Semiotic Theory of music*” that musicologist Philip Tagg:

...has described the way that in our culture we have come to make associations of particular musical patterns and sounds with emotions, attitudes, settings and events through their repetition in our lives and as they have become embedded in our shared cultural conventions. A composer can therefore rely on a certain combination of notes as being heard by listeners as ‘romantic’ or ‘scary’. (1983)

Taking from these descriptions, one can hypothesize that associations have now been made between certain mixing choices and parameters to feelings of nostalgia and settings from the past. Through analysis of the interviews with the help of social semiotics, production signifiers and signifieds are identified.

2.3 Aura and Authenticity

I also have a curiosity with the idea of “aura” and how it can be applied to the study of the current retro trend. Walter Benjamin describes what the authenticity of something as:

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. (1935:4)

Walter Benjamin also defines this authenticity/element as “aura” and how it dissipates as technology develops. Technology allows for more reproductions of a work of art and Benjamin states that these reproductions lose the aura of the original. Aura’s value depreciates as you bring for example an Opera performance into the confines of your bedroom via radio or “out of reach for the original self” as stated by Benjamin.

One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. (1935:4)

The “aura” or authenticity of classic extreme metal albums in the early 1980s may have been brought to life by obstacles caused by the recording technology of the time, and the lack of knowledge on what a metal mix “should” sound like. Production customs, practices and conventions in metal production have developed since the early 1980s and so has distribution (from vinyl to cassettes to CD) yet in spite of this, bands are starting to take mixing cues from the mixes in the 1980s and people are purchasing vinyl and cassettes again. Does this suggest that “modern” mix styles and listening to streaming services are seen as lacking in aura or authenticity? This goes hand in hand with Auslander’s writings on authenticity:

In other words, the common assumption is that the live event is 'real' and that mediatized events are secondary and somehow artificial reproductions of the 'real'. (Auslander, 2008, p.3)

Prior to the widespread use of metronomes for tracking in the studio, many bands played live in the studio for at least the “basic” tracks (bass, drums and sometimes rhythm guitars). “Aura” may be applied in this context since there still is an interaction between several musicians in the studio instead of, for example, a guitar player recording his parts alone to the beat of a click.

Authenticity and genuinity are characteristics that are valued and considered important in heavy metal culture. The word “poser” and “sell out” are often used to describe people and artists who are considered disingenuous and “fake” with their dedication to the music. Sell out is also often used to describe bands that decide to take a change in musical direction. Metallica frontman James Hetfield once introduced a song in concert in 1983 with: (Thrash Demonic, 2018)

This one is gonna kill all the fake people, all the posers. We fucking hate them. (Hetfield, 1983)

The posers James is referring to in his charming introduction to the song are the glam metal acts (“Glam metal” being a subgenre of metal music that combines heavy metal with melodic pop with catchy hooks. The aesthetics of glam metal acts include large, hairspray-thick hairstyles and

flamboyant clothing. Weinstein describes Glam as “Sweetened heavy metal”) that was popular in the mainstream at the time. These bands were called a colorful selection of names such as “nerf metal”, “poodle bands”, “hair metal” and more. Weinstein (2000:46) explains that these bands being referred to as posers indicates that they are seen as lacking in authenticity. She then states that the “code” of authenticity is central to heavy metal culture. Weinstein (2000:32) also describes this authenticity as “of holding to one's principles rather than being seduced by financial rewards.”, which further tarnishes Glam Metal’s credibility in the eyes of “true” metal fans since their music was on heavy rotation on MTV.

The discourse of authenticity in heavy metal subculture isn’t limited to the consumption of music. There are conventions in how listeners of heavy metal *can* look like and how they consume the music and purchase merchandise off of their favourite bands. Going back to metal fans’ critique towards hair metal, James Hetfield expresses this critique with colorful language to an audience in a 1985 concert with: (Sigma TV, 2016)

If you came here to see fucking spandex and fucking make up and hairspray and all this crap.
This ain’t the fucking band!

In Larsson’s study “I Bang My Head, Therefore I Am” (2013:102), she interviews several metal fans on their relationship with the music and the subculture and some of the respondents state that being a metal fan involves buying into the package.

It’s this thing where you buy the records, you dress like a heavy metal fan, you listen to heavy metal, you go to concerts, you drink beer and you have fun.

The statement “you dress like a heavy metal fan” suggests that there is a “heavy metal” uniform, but later on in the article the respondents comment that a metal fan needs only to listen and enjoy the music and “be genuine” to themselves. Respondents comment that the music comes first, and that the “uniform” exists in order to identify other metal fans, and this identification based on clothing allows for a certain “connection” or “relation”, as the respondent calls it. (2013:104)

One final example of “authenticity” is illustrated again by Machin (2010:14) using an episode of the *Muppet Show* where a puppet classical musician is asked by blues artist Ry Cooder to play the blues. The puppet is terrified and believes that it can’t perform music without sheet music. Ry Cooder teaches the puppet a lesson in “letting it come naturally” and the puppet does this and successfully plays the blues. This scenario can be seen as a rather cliché expression “playing music from the heart” and a lack of obstacles between what the artist's intentions are and the (production of) his music.

3 Methods

3.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Before the interview, both mixes of the song in .wav format are sent to the respondents. The respondents then listen to the tracks on their preferred listening apparatus. Some respondents chose to listen to one mix at a time and discuss them while others listened to both mixes right away before discussing. The respondents were allowed to listen to the songs as often as they felt they needed. After the initial listening of the tracks, the interviews were carried out.

Concepts from Multimodal Ethnography are borrowed for the study. This study’s main approach in gathering data is through semi-structured interviews and this choice is influenced by the approach and aims of Multimodal Ethnography. Jewitt et al. (2016:130) describes the aim of Multimodal Ethnography as “to make visible the cultural and social practice of a particular community.” This is an aim I find apt for the nature of the study for its focus on opinions and behaviours of music listeners in the metal genre. A summary of the empirical focus of Multimodal Ethnography includes unstructured and semi-structured interviews. (Jewitt et al. 2016:119)

The methods for data gathering for this study does not include recordings and observations from the field. It instead focuses on thoughts and opinions of members of the musical subculture in focus. Semi structured interviews were carried out and a series of themes/questions, or an

“interview guide” (Bryman, 2018:301) will be prepared in a way that it leads into a more open conversation.

Because the intention of the study is to discover and analyze the opinions of listeners based on the listening to two separate mixes, focus is put on what the listener finds important. Bryman (2018:300) states that in qualitative interviews, the interest is focused on the interviewees' standpoints, and it is desirable to allow the interview to move to different directions where the interviewee sees appropriate. Ahrne and Svensson (2015:38) also state that an advantage of qualitative interviews is that one can adjust the order of interview questions to better suit specific situations in a discussion.

The guide questions used in the interviews are as follows.

- 1.) What bands or albums do you associate each mix version with?
- 2.) What was “right” or “wrong” with the way each mix was done in regards to their respective references?
- 3.) What makes each type of mix “standout”?
- 4.) Why do you think retro mania has become popular?
- 5.) What influence do you think technology has in the birth of this “retro wave”? Is there a big correlation?
- 6.) Do you think the retro wave is a move forward, backwards or somewhere in between?

The above order of questions was not rigidly followed during the interviews. Instead, the respondents were allowed to “lead” the conversation somewhat in order for them to be more comfortable and in turn disclose more honest information and hopefully reduce the interviewer effect. With the respondents being more comfortable during the interview, the process itself may become more like daily conversation.

Convenience sampling is used to find respondents for this study. An important characteristic the potential respondents needed was being a listener of extreme metal music. This study was

written during the Covid-19 pandemic and thus it was decided that doing video-call interviews on Zoom and Skype would be appropriate and the safest way to gather information.

The following are descriptions of the respondents and the names I assigned to them.

Albert - Vocalist of a death metal band who has listened to heavy metal for a considerable amount of his life.

Boris - Swedish heavy metal drummer and lecturer/teacher in music and music production.

Carlos - Filipino musician, guitarist and producer. Listened to heavy metal in his younger years.

Derek - Musician and Producer. Listened to heavy metal in his younger years.

Eric - Guitar player, composer, and producer of a death metal band.

3.2 Transcription and Analysis

The interviews were done via Skype and Zoom, depending on the respondents' preferences. All interviews were recorded and most of the contents were transcribed. Parts considered irrelevant were left out such as small talk and off topic conversations. Four out of five of the interviews were done in Swedish and the last in English. The transcriptions were analyzed in their original language but quotes deemed relevant enough to be featured in the text are translated to English by me. Translations from Swedish interviews used in the results and analysis chapter are not word-for-word literal translations but rather contextually translated. Descombe (2014:371) states that a possible obstacle in transcribing is that "People do not always speak in nice, finite sentences". Some quotes are paraphrased due to stuttering, excessive pauses and other verbal quirks that make unmediated audio-to-text transcription confusing to read.

The transcriptions were read through and quotes/sentences of interest were sorted. Color codes were categorized and assigned to sentences of interest. Patterns and themes are identified. Theoretical concepts are used in analysing the different thematic categories' relationships with each other and to the concepts used in the background of the study. Quotes that express opinions seen as significant to the study are then presented and *italicized* in the results and analysis section of this paper. (Ahrne, Svensson. 2015:220).

3.3 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the four basic principles of research ethics; the information requirement, the consent requirement, the confidentiality requirements, and the utilization requirement (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). The informants were all informed of these points, the purpose of the study and that the interview would be recorded.

4 Analysing What Retro and Modern Sound Like

The song used for the respondents to listen to was written and recorded several months prior to the writing of this paper and mixed and mastered in tandem with the writing of this thesis. The two mixes of the song will be referred to as *The Retro Mix* and *The Modern Mix*. Two songs were then chosen to serve as references for what the retro and modern mixes were going to sound like. The reference chosen for the retro mix is *Immortal Rites* (1989) by the band Morbid Angel, while the reference chosen for the modern mix was *Born For One Thing* by Gojira. An analysis was made on both songs in order to help me replicate the mixes, in order for them to sound “convincing” for the interviewees.

Immortal Rites is chosen due to the album *Altars of Madness* being considered by death metal fans as an important and landmark album in the history of death metal, very often being featured highly in many top 10 or 100 lists of greatest death metal albums on many magazines and websites (Metal Hammer 2020) (David Slakovic 2020). *Born For One Thing* is chosen partially due to how recently it was released and Gojira being regarded as one of modern metal’s most successful bands, having been nominated a Grammy once and for more awards. Both songs were analysed with three analysis recommendations from Ternhag. (2009:43-46)

1. What can be heard in a certain recording?
2. How is the recording made?
3. Why does the recording sound in this way?

All three is required for the analysis of specific parameters in the mix, ranging from the more immediately audible ones (such as level of reverb on certain instruments, how loud an instrument is etc) and to other parameters that require some technical aids (loudness, what the song looks like on a spectrometer).

The first recommendation includes the implementation of a *Sound Event Description* (Ternhag, 2009:43). This is a chronological description of what can be heard in the song from start to finish. Ternhag further describes that one parameter is described at a time such as vocals, and then guitars, drums and so on. A Sound Event Description is used to analyze both songs focusing on each instrument and the way they are mixed. Because the study focuses on the sound characteristics of metal music, analysis of the lyrics is neglected.

The second proposal involves an attempt to reconstruct the recording process from pre-production to post production. Considering the circumstances of the recording process (how well rehearsed the band was, where the recording took place, when, etc etc).

The third proposal involves getting insight into the intentions of the composer of the music.

Ternhag expressed regret over the fact that few notes were taken down on the specific stuid recording details of albums. (2009:46). This is especially true with *Altars of Madness*, the album *Immortal Rites* is a part of. Information on the recording of this album has been very hard to find, with only a few anecdotes and quotes from several band members and the producer found online and in books.

After the analyses of each instrument in the mix with the help of Ternhag's propositions, an image of the average spectrometric analysis of the song is presented. The spectrogram shows the tonal characteristics (bass, middle and treble) of the track. On the X axis, the left section of the spectrum contains the lower bass frequencies, the middle section with the middle frequencies and the right containing higher treble frequencies. The Y axis shows how loud the frequency is on a track. For example, a spectrogram showing a peak in the area more to the left suggests that the track is bass heavy.

The loudness meter shows how loud a track is mastered and this loudness is measured with LUFS. A track's loudness is the track's perceived volume for humans. LUFS is a standardized way to measure a track's overall loudness. In order to illustrate how “too loud” might sound, one can refer to the loudness limits of several streaming platforms, websites and CDs.

- 1.) Spotify = -13 to -15 LUFS
- 2.) Apple Music = -16 LUFS
- 3.) Youtube = -13 to -15 LUFS
- 4.) CD = Over -9 LUFS

After each analysis, a summary was made, outlining and emphasizing the more important parameters analysed for use in my study.

4.1 Immortal Rites - Morbid Angel

Released in 1989

Recorded in Morrisound Studios

Specific copy of the song analyzed is an .mp3 file purchased from Morbid Angel's Bandcamp page. The band was contacted and a representative stated that the file is not remastered and is directly from the 1989 master. This benefits the study because this essentially means that the version of the song being analysed here would have been the same version fans have heard when the song was initially released.

Sound Event Description Summary:

Drums - The drums do not overwhelm the mix. Significant amounts of reverb is used on the snare drum and a little bit of reverb is also heard on the hi-hat. Reverb may be used on the entire drum track but with emphasis on the snare drum. In the first few bars of the song, a loud and largely untreated plate reverb seems to be placed on the snare. Toms are difficult to hear and

seem to disappear in tom-based fills in certain areas of the song. Fast bass drums are audible but lack the “clickiness” of modern productions (Achieved via a bump in the treble frequencies; around 2500-3000khz). Cymbals are clear, although not very loud.

Guitars - Dominates and is one of the loudest elements in the mix. It is uncertain if the guitars are quad-tracked (recording and having four individual guitar tracks in the song) or not since quad-tracking may not have been the norm at the time the album was recorded. The amplifiers used in the recording are possibly Marshall amplifiers (old footage of Morbid Angel playing live shows a small wall of Marshall amplifiers behind guitarist Trey Azgathoth). The guitars sound very heavily distorted and the middle frequencies sound somewhat attenuated.

Bass Guitar - The low end of the bass guitar is definitely “felt” but the notes played are not always so audible. In more chaotic passages, specific notes from the bass guitar are more “buried” in the mix. Notes played on higher frets are heard. The bass guitar track also does not sound distorted.

Vocals - The vocals are not so loud in the mix, and the words vocalised are not very audible with only a few words being somewhat discernible. Not so much can be said about the vocal mix. It seems to be one setting used in the entire song, which is understandable considering that the guitars and drums seem to be the driving force behind the song. Reverb is used on the vocals but becomes difficult to discern in the chaotic parts of parts of the song. Compression can be assumed in order to make the vocal track “stand out” in the chaos of the song.



Figure 3 - Average Spectrometric Analysis of Immortal Rites

Figure three shows a spectral analysis of the mix of *Immortal Rites* and a dip is seen between ~150kHz and ~1500kHz. The peak of the figure is at around 2200kHz and frequencies afterwards are gradually rolled off until 17000kHz. A steep drop is observed here, followed by a sudden spike at around 18000kHz and yet another steep fall at around 19000kHz.

There is a very drastic dip in the lower frequencies at around 20kHz to 25kHz and a steep climb is observed from 25kHz. The abrupt appearance of the peaking and dipping in the lower part and higher parts of the spectrum suggests that aggressive high-and low cut filtering was used at some point in the production process. One can hypothesize that the aggressive cutting of the lower and higher frequencies are made in order to make the album more suitable to be produced on vinyl.

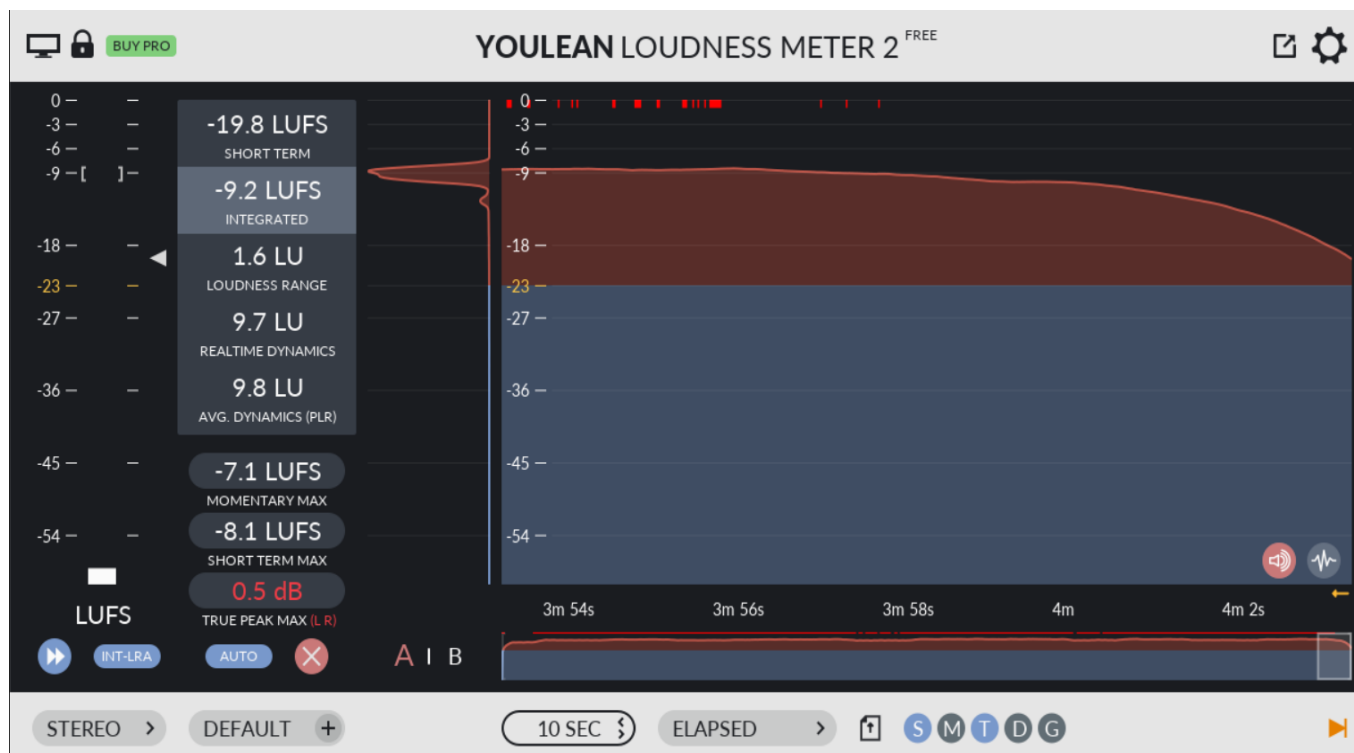


Figure 4 - Loudness Analysis of Immortal Rites

The track's integrated loudness at -9.2 LUFS is observed in Figure 4. The track can get as loud as -7.1 LUFS.

Very little information could be found at all regarding the recording of *Altars of Madness* in which Immortal Rites is the opening track. An interview with one of the main studio engineers of Morrisound Studios suggests that there has been significant drum sampling and correction that made it to the finished product. As Jim Morris himself states,

We had a guy working for us named Brian Benscoter—we called him “Super Brian,” because he is a genius level IQ-type guy, who was a composition major at USF at the time. Quite often, we would get Brian to sit there with the calculator, and he would sit there for the rest of the night just calculating kick drums and putting them in, because the drummers just could not play them. It was not necessarily anyone's fault; it was more that they just were not really prepared. (Netherton, 2015:266)

Jim Morris also states using tape with recording during the time period, while not explicitly stating *Altars of Madness* was recorded to tape, one can assume that this was the case because of the time period, but Jim Morris himself again recalls recording everything on 2 inch tape at the time with minimal computer editing.

This suggests that the aid of technology in order to achieve the sound the band was after was absolutely necessary, since death metal as a genre hasn't matured yet in this period and did not have the same conventions and "rules" as it does today. Despite the inability of drummers to perform their parts properly, the album in the end was still produced and released to acclaim from fans and critics. Without the help of technology to aid and "fix" the performances of drummers on these early albums, the modern style of death metal drumming may have turned out differently, exhibiting technological determinism.

As for the intentions of the composition, Morbid Angel guitarist Trey Azgathoth expressed a desire to be faster and more extreme than any other group at the time;

Back then, I really wanted to destroy everybody. I wanted people to have to work a lot harder after the fans witnessed what we had going on. I wanted to smoke people. (Mudrian, 2009:84)

The quote displays a very competitive mindset on Azgathoth's part, and this can be interpreted in the nature of *Immortal Rites* being fast, aggressive and chaotic.

4.2 Born For One Thing - Gojira

Released in 2021

Recorded in Silver Cord Studios

The specific copy of the song is an mp3 purchased from iTunes.

Sound Event Description Summary:

Drums - Drums are loud and very clear. There is not nearly the same amount of reverb that is noticeable on the drum track. The Snare drum sounds “crispier” which can be accomplished with a slight EQ bump in between 2500 khz and 4000 khz . The bass drums sound “punchier” and “clickier” (Again, with a bump in the higher frequencies as previously mentioned in the previous analysis) although not as clicky as other modern productions. Cymbals sound very smooth and not harsh at all, a high-cut filter could have been used and/or notching harsher frequencies.

Guitars - Also loud and clear and not nearly as “harsh” or “huge” sounding as the guitar tones on *Immortal Rites*. It is easy to decipher what the guitar players are playing. Heavy reverb is used on more melodic lines but this could be a stylistic/artistic choice. There seems to be less distortion on the electric guitars.

Bass - Very clear, has a very small tendency to disappear when playing low notes but it is very audible in many parts since sonic space is given up when electric guitars start playing higher notes. Bass sounds compressed and overdriven to a certain degree.

Vocals - Similar to *Immortal Rites* in the way in which they’re not the main focus of the mix. There are however differences in volume whereas *Immortal Rites*’ vocals are rather low in the mix, the vocals in *Born for One Thing* are loud although still not very intelligible because of the nature of growled metal vocals. The vocals have a more “well rounded” sound, suggesting a rolling off on higher and lower frequencies and notching. (Eliminating very specific frequencies)

Mix/Loudness - Every instrument and element in the mix has its “place” and doesn’t stray very far, aside from the reverb on the vocals during the choruses. Every instrument is also heard very clearly. The track, when compared to *Immortal Rites*, is definitely much louder but each element/instrument in the mix sounds very well separated from each other.



Figure 5 - Average Spectrometric Analysis of *Born For One Thing*

A smaller dip in Figure 5 is observed between 200khz and 600khz but the graphic is, all in all, more stable and balanced when compared to Immortal Rites. No drastic peaks or dips are found and there is a more generous portion of lower frequencies in this mix while the roll off at the higher frequencies is more gradual and less steep and abrupt. The low and high cut filters were used in a more gentle manner for this mix.

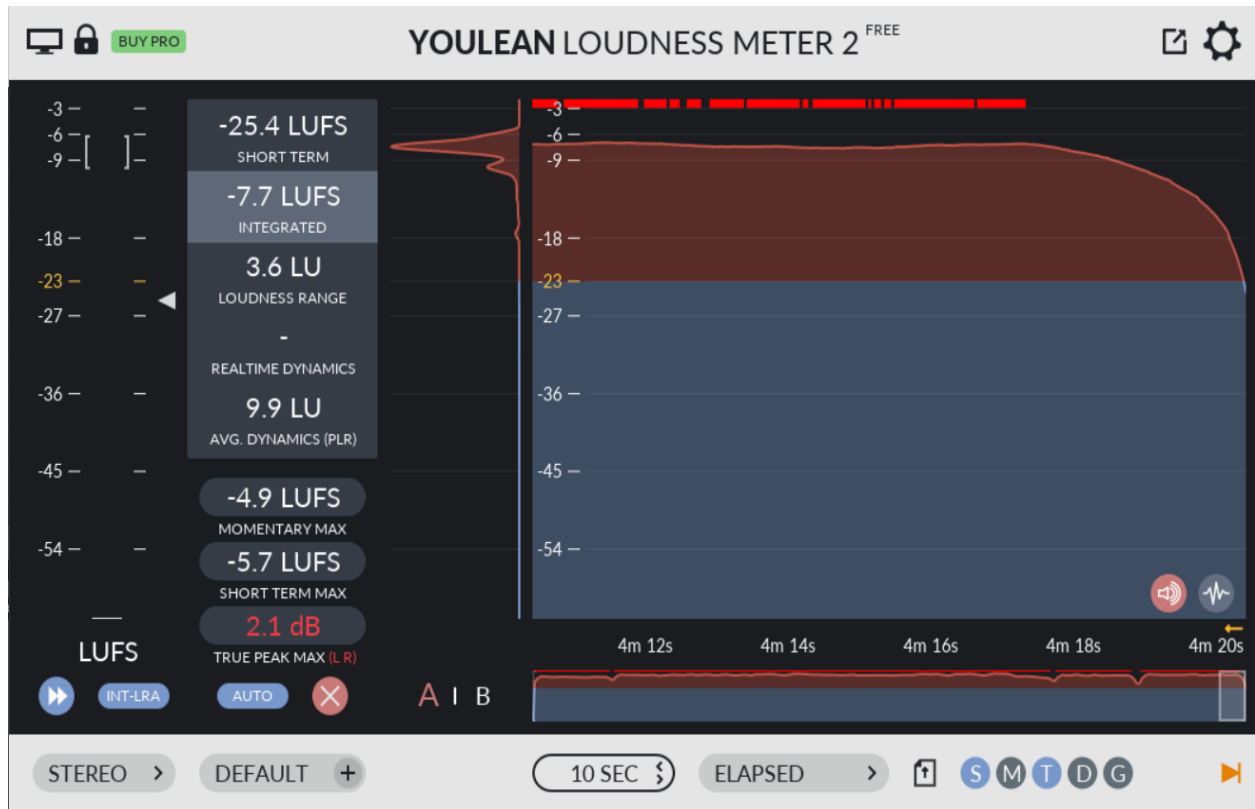


Figure 6 - Loudness of *Born For One Thing*

The mastering is much more aggressive for this track with the track being -7.7 LUFS integrated. The track itself sounds very “punchy” and there was no clipping whatsoever in the track despite being aggressively mastered. A limiter could have been used to keep the track from peaking and clipping.

The album was recorded in *Silver Cord Studios*, a recording studio owned by Gojira’s vocalist. A small list of equipment present in this studio can be found on the studio’s website. (Silvercordstudio n.d.). The list shows a mix of analog equipment and digital programs such as ProTools, suggesting that digital processing is part of the album’s production. Based on bits of information gathered from interviews, it can be assumed that the band recorded instruments separately.

In stark contrast to the songwriter's intention of *Immortal Rites*, vocalist and guitarist Joe Duplantier states in several interviews that he wants songs in *Fortitude* (the album *Born For One Thing* is a part of) to "inspire the best in people." Joe states that he wants to:

"...see people give their best and be strong and to not despair and to project a positive image for their future and for our future, and through discipline and decision and the right intentions, we can better ourselves and better display." (Full Metal Jackie 2021)

This, when compared to *Immortal Rites*, can be seen as a reason why *Born For One Thing* lacks hyper aggression in its mix.

Summary

The clear differences between both tracks are the levels of compression/loudness and the balance between lower and higher frequencies. *Born For One Thing* is significantly louder with a momentary max dB level of -4.9 LUFS as compared to *Immortal Rites*' -7.1 LUFS which can be heard with the "punchiness" of the track. The spectrometric analysis on the other hand shows much more aggressive manipulation in *Immortal Rites*' EQ with more drastic dips and cuts while *Born For One Thing* maintains a steadier level throughout the spectrum. As for the mix, the separation of the tracks on *Born For One Thing* is easily identifiable while *Immortal Rites*' instruments seem to "blend into" one another more. It can be suspected the higher levels of reverb used on the track is the cause for this effect. While *Immortal Rites*' dominating aspect are the guitars, which are heavily distorted, *Born For One Thing* seems to have a more restrained guitar sound although it still dominates and is a driving force alongside the drums.

The main similarity I've observed is the quality of the vocals on both tracks. Both vocal tracks are a bit dampened in the mix and the words are mostly unintelligible, although one can identify more words on *Born For One Thing* as compared to *Immortal Rites*.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of both reference tracks, the *retro mix* and the *modern mix* are mixed as such:

The Retro Mix : Sparing use of compression. Some compression is used on the drums' master bus and heavier compression is applied on the vocals. The overall EQ of the track is carved to imitate *Immortal Rites* through attenuation of middle frequencies on the guitar and the entire track and some attenuation of the bass frequencies. Two guitar tracks and one bass track are recorded and the bass track does not contain any distortion. Plate reverbs are used on the drumset, especially on the snare drum, and on the main vocals. The track is mastered with an analog mixing console simulator.

The Modern Mix: Heavier use of compression on almost all tracks, especially on the snare drum, bass drum and bass guitars. Slight attenuation is used on the overall track's middle frequencies but not as much as on the *Retro Mix*. More lower frequencies/bass is present in the overall EQ of the mix. Four guitar tracks are recorded, with two having less gain, more treble and lower in volume in the mix and the other two having more gain and a more balanced distribution of EQ and is more audible in the mix. Two bass guitar tracks are present with one being distorted and played through an amplifier and the other being a raw, D.I. signal. The track is mastered with a compressor and a limiter.

5 Results and Analysis

5.1 Describing The Mixes

While not all the respondents heavily listen to metal at the present, they have all listened heavily to metal in their younger years and gave informed answers regarding their opinion and how they perceived the mixes. The respondents were not informed on the character of mixes and the files were dubbed "Mix # 1" and "Mix # 2" Each interview was started off with listening to the provided mixes and the interviewees were then asked what associations they have regarding the

mix. Included also is the descriptions the interviewees gave for each mix. Before revealing the references for each mix, the respondents often associated the retro mix to older metal.

5.1.1 Retro

Associations made with my retro mix were often metal bands from the late 80s to the early 90s. Bands given as examples were *Death*, *Slayer*, *Entombed* and *Autopsy*, all of which were founded in the 1980s. Two of the respondents also commented that they were reminded of older, 1990s black metal bands from Norway.

Boris comments that the track sounded like death metal during a transition period where thrash metal evolved into death metal in the early 90s. Boris and Carlos both made associations to Slayer in the mid 80s. Boris comments that the mix reminded him of Slayer's *Hell Awaits* (released 1985) album while Carlos comments that the mix has the *dirtiness* of Slayer's *Reign in Blood* (released 1986) album.

Carlos also makes an association with the band Entombed and to the late 1980s and early 1990s

I feel the other one's in the '90s, late 80s range, maybe trying to sound like that... Maybe... closer to *Entombed*? To what they were kinda doing? - Carlos

An association was also made to the band Death. Lastly, there were also associations with older black metal, however no specific band was given as an example.

The respondents' descriptions of the mix were all near identical. Words such as “raw”, “dirty”, “saturated”, “gritty” with “raw” being used most of all. Many comments were also made on the *lack of compression* in the mixes and the *use of reverb*. Albert also comments that the retro mix captures *rawness* and has a *grittier* and *dirtier* sound.

Rawness, *dirtiness* and *saturation* all seem to be qualities the respondents all associated with older metal. These parameters can be observed as signifiers that bring the listeners back to the late 1980s and 1990s. These parameters render time as an “audible materiality.” Furthermore,

when it was revealed that *Immortal Rites* was used as a reference for mixing the track, all the respondents commented positively and “approved” of the mix, albeit to varying degrees. The most positive reaction was from Albert, commenting that *Immortal Rites* being the reference sound and felt “totally natural” to him. The most lukewarm reaction was from Derek, commenting that he was not reminded of *Immortal Rites* at all, but he understands the attempted direction and that discovering the reference seemed to justify the mixing choices for him.

Some respondents also commented on the attenuated middle frequencies on the electric guitars. Both Derek Boris commented on his perception of older metal having “un-middy” mixes and guitar sounds.

This can be observed in the provided spectrometric analysis made on the mix of *Immortal Rites*, wherein a dip can be observed in the higher-middle frequencies.

Respondents have also made comments about the abundance of gain in electric guitar distortion in older mixes and how excessive rawness of the mix is detrimental to the music. Boris commented on the intelligibility of the riffs.

Many bands have abandoned this super duper.... High gain sound. If you turn down the gain, you'd end up hearing what you were playing. - Boris

Albert comments that the excessive rawness can even make the track unlistenable and low quality. This suggests that an unintelligible mix can be associated, to varying degrees, to older mixes.

Eric expresses restraint in sounding too much like older mixes, explaining that he wanted the character and aggression of older mixes and that old mixes sounded the way they did because mixing engineers and the technology available in the earlier years of metal couldn't “control” the mixes.

I like the balance between modern and raw. You don't want the old rawness, if you can call it that. I think it sounded like that because they couldn't control it, maybe? But when you can actually

control the sound, you can have more of a modern sound but you want to have the *character* of the old and raw. - Eric

The capability to control the rawness of the mix, yet preserve “character” suggests that technology and authenticity go hand in hand in the quest to achieve the goal of controlled yet authentic chaos.

The respondents were then asked what they thought were “correct” in the retro mix, giving an insight into what they believe is important for a mix to be identified as “retro”. Comments on reverb were made albeit not nearly as many as the comments regarding the track’s *rawness*. Eric suggests that the use of reverb also accentuates the middle frequencies of the tracks and gives the impression that the track had more “room” (Meaning the microphones pick up the reflections of the room the drums are recorded in). Albert also comments that the mix sounded “bigger” and that it sounded like “there was more room in it.”

Boris also suggests that reverb makes a significant difference in experiencing the track and Derek comments that reverbs were more used in general (not only on the vocals) in the past than how they are today.

All respondents made comments regarding the level of compression on the track with most saying that they have the impression that not so much compression was used in the track.

The retro mix is the kind of mix that’s... more raw, more *organic* and doesn’t have as much compression. - Albert

Note the word “organic” is used, suggesting that the sound is more natural and ties in with authenticity.

Many of the respondents also commented on the compression specifically with the drums. Respondents commented that there was “more space for other things” in the mix because of the lack of compression and denseness of the drums, and that the mix sounded more “dynamic”.

In general, the respondents pointed out that production choices such as excessive distortion and attenuation mid frequencies on the electric guitar, generous overall use of reverb and the sparing use of compression on the drum track are what led to the mix to gaining these descriptions. In terms of semiotics, these production choices signify these descriptions.

5.1.2 Modern Mix

The respondents have varying opinions regarding modern mixes with some being favourable, others being unfavourable and others finding the charm in both styles.

The respondents associated the modern mix with the mid 90s and early 2000s. Bands associated with the mix were *Dimmu Borgir*, *The Haunted* and *At The Gates* (Specifically their *Slaughter Of The Soul* album). All three examples were active in the mid 90s (*Slaughter of the Soul* was released in 1995, *The Haunted* formed in 1996 and *Dimmu Borgir* formed in 1993). The respondents expressed that they did not hear a very modern “2021” mix although they understood what my goals were and which direction my mix was headed. Words used to describe the modern mix were “*clean*” and “*hi-fi*”.

Derek thought that the modern mix sounded old although he described it as cleaner sounding and newer sounding than the retro mix. Attention was also paid to the sound and compression of the drums and “clicky” sounding bass drums.

A topic that was focused on regarding modern mixes was the use of compression. Most respondents commented that much more compression is used in modern mixing. Albert and Boris have slightly contradicting views regarding mixing. Albert commented that much of modern music is mixed in order not to “scare away” listeners suggesting that the track would be pleasing to listen to, Boris however says modern mixes (and mastering, to be specific) causes ear fatigue.

I'd say that music is mixed the way it is so that it doesn't scare off listeners or something like that. It's been adjusted so that you wouldn't have to make an effort to listen to the music. So that it doesn't have to be an acquired taste. - Albert

Boris also comments that the heavy use of compression makes mixes harder to listen to and makes more “information” in the mix audible, making it easier to fatigue the listener’s ears.

A lot of modern metal is so *heavily compressed*. When you compress so heavily, noise... artifacts or whatever you wanna call it become more audible. There’s more information to take in when you listen and that makes your ears fatigued from listening to music. - Boris

Descriptions of the mix indicate that the attempt to make the modern mix as modern as possible was unsuccessful, but the respondents describe the mix as “newer” sounding anyway. When asked what was “right” with the modern mix, a more in detail discussion was had into finding out which parameters were important in making mixes sound modern. Many of the respondents main points of discussion were compression.

The compression with the modern mix, that was... you know, I felt it like, right away in the kick. That was the shining beacon and the.... And the bass guitar was like... super... *squished* already.
- Carlos

Derek uses a very similar word in describing the sound of the snare drum, the word being *squashed*.

The compression of the kick drum is seen as very important by Carlos. This sentiment is given away by him calling the compressed kick drum as a “shining beacon”. The frequency of comments regarding compression supports this. More respondents pointed out that the snare needed to be more compressed, and that modern drums are in general very compressed.

Discontent was expressed regarding the uniformity of modern mixes. Albert comments that modern mixes sound very uniform and alike each other and Eric goes into detail as to why he thinks modern mixes sound very uniform, stating that everybody had “Jens Bogren snare” (Jens Bogren being a successful heavy metal producer having produced many acclaimed metal albums and sells drum samples etc)

An unavoidable part of modern mixes That I think is one of those things that bug me the most is that all the snares sound the same. I think all drum productions sound identical, almost. It's like... the problem is that modern mixes have influenced each other so much that nobody wants to take risks and sound different. Since everyone can make a really good mix, they'll do that and everyone will try to do the perfect mix and everything sounds the same. Everyone has the Jens Bogren snare, for example. - Eric

Boris added that modern mixes on tom sounds make the toms sound monotonous or sound as if only one tom is used instead of two or more.

Carlos also comments that perfection is ultimately the end goal of modern production and emphasizes the importance of note clarity in modern production. Stating that *the pursuit of perfection makes* the modern sound. Note clarity is also described as important for newer bands.

5.1.3 Authenticity

As the interview went on, the respondents began associating retro mixes to ideas of authenticity and honesty and their own reasons as to why they believe this to be the case. Albert states that a sound dirtier sounds more *genuine*. Carlos comments that honesty is hard to come by in modern society and that he believes that modern mixes lack and take away honesty.

Derek says that, at present, he prefers modern production but preferred older sounding mixes when he was younger and listened to more heavy metal and stated that he understands the “reasoning” behind it.

If I had to choose, I'd actually choose the sound of modern mixes. When I started listening to metal however, I actually preferred older mixes. I thought that modern mixes were.... Ugh, no. - Derek

When asked why he felt modern mixes were “ugh, no”, Derek answers that older mixes sounded more *true metal*. The terms “honesty” and “genuinity” were suggested, to which he agreed, and he also added that mixes that weren't so tampered with added to this “honesty.”

Boris also associates “honesty” and “genuinity” with older mixes and goes into greater detail in explaining why he believes this to be the case. He describes the sound of Slipknot’s self-titled debut album and comments that the mix sounded retro while the actual style of the music is more modern.

Another album, that's actually pretty old at this point, that I think has a cool sound and at the same time still a bit retro is Slipknot's first album. I think... I think it sounds honest and that it sounds just like a mic'd up drum set, guitars, bass and vocals. At the same time I think it sounds modern but retro. I don't know... I think the songwriting and riffing is very modern but I think the sound itself is still a bit retro so I think that album has it's foot in both doors. - Boris

When asked to elaborate on why he thought it sounded more “honest”, Boris describes an honest sounding track as sounding like a group of individuals in a room playing their instruments together. He then uses the band Fear Factory as an example of the opposite of “honesty” in a retro mix, commenting on their reliance on technology. His comments on Fear Factory’s sound are not criticisms, but are simply descriptions of what he experiences their music to be like.

Fear Factory, if we take them as an example. It sounds incredibly... machine like, and that's the whole point with them. It sounds very edited and quantized. It doesn't really sound like a bunch of guys jamming in a room. It sounds more like a product created on a computer... which I suspect is the whole point with Fear Factory. They're one of the first bands to take advantage of technology to make something special and new. It sounds really artificial compared to... let's say, Iron Maiden or Metallica or some other older band where it sounds like it's people playing their instruments. - Boris

Boris then continues and takes up recording live in the studio, where the songs are not recorded to a metronome and have a push and pull in the tempo and therefore contribute to the “human” side of a recording.

The tempo fluctuates and it's not totally quantized-tight all the time. You notice that it's alive and the tempo goes up and down.. Another thing is that it isn't recorded to a click so much, it's played in a way the tempo fluctuates a bit but it doesn't really bother me actually. - Boris

Carlos gives a similar opinion regarding recording songs live. When asked about what he thinks I've gotten "right" and "wrong" with the retro mix, he comments:

It has that vibe, it has that older... that old school vibe .. *the kinda dirty, not super clean*. Maybe I was paying more attention to the performance. Cuz it's all tight, no? It's all really solid... I think, Sean, if you wanted to go that direction, you know, like... Cuz a lot of those recordings are kinda *live*, no? Some of them might have not been playing to a click track, even. - Carlos

Carlos suggests that in order to capture the "old school vibe" as he describes it, the music should then be recorded live with a band without the use of a metronome.

Boris also describes the sound as more "alive" and comments that he believes a recording is made in order to capture the energy of a great live band.

The sound is more *alive*, I would say. I like it when it sounds like a great band performing where you'd think 'If I go out and see this band live, it's gonna sound similar'. The recording is more for capturing a great live band. You do the live show justice on the record. - Boris

Many of these comments tie in well with the ideas of aura, authenticity and liveness. Much like Walter Benjamin's example of the Opera being reproduced through the sounds of a small radio in one's bedroom, it seems that the gap between the listener and the "original" state of the artwork widens in the listener's perspective when more manipulation is made onto the reproduction. The more a track is manipulated, and the more separated the recording of the instruments becomes in contrast to playing live, the further away the listener becomes from having the "in the same room" feeling with the artist. This gap can be disregarded by the listener depending on his/her own tastes in music. Fear Factory as the example and Boris mentioning that he suspected that the lack of "humanity" in the production is intentional and the point of the songwriters.

The need for "something new" is also mentioned by many of the respondents in the study, while "something new" doesn't always have to be exclusive with modern mixes. The respondents seem to associate "new" with revisiting old sounds.

I feel, for me, what I'm looking for as a listener ... *something new*, you know? Maybe.. Not necessarily a new sound, maybe going back to that old way they used to do it, like on tape with..... The band had to be tight, but they didn't have to necessarily have to play to a click, to be on the grid, you know what I mean? - Carlos

Eric uses the band *Opeth* (founded in 1995) as an example

This is why I like to use older sounds to make something new. It's like how I see Opeth. They're still doing something new by incorporating older styles and influences into their already existing, signature sound. - Eric

All in all, the respondents seem to associate rawer, grittier and less compressed sounding mixes as more genuine and honest. The rawness suggests that a certain lack of manipulation in the music's post-production process seems to signify "honesty" and "authenticity" among the respondents. Certain emphasis is put on "liveness" as well, and recording without a click track. Music not recorded to a click or recorded live is described as more "alive" and played by humans. The push and pull of a band playing without a click was seen as desirable.

Positive as the reception may be, the respondents are also weary of pastiches and the commodification of a certain sound, be it retro or not. Albert and Eric both are aware of the increasing popularity of the bands found in their own little "niche" in the music scene and are already considering a departure from their initial sound, although not abandoning it entirely. Eric was even more hostile in his expression of dislike for pastiches, calling them "boring as fuck."

Descriptions of modern productions were a little less positive, but not outright. Two out of the five respondents expressed disappointment and a certain degree of disillusionment in contemporary metal music. Eric stated that the songwriting has become very predictable, and that the productions "all sound the same". ("Everything has the Jens Bogren snare and the Ola Englund guitars" comments Eric.) Albert expressed disappointment in Slayer's latest album *Repentless*' production. He said that while he thought that the songs were well written, he felt that the production "sucked the soul" out of the music.

The three other respondents were, however, more neutral if not positive to the sound of modern productions. Boris' description of Fear Factory's music, which he used as an example of modern production, described the music as "sounding like a product created with a computer", "does not sound like a group of individuals jamming in a room." and "artificial" but he still points out that he believes these characteristics are intended by the band. Carlos comments that both retro and modern styles of mixing are both colors the artists can use to paint with, and that it all depends on what inspired the artist to create which ultimately is a positive thing.

The retro mix also evoked feelings of the past in several ways among the respondents. Carlos commented that, while he did prefer newer styles of mixing, older music "churns out memories" and that he believes that there is a growing market for all things retro. Albert goes as far to say that he feels nostalgia for a time in which he didn't exist yet. Eric comments that the desire to listen to older music or older sounding music ties in with a desire to return to a more stable, less problematic past.

5.1.4 Technology

The respondents discuss their own perspectives on why retro culture and mixes are on the rise and how it's seen as a counter-reaction to all that's "modern". Albert gives a long explanation on why retro is on the rise and why it seems to catch and hold the public's attention. He begins by explaining why he thinks many of today's mixes sound uniform.

I think that the more communication is available, the larger a risk there is for uniformity in mixing and mastering. Imagine that you're isolated and that you have nobody to talk to regarding mixing and mastering... you're then forced to find your own way through trial and error. I believe that this trial and error process is ... more unique as compared to always having someone to ask "how do I do this?" because I think that people discover new things by accident. If you're after a specific goal but you don't have any ideas on how you get there, you'll start trying out all sorts of things and suddenly, you'll try something that really doesn't have anything to do with your goal but you get a really nice sound from it and suddenly, you've done your own thing. - Albert

He then continues to make connections between the development of technology, striving to create something new and the need for something genuine.

I think that in general, people have begun to appreciate craftsmanship in a different way in modern times. I mean... When industrialization happened, the need for craftsmanship disappeared which then liberated those people who worked day in and day out just to produce something or anything of value. Nowadays, everything is done on an assembly line and if anything is going to be mass produced, you're going to have to streamline production which leads to many bands having the same perspective on mixing and mastering. You have a template to apply on every band you're going to mix and master, instead of constantly trying to do something new. I think people these days are after something else instead of what's mass produced, basically. We've gotten mass produced products for so long that people, be it consciously or unconsciously, have noticed that everything has become uniform. They're looking for something more unique. - Albert

Music in this context is presented as a product and it's production has, in tandem with the development of technology, been streamlined in order to satisfy and keep consumers. Once a formula is found to have worked, this formula is used on more and more music in order to generate revenue. Albert also believes that the more communication is available between producers/mix engineers, the higher the chances are that mixes will sound similar. Technology and agency of people appear to determine how producers mix their music.

The development of technology has also made it possible for people to make very professional sounding mixes in their bedrooms with only a laptop and a pair of earphones with the help of mixing tips, information and knowledge found via the internet has made the music scene saturated with music that sounds very uniform to some listeners.

It was also discussed with Eric that, in connection with Carlos' comment on the modern production being the "pursuit of perfection", that we might have already reached "perfection". Eric was asked his opinion about us finally reaching "perfection."

Yeah, and now that everyone's achieved this goal so.... What now? I think that's the biggest problem. I want to hear worse.... "Worse" mixes -imitates quotation marks with fingers-. Maybe not worse on purpose but.... Different. Try something new! We need diversity in mixes! - Eric

This desire to hear something different is echoed by the respondents, pointing specifically to older mixes. Some would like to incorporate the old with the new to create something new.

I guess for newer bands, it would be refreshing to see that older sound. - Carlos

I'm happy that we've taken a little pause from the constant search for what's new... the next, best new thing. Sometimes it feels like... I get tired of always looking for what's new, new, new. We should look back and appreciate what we had before. - Derek

Albert plays in a metal band that uses a Boss HM2 pedal, which was used widely by death metal bands in the 1990s and the wave of revivals from this era. He expresses a desire to depart from the HM2 sound after noticing that more and more bands are beginning to adopt the same guitar tone the HM2 affords.

'Alright, if we go with this sound, we're going to be one of the few bands today that sounds like this.' and the more involved I got in the scene, the more I realised that 'Alright, everyone's already doing this' Which meant that... I felt that we needed to depart from this sound. We don't want to be locked into this sound. We naturally want to incorporate this in our sound but we didn't want to be pigeonholed as a "HM2 death metal band" anymore. - Albert

The respondents also believe that not only did technology lead to a counter-reaction against the modern, the technology is also helping the retro come into play as Albert and Eric comment:

It would have been impossible without modern technology to do this old sound. Nobody would have had the budget to get that old sound today if it weren't for laptops, home studios and copies of the old stuff... simulators of the old stuff. It wouldn't have worked. - Eric

I think that technology has made it more available for people who want to have this kind of sound. I think technology in general has made it possible to get this kind of sound even though you don't have the original hardware available. - Albert

Based on the respondents' comments regarding the role of technology, it appears that the uniformity of music is caused partly by the mere existence of said technologies and the willingness and enthusiasm of producers to get their hands on and use everything that's "new". With the increase of the number of producers having access to the same tools and the increase of the numbers of producers in general, the music scene has become saturated with similar sounding mixes. This saturation of similar sounding songs and mixes has led to a backlash and counter-reaction from the community which leads them to wanting to use older sounds and sometimes, technology.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

Respondents believe that retroculture exists and is thriving because of a general desire of human beings in modern society to find something *genuine*, *authentic* and *honest* to latch on and to relate to. Albert and Carlos both comment that honesty and authenticity aren't so present in modern society because of the seemingly streamlined nature of production today which are designed as such so that they'd be easily mass produced. This is observable and applicable to a wide range of products and goods and music is no exception.

The qualities of a "retro" mix that the respondents find important and stand out are *compression* (or lack of), *reverb*, *lack of middle frequencies* in the electric guitars and the entire mix.

Descriptions of the retro mix include "raw", "gritty" and "dirty". Descriptors that were also used albeit less frequent among the respondents were "distorted" and "saturated". As the interviews with the respondents went on the respondents began associating authenticity and genuinity with older mixes, suggesting that *rawness* and *grittiness* of a track signifies *retro-ness*. The respondents all lament in different degrees on the perceived uniform state of heavy metal music today, with some being more aggressive in their expression of disappointment and others less so.

Respondents' explanations regarding the need for something "*genuine*" and "*honest*" ties in with the concepts of technological determinism and hauntology. The rapidly advancing state of technology enables much more communication between individuals worldwide and with this open and fast mode of communication comes an abundance of information which, according to Albert, Eric and Carlos, leads to a streamlining of music. Technology may have developed past a certain point that it has come closer to a state of inertia. It is also believed that achieving the retro sound is made possible again by the development of technology, being able to capture old sounds with digitized versions of old equipment instead of procuring expensive, authentic analog equipment.

Heavy metal music from 1985 may sound wildly different to heavy metal from 1995, yet this might not be as true when comparing 2010 to 2020, for example (and with many exceptions, naturally). The respondents did not mention so much about the consumption of music (save for a short discussion on internet algorithms dictates what becomes popular or not) but based off of the Hogarty's study, the accessibility of a several decades of old music makes it easier for people to choose to listen to older music much more than newer music and thus possibly coloring their tastes for what kind of sound they want to hear, be it from a newer band or an older and more "veteran" band.

According to the respondents, another factor that contributes to a track's authenticity is recording a band live. Suggestions were made that in order to make the retro mix sound more "convincing" in sounding older, the band should be recorded without the help of a metronome. The lack of metronome allows the tempo to fluctuate and this is seen as a positive aspect of older mixes, according to the respondents.

The study has shown that the respondents associated retro mixes to authenticity (using terms such as *organic*, *human*, *genuine*) more than modern mixes do. The use of "retro" parameters, such as sparing use of compression, a generous use of reverb on the vocals and less processing does invoke and signify a feeling of the past, which is observed with my respondents' associations of the retro mix with older music and eras. The descriptors used by the respondents

to describe older mixes aren't positive adjectives although they are still desired. Eric goes as far as saying "I want to hear *worse* mixes" for the sake of diversity and for creating something new.

In contrast to some respondents in Hogarty's study, my respondents expressed yearning to hear newer bands and artists explore different sounds based from the past and yet avoid becoming a pastiche of previous artists instead of listening to only the older artists and bands. The respondents of this study were not entirely negatively disposed towards modern mixes, although they don't attribute genuinity and authenticity to modern mixes. My respondents see these parameters, both from retro and modern mixes, are to be used as a tool, or as a "color to paint with" as one of my respondents put it. Modern mix characteristics become problematic for my respondents when mixes of today begin to sound uniform and indifferent to one another. Interestingly, my respondents all valued the pursuit into creating something new, even if this "new" consists of older characteristics.

6.1 Method Discussion And Criticism

Several aspects of the methods for this study can unfortunately tarnish the reliability of the results.

Ahrne and Svensson (2015:42) state six interview subjects can still be too few to guarantee proper representation, and considering this study interviews five people with differing opinions, the representation of the interview subjects will be lacking. Descombe also mentions (2014:65) that convenience sampling is hard to equate with good research. I've chosen my respondents via friends or friends of friends and came up with five respondents for my study with varying experience in production and also varying "loyalty" in listening to metal music, with some seemingly living and breathing death metal while others have listened to metal more in their younger years than today. More interview subjects with more varying backgrounds would have benefitted and elevated the reliability of the study.

In the implementation of the study, more focus was put on the data-gathering and result analysis than the preparation, gathering and understanding of theoretical concepts. A more balanced

approach would have made for better analysis of the data gathered as the research questions and theoretical concepts chosen for this study were revised several times based on the information extracted from the interviews.

A more controlled listening test would have better served the study and to make the interviewers smoother. This would have also contributed to the reliability of the study.

The song and its two versions produced as part of the method also has its own deficiencies. What makes a track “retro” or “modern” does not lie squarely on the way it was mixed and produced, it also depends on songwriting and composition to a degree. The songwriting style of the production seems to find itself in more “retro” territory based off of my respondent’s answers. While the respondents still acknowledge that modern mix as the “newer” sounding one of the two mixes, it still belongs to the “personality” of older mixes, just not as far back as the 1980s.

Lastly, a lack of distance between researcher and research and reflexivity is observed in the majority of the study. This can make it harder for non metal fans and non music producers to grasp the study since technical terms and concepts are used with the assumption that the reader is well versed in production and the metal genre.

6.2 Further Research

Further research can be made into the subject through deeper and more comprehensive ethnographic methods in the “culture” of metal bands and artists. To observe and to be present in a metal band’s songwriting sessions and recording sessions can give insight into the meaning making of the artists in regard to the production choices in their music. A more focused, ethnographic approach would have given this study sturdier foundations. By being “in the field” among metal fans and musicians while they listen and create music, one can identify and more thoroughly identify and understand meaning making regarding authenticity and preferences among members of heavy metal subculture.

In addition to further research into retro culture among music creators, a more comprehensive version of this study can also be made in order to create a more reliable source of information on the subject. More respondents of varying backgrounds and more methods in gathering information such as surveys and focus group interviews. A focus group interview with more respondents being able to actively discuss their opinions among themselves allows me, the researcher, to distance myself from the respondents and diminishes the “interview effect.” Different generations have different values and customs so separating and categorizing each generation’s opinions regarding retro culture in mixing could be necessary and can be helpful in tracking and, perhaps to some degree, mapping the trajectory of retro culture’s prevalence.

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