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## **How The Devil Influenced Rock and Metal**

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### INTRODUCTION

If folktales are to be believed, the Devil seems to have quite the interest in music. From the satanic imagery in metal, the legendary fiddle duel in “The Devil Went Down to Georgia,” to the legend of Robert Johnson selling his soul to the Devil at a crossroads. It would appear that the Prince of Darkness likes a good tune as much as you and I. He has been present every step of the way in popular music throughout the last century. The relationship between the Devil and music goes back centuries, but this paper begins in the Delta with Tommy Johnson and Robert Johnson (no relation) and how they both made deals with the Devil, continues with an analysis of how the Devil influenced rock and metal as we know today, and concludes with an examination of how Satan remains as the most powerful symbol of absolute rebellion in music today.

Erving Goffman and Emile Durkheim were sociologists who each had concepts relating to society and how society viewed those concepts and theories of stigma, symbols, ritual, and sacred. Stigma is behavior, attributes, or reputation viewed as socially discrediting. Basically, stereotyping and negative connotations associated with the thing being stigmatized and in this case it's Rock and Metal. Symbols, ritual, and sacred are religious concepts by Emile Durkheim which all represent sacredness in a way because they are deemed as so by how society views them. Rituals and symbols are things that are viewed as highly respected and commonly practiced forms of devotion but if we flip it to our point of view you can see Rock and Metal as forms of rituals and it too has symbols of devotion too. Sacred is something deemed as such because society and individuals in society deem it as so. Now as these concepts are treated as sacred by how individuals and society views them, we can also use these concepts as a way to destigmatize how Rock and Metal are viewed as “Devil's music” and how they are misrepresented and how they're seen through a different sociological lens. With the help of these concepts. But

first we have to dive into how this stigma got started and the person that is commonly associated with the “Devil’s music”.

### HISTORY OF THE DEVIL IN JOHNSONS’ MUSIC

Before we dive into Robert Johnson, we must first have a little backstory that led up to him at the crossroads and another blues player before him. Tommy Johnson was a blues player from 1914-1956 who recorded in the late 1920s who came before Robert and was so good on the guitar that he was instrumental in creating the Delta blues sound along with its accompanying mythology. According to the legend, Johnson’s older brother, LeDell, claimed that at one point his brother had sold his soul to the Devil:

He returned two years later an accomplished performer, which, according to LeDell, Johnson attributed to a meeting with a mysterious figure at a crossroads. The story involved Johnson handing over his guitar to a large black man who tuned it for him. (Mississippi Blues Commission 2022)

Johnson’s stage presence was one of curiosity that led credence to this idea. He showboated on stage like a man overcome by something supernatural. He played his guitar behind his head, between his legs, and using a falsetto voice unmistakable to contemporary blues fans and which can be heard in the tune “Big Road Blues.” Tommy even eventually took up the mantle that he did indeed sell his soul to the Devil.

Tommy Johnson’s legend would soon be overshadowed by Robert Johnson. The infamous story of Robert Johnson begins around 1929 with meeting bluesman Son House and Willie Brown in Robinsonville, Mississippi where they had settled and played the local area. Johnson would accompany them and play with them around the local spots, on some occasions after a gig. Brown, House and another accompaniment named Patton would all belittle Johnson and his embarrassing lack of guitar skills. Son House said of Robert, “Such another racket you never heard! It’d make people mad, you know. They’d come out and say ‘Why don’t y’all go in there and get that guitar from that boy?’” (Compagna 2000). Shortly after crossing paths, Robert left for

Martinsville, Mississippi; two years later, Robert returned to Robinsonville where his ability to play now blew both locally based notable bluesmen Son House and Willie Brown away. By the time Robert Johnson became known in the mainstream, his myth and legend had already had decades to grow and warp. When Tommy Johnson told his tale and when Robert Johnson sang about the crossroads, neither of them could have possibly known the huge changes they were about to bring on, because the crossroads and the Delta blues that they helped to create were not the final destination. Instead, they're a key landmark in the incredible journey that brought on rock and roll and metal. In doing so, they changed the world forever.

### ROBERT JOHNSON'S INFLUENCE IN ROCK

Robert Johnson is seen by many today as the grandfather of rock and roll. That comes not only from how he played but also from his mythology. It is foundationally why rock has been labeled as "Devil's music." Many musicians who followed in Johnson's footsteps have since played with occult imagery, including The Rolling Stones, who were influenced by Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, and other famous bluesmen. In the book *Me and the Devil Blues*, J.D. Wells connects Johnson and the Stones, stating that:

The influence of Robert Johnson is particularly evident in terms of individual values and themes. Johnson's songs, like the Rolling Stones, are rooted in honesty and social realism which uncovers an often brutal account of the world through the expressive characteristics of the human voice. (Wells 1983: 17)

In other words, Johnson sang about what was around him, and what others were going through during the Great Depression. The Rolling Stones and other popular rock bands of the 60s and 70s reflect a consonant attunement to social observation and critique.

Robert Johnson influenced early rock and roll musicians through his musical talent and qualities, lyrics, and legend. Adam Compagna (2000) argues that:

According to black folk culture, Johnson had a number of traits that might have been seen as

demonic: he had a cataract in one eye; he often played with his back turned to other musicians, causing people to believe he had something to hide; and he favored unusual guitar tunings.

Even in his music there is Devil imagery. In “Hellhound on My Trail,” Johnson sings that he became a traveling vagabond in the middle of a run-in with the Devil and that hellhounds are following him. You can also see it as the middle of a song trilogy and his legend coming to an end. “Cross Road Blues” is the beginning of his tale and where he sold his soul, “Hellhound on My Trail” in the middle where he has run-in with the devil, and then the trilogy ends with “Me and the Devil Blues” in which the opening lyrics are Johnson opening his door to see the Devil standing there and Johnson replying, “Hello Satan, I believe it’s time to go.” A year later, after he had recorded “Me and The Devil Blues” on June 19, 1937, on August 16, 1938, the Devil came for his part of the deal and took Johnson’s soul. He was poisoned by a jealous husband and died at 27 years old.

#### ‘DEVIL MUSIC’ AND STIGMA

Erving Goffman was a Canadian-born sociologist, social psychologist, and writer, considered by some the most influential American sociologist of the twentieth century. His theory about stigma applies to how others view rock and metal as “Devil’s music.” Stigma is defined as signs that expose something about a person. During the 1950s, when rock and roll was becoming popular, parents could have a visual on how they could distinguish kids who were listeners of the “Devil’s music.” They could tell by rock and roll lovers’ appearance, leather jackets, Levi’s, and boots compared to the more conservative kids. That appearance of the leather jacket and boots was and still is by some the official uniform of rock and roll, punk, and metal. This was a uniform that both distinguished and stigmatized them. Goffman said that “A stigmatized person is ‘blemished’ and is ‘disqualified from full social acceptance.’” Scared parents during this era believed that if their kids liked this music, they might also emulate deviant acts of the musicians they idolized.

According to Goffman’s Stigma (1963), “most people experience the role of being stigmatized ...at least in some

connections and in some phases of life." At first, those who loved rock and roll were treated as a "blemish" and this disqualified them from social belonging in line with societal norms. However, the strongly stigmatized often holds the "blemish" as a badge of honor, showing others that: yes, I am what I am, and there is nothing you can do about it. That type of resistance emerged in rock and roll lovers in the 50s and continues to be sort of a battle cry of musical rebels today. A great example of this was when John Lennon of The Beatles remarked that they were bigger and more popular than Jesus Christ. This sparked a ton of controversy about the real "message" of the music. The Beatles were stigmatized by conservative segments of society for a while but it never actually stopped their popularity.

#### 'DEVIL MUSIC' AS SACRED RESISTANCE

Emile Durkheim was a French sociologist and was the first academic sociologist. He formally established the academic discipline of Sociology along with Karl Marx and Max Weber, who are commonly cited as the principal architects of modern social science. According to Durkheim, the sacred is defined as the extraordinary, that which is set apart from and "above and beyond" the everyday world. In other words, anything can be deemed sacred if socially defined as such. People who mark blues, rock, and metal as sacred see those genres as such specifically because they have formed communities around the act of marking the art as sacred (Sociology Guide 2023). When rock and roll and metal were labeled "Devil's music," it did not deter listeners of the music. It, in fact, did quite the opposite. It brought more and more and more listeners to those genres and made them even more popular.

An excellent example of the concept of sacred put into practice was in the 1980s when Tipper Gore and the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) went after heavy metal bands and their songs deemed in their eyes as the "filthy fifteen," which included Twisted Sister's "We're Not Gonna Take It", Black Sabbath's "Trashed", and Venom "Possessed" to just name a few. The goal was to make children not listen to them since they purportedly promote violence and occultic activity. Well, like that saying goes, tell someone "no don't do that," and they'll do it anyway. This has

been called the forbidden fruit effect (Binder, Matthes, Naderer 2020). That parental advisory sticker did the opposite and caused new listeners to go and listen to these songs from these bands and any other album that dawned that sticker (“Tipper Sticker”). Labeling the music “explicit” made the regular listeners and fans that much more adamant and determined never to abandon their beloved genre.

## ROCK AND METAL AS RITUAL

Durkheim’s concept of ritual is defined as a highly routinized act (e.g. taking communion, praying towards Mecca or Jerusalem, and so forth). You could say that listening to rock and roll and metal is a ritualistic form for devotees. They listen to it religiously because they love the bands, like how Catholics take the host every time at Mass because they love Jesus Christ. People attend mass or Sunday Service for social support and to rejoice in God’s love. When I asked my friend why he loves rock and metal, this is what he had to say, “Being at metal shows and rock shows breaks down all barriers and allows people who love the music to share their passion with others. I have seen and met so many cool people at these shows.” As Catholics, Christians, Muslims, and Jewish people all go to their places of worship to share their love with God, rockers, metalheads, and punks all go to shows to share their love with others for the band playing.

An example of shows being a ritual is when I went to my second festival, Punk in the Park. I saw all the older punks and the new generation of younger punks like myself all together outside at Oak Canyon Park in Silverado, CA. You can even compare it to those outdoor churches. In the outdoor churches, you sometimes have food and drink offered after service as we did at the festival, with food trucks and beer. Everyone was enjoying themselves, eating some good food, having some good beer, and making new friends over the love of the different bands that were playing that day. Again, much like people who go to their places of worship to rejoice in their love for their God, rock and metal fans rejoice in the love of our musical gods. The fans stuck with it because of the aforementioned community bond over deeming the genres sacred.

## THE ROLE OF SYMBOLS IN MUSIC

Durkheim's concept of symbols is defined as something that stands for something else, a representation that calls up collective meanings. Places of worship have their symbols, such as the sign of the cross, as does rock and metal music. The symbol for rock on is index finger up, middle fingers down, pinky up, and thumb in. A prime example of the rock on symbol being widely recognized and popular was through its use by Black Sabbath. In 1979, Ronnie James Dio replaced Ozzy in Black Sabbath. Osbourne had his double peace sign he would do on stage, so Dio felt the band would not be Black Sabbath without one. Dio many times explained to media outlets that he took the hand sign from his Italian grandmother. In an interview he gave with EvilG of the online service Metal-rules.com, Dio mentions that "It's not the devil's sign like we're here with the devil. ... It's to ward off the Evil Eye or to give the Evil Eye, depending on which way you do it. So, it's a bit like "knocking on wood" (EvilG 2006). Even if you have never listened to rock and metal music you have seen this symbol of rock on at least once in your life. This is much like people who aren't religious and or atheists know what the symbol of the cross is because they too have seen it once in their lives. These symbols are engrained in our minds.

## DEVIL INFLUENCES IN MUSIC

Many people say that heavy metal first started and began with Black Sabbath, including myself. Black Sabbath's first debut album had the most amazing artwork for the album cover: it had an inverted cross on the inner sleeve. The distortion of the image of the woman in the cloak wearing nothing underneath (the photographer mentions that), just added fuel to critics saying they were Satanists and occultists. But they rolled with it and brushed it off, and now Black Sabbath are considered the fathers of heavy metal. To add to the play of Satanists and occultists, the album was released on Friday 13th in February 1970. As we know Friday 13th is associated with the horror franchise but it was also controversial because of the number 13 being a superstitious number and bad luck. Since then, the imagery of the Devil has been prominent, from Venom having a goat head in a pentagram in their *Welcome to Hell* album, to Ghost having an inverted cross

which they call the Grucifix, to countless other metal bands. Many other people would say that the Devil is playing the instruments, putting hidden messages in songs. In the 80s, Christian organizations and TV shows were against heavy metal and against their child listening to such 'vile Devil music'. One anonymous critic said, "listen to heavy metal music and the devil will make you kill your mom." In the article "Heavy Metal Kids: Are they playing with the devil?" it talks about how listening to heavy metal will promote violence, suicide, and Satanism, as said by the author, "The popularity of heavy metal music with young people has grown dramatically; among adults, concerns about its influence have also grown. It is alleged that heavy metal promotes violence, suicide, Satanism, and the occult" (Trzcinski 1992). This is roughly the same thing parents of the 50s said about rock and roll: that it promotes sex, violence, delinquency, and crime. The Satanic panic of the 1980s helped fuel the rebellious nature of heavy metal and gave kids something that could really piss off their parents, just like early rock and roll did in the 1950s.

When thinking of The Beatles, you wouldn't think of Satan, would you? Well, my friends, you would be wrong. In the book *Lucifer Rising, Sin, Devil Worship & Rock and Roll*, the author Gavin Baddeley (1994) mentions this about The Beatles:

Christians suspicious of the Beatles were confirmed by detailed perusal of the cover of their catchy, innovative *Sgt. Pepper* album. The cover design is a collage of people admired by The Beatles, all standing behind the band: among them, in the top row can be seen Aleister Crowley. (2016)

Crowley himself is a prominent force in metal songs such as "Mr. Crowley" by Ozzy Osbourne to Iron Maiden's song "Moonchild." The reason why is that Crowley had such a rock star mystique about him, shocking everyone with his indulgence in sex and drugs until his death at the age of 72. When The Beatles were recording their album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, they were on a spiritual rebellion, because as I mentioned before, Lennon had remarked that they were more popular than Jesus Christ. Because of that remark they had a somewhat terrible U.S. tour and vowed that they wouldn't tour again and be a studio-only



band. In my opinion, I think John Lennon saying that was a good thing because we wouldn't have this amazing album, where they expanded on their sound and experimented with different instruments. This was also a time of expanding on the mind as well through mind-altering, eye-opening drugs such as LSD. So, The Beatles took that label of being Satanists and Devil's music and ran with it, releasing an amazing album.

## CONCLUSION

Satan is one of the strongest concepts that any artist could draw on. From Tommy Johnson's tale, to Robert Johnson's legend, to Elvis' gyrating hips, to The Beatles infamous long hair, Satanic concepts have riled up the public - promoting the bands more than any advertising could instead of keeping their children away from the "Devil's music." Durkheim's and Goffman's concepts help to paint rock and metal in a different picture; a picture of understanding instead of misunderstanding. We saw how Durkheim's concept of ritual applied to places of worship, but we also saw how it can also apply to these genres. As long as art and music exist, Satanic themes and imagery do not equal Devil worship. They are just that: themes and imagery, nothing more nothing less. Stories of the Devil are essential in the history of human creativity and the Devil has helped to shape pop culture. Without the Devil we wouldn't have the blues and without the blues, we wouldn't have the amazing genres that followed the blues pattern. No rock and roll, no punk, no metal, no country, no pop, no R&B, and no rap to just name a few of the big genres.

Even at the 2023 Grammys, we saw another return of the Devil back in the music game. Sam Smith and Kelly Petras did a duo performance of the song "Unholy" to some backlash by some conservative people, as this news article talks about the highlight of the night:

Surrounded by long-haired acolytes in identical red sheaths, Smith kicked off the performance in an outfit of latex and a devil-horned top hat before Petras made her grand entrance in a giant cage guarded by a trio of she-devils. 'Mummy don't know daddy's getting hot/ At the body shop, doin' something unholy,' the duo belted in hellish

harmony as a wall of fire erupted on stage behind Petras' personal prison. (Rowley 2023)

I think the Devil should be awarded a Grammy for his help in the music business, that is if he is real. It all comes back to that age-old question, is the Devil real? As is said, the greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist.

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