



Black Sabbath

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Introduction

Black Sabbath are one of the most influential rock bands of all time. With a long list of multi-platinum albums, and a large number of bands claiming them as a chief influence, Black Sabbath are widely regarded as the originators of "metal music". Metal is a subgenre of rock music, characterized by heaviness, loudness, and morbid sensibilities. Guitars roar, drums pound, and vocal cords wail. Due in large part to Black Sabbath's macabre aesthetic, metal is not just a genre of music, it is a subculture, a social identity, and, for many, an entire way of life. "Metalheads" (a term used for diehard fans of metal music) can be recognized by black clothing, tattoos, piercings, long hair, or other alternative cultural traits. They are often regarded as loners, outcasts, and individualists. The intense, bombastic music they listen to offers them an outlet for relieving their griefs, upsets, and hostilities, and it also reflects the way they see and feel about the world. While metalheads come in many forms, and there can be significant differences, they are unified in a preoccupation with the morose, sinister, and gloomier elements of life. They are also unified by a rebellious, anti-establishment attitude, as they subvert received standards and norms, and reject dominant forms of expression in mainstream culture. These characteristics are reflected throughout Black Sabbath's career, and in the off-shoots they started or inspired. Founding members Tony Iommi (guitarist, b. 1948), John "Ozzy" Osbourne (vocalist, b. 1948), Terence "Geezer" Butler (bassist, b. 1949), and Bill Ward (drummer, b. 1948) were some of the original hands stirring the cauldron of this burgeoning subculture. But an under-appreciated feature of metal music and culture, Black Sabbath and beyond, is their unique and abundant apocalypticism.

Black Sabbath's music appeals to people who have been demoralized by religious hypocrisy and authoritarianism, and traumatized by the sheer magnitude of violence and oppression wrought by world leaders. In their enduring song "War Pigs" (released 1970), Black Sabbath condemns such leaders as "Evil minds that plot destruction / Sorcerers of death's construction." Deploying apocalyptic imagery and offering an apocalyptic interpretation of reality, Black Sabbath attempt to give voice to the outrage and indignation the powerless feel toward the powerful. Their rage is no cause-less rebellion, but rather presented as a fiery protest of the status quo born of suffering and destitution. Like many comparable apocalyptic prophets before them, Black Sabbath lament the status quo, condemn corruption, injustice, and state violence, and encourage listeners to imagine the wholesale destruction of the present order to make way for the realization of justice.

Background

Black Sabbath were inspired by a confluence of musical and literary forces. The Beatles hold a special place in their history, as The Beatles were the first British rock band to achieve major success, and were made up of young working-class Brits from an area not unlike Aston, Birmingham, where the founding Black Sabbath members grew up. Geezer Butler, their chief lyricist, even said The Beatles became his “religion” (Gabriel 1996). Not only did the Fab Four have raucous energy in their music, they modeled an alternative lifestyle to those on offer in Birmingham at the time. Each member of Black Sabbath has expressed the idea that The Beatles convinced them they were not forced to settle for factory jobs, desk work, or prison-bound vagrancy. They said it enabled them to look at making music as a genuine possibility for their future.

The Beatles were also a gateway to different kinds of music. Through them, the original Black Sabbath members were introduced to the blues. Songs by Willie Dixon, Robert Johnson, Howlin’ Wolf, and others, made a considerable impact, and would be among the first songs these musicians performed. Drummer Bill Ward was fortunate enough to have parents that were jazz enthusiasts, so his rhythmic intuition was shaped early on by the swing and spontaneity of jazz drummers. As rock ‘n’ roll got heavier and heavier, through bands like Led Zeppelin, The Who, and Jimi Hendrix, the minds of these young Birminghamites were expanded all the more. Concurrently, they were reading sci-fi and fantasy novels, comics, and esoterica such as books by Dennis Wheatley. Satanism and the occult were in the air in the circles they frequented—although the band has since downplayed the role these sources played in their development. They insist that the invocations of Satan in their music were meant to caution listeners against occultism and not to espouse it (Thompson 1994).

Osbourne, Iommi, and Ward were raised by parents who were culturally Catholic but did not consider themselves religious. They went to church now and then, but these three were not raised Christian. Geezer Butler, on the other hand, was raised by devout Irish Catholic parents, and he himself has said he was a true believer as a child (Butler 2023, 21–23). He used to purchase Catholic paraphernalia, including icons of Jesus and a rosary. He even wanted to become a priest. But as he became drawn toward rock ‘n’ roll and the occult alongside his irreligious friends, he grew disenchanted with the church. But the decisive factor in his retreat from Christianity came when he heard a missionary preaching a fear-based message of fire and brimstone. It struck him as a flagrant attempt at social control, and the disgust he felt in response made him sour toward Christianity and more curious about Satanism.

In 1970, the media campaign for the release of Black Sabbath’s debut album took advantage of the English and American publics’ fear of Satanism by exaggerating the Satanic elements of the band’s music to inspire sensationalist headlines for free publicity and higher record sales. The previous year, Charles Manson had led a group of hippies to commit a series of horrific murders in southern California. Fear of youth counterculture was particularly acute and widespread when *Black Sabbath* debuted. Black Sabbath’s morose entrance onto the world stage set the trend for their whole career. Charges of devil worship, evil influence, and witchcraft have followed them to this day. The infamous Satanic panics of the 1980s created further headaches for the band.

What you hear from the artists themselves is they turned their attention to dark and sinister aspects of life because they felt the popular culture’s embrace of peace, love, and flower power was naive. “Peace and

love” and “flower power” did not speak to the rugged existence of disaffected youth like them. They knew little of flowers and peace.

Osbourne, Iommi, Butler, and Ward all came from working-class families. In the 50s and 60s, Birmingham was a city still suffering the after effects of war and was mostly known for its factories. In his article “Factory Music: How the Industrial Geography and Working-class Environment of Post-War Birmingham Fostered the Birth of Heavy Metal,” Leigh Michael Harrison describes the starkly industrial environment of Birmingham in the 1950s and 60s: “Almost two hundred years of continued industrial expansion meant that residential areas and schools were surrounded by factories, continually subjecting the city’s children to the sounds of heavy industry” (Harrison 2010, 145)

Everyday life in Birmingham, was engulfed by industry sounds, as trains crisscrossed the city and industrial plants could be seen almost anywhere. A 1946 Birmingham Public Health Department Housing Survey found that “noise and smoke from the factories hindered light and air from reaching the houses they surrounded” (Harrison 2010, 147). Having been a key city in the production of arms, the area was completely transformed by the war’s destruction and the modernization that followed. In his autobiography, *Into the Void: From Birth to Black Sabbath and Beyond*, Butler recalls his hometown full of bombed-out buildings and other wreckage left over from World War II. These made for ominous play settings for local children, as well as perfect hide-outs for teenagers (Butler 2023, 16).

The conditions of Aston, Birmingham, where the founding members grew up, made an indelible mark on the artistry of Black Sabbath. Bill Ward said he would lie in bed at night and hear machinery pounding away—sounds which came to influence his heavy drumming style. Tony Iommi’s fingertips had already brought him some level of fame at the age of seventeen, before they were severed in an accident while working at a factory. (Coincidentally, it was his last day on the job.) The modifications he made so he could play without hurting his fingers determined what would become his signature sound.

In Osbourne’s autobiography, he recalls seeing his mother weeping when she could not afford to pay the bills. He later got a job at a car horn factory, and in his retelling called factory life a “trap” he was desperate to escape. In a 1972 interview, he explained,

The society trip in England is that you go to school, then get a job, and at the age of twenty-one you get married. You work the rest of your life in a factory and when you retire at the age of sixty-five you get a gold watch; forty-five years in a factory with stinking oil, polluting the land. I used to work in a factory and I used to see these blokes dying on their machines. That just blew my mind.
(Bronson 1972)

Butler, whose parents were Irish, inhabited a special intersection of working-class existence in Birmingham. In *Into the Void*, he recounts experiencing prejudice from both English and Irish people; even other Irish people would harass him because of his Birmingham accent (Butler 2023, 20). He consistently performed well in school, and, before Black Sabbath, was on his way to becoming an accountant. But this prospect made him deeply depressed, as he could not bear the idea of spending most of his days doing work that meant nothing to him (Butler 2023, 37–42).

Through these four musicians, the heavy metal factory sounds that defined the airwaves of their hometown became the occasion for what became known as heavy metal music. Yet over the years the music took on another name: doom metal. This descriptor captures the darkness and foreboding in their sound and lyrics. It also gets at another of their unique qualities—the theological resonances of their songs, especially their apocalyptic character.

Heavy Metal Apocalypticism

The prophetic vocation is typically understood to involve overcoming indifference, suspending private self-concern in favor of the common good, and assuming moral responsibility for the shaping of history. Often presented as thankless and agonizing, the prophet's task is to warn the world of the consequences of doing wrong and enacting injustice [See "[Prophets and Prophecy](#)"]. And when the circumstances demand it, they are prophets of doom. Black Sabbath are like such prophets of doom.

With their classic protest song, "War Pigs," Black Sabbath condemned the U.S. war in Vietnam, highlighted its horror and senselessness, and predicted its disastrous end:

*Now in darkness, world stops turning
Ashes where the bodies burning
No more war pigs have the power
Hand of God has struck the hour*

*Day of judgment, God is calling
On their knees, the war pigs crawling
Begging mercy for their sins
Satan, laughing, spreads his wings
("War Pigs")*

With "Electric Funeral" (1970), they imagined the annihilation of life which would issue from global nuclear war. The song was especially prescient in its description of a world in flames:

*Dying world of radiation
Victims of man's frustration
Burning globe of obscene fire
Like electric funeral pyre
("Electric Funeral")*

These analogies cut even deeper today given our planet's ever-worsening state of global warming. So too, in "Seventh Star," from Black Sabbath's 1986 album of the same name, the band laments over the impending destruction of the planet:

*There's no shelter from the heat
There's no mercy from this land
Hear a thousand chanting souls
Waiting judgment from God's hand
("Seventh Star")*

Prophecies of doom are usually accompanied by laments of despair. The prophet Jeremiah is typical in this regard, as well as the scene in the Gospel of Luke when Jesus weeps over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44).

Occasioned by dread-filled lament, the apocalyptic theology of Black Sabbath presents revelation in the forms of disillusionment, warning, and promise. They attack the fantasies people embrace when they seek escape from the woes of the world:

*Too much near the truth, they say
Keep it 'til another day
Let them have their little game
Delusion helps to keep them sane
("Cornucopia," 1972)*

They bluntly and graphically depict the consequences of mass injustice, and prophesy devastation for those who make life hell:

*Is it the end my friend?
Satan's coming 'round the bend
People running 'cause their scared
The people better go and beware
("Black Sabbath," 1970)*

*Three flecks in the sky
Warn you you're gonna die
Storm coming, you better hide
From the atomic tide
("Electric Funeral")*

And they promise that a revolution of love is not just an ideal, but a possibility within humanity's power to realize:

*Revolution in their minds, the children start to march
Against the world in which they have to live*

*And all the hate that's in their hearts
They're tired of being pushed around
And told just what to do
They'll fight the world until they've won
And love comes flowing through
("Children of the Grave," 1971)*

*When sadness fills my days
It's time to turn away
And let tomorrow's dreams
Become reality to me
("Tomorrow's Dream," 1972)*

Black Sabbath's theology can be labeled a 'materialist' rendering of apocalypticism. For Black Sabbath and their ilk, revelation finds its source not in a voice-on-high sharing secrets of another realm, but in present encounters with facts of life. Materialist prophets derive their authority from their familiarity with facts. They are believed because what they say rings true. It tracks. As James Baldwin, often presented as the preeminent prophet of the twentieth century, wrote, "the meaning of revelation is that what is revealed is true and must be borne" (Baldwin 1993 [1962], 206). Facing immediate, sensuous reality, a materialist prophet brings reality to bear on their social world. They speak truth to power and call rulers to account. They are not interested in intentions but results. They judge trees by their fruit (cf. Matthew 7:15-20; Luke 6:43-45).

Black Sabbath's materialist apocalypticism fits into a broader trend in twentieth-century theology toward what Gary Dorrien has called "true myth" (Dorrien 1997). Modern thinkers like Carl Jung, Paul Ricoeur, Langdon Gilkey, and Mircea Eliade pushed back against both naturalist and biblicist assumptions about the Bible's mythical material by reappraising the capacity of myths for communicating truth. "By getting rid of the expectation that myths convey factual information," Dorrien explained, these theorists emphasized how myths function "to disclose with emotive power the bond between human beings and the sacred" (Dorrien 1997, 161). Instead of dismissing myths as fairy tales and demythologizing the Bible, these thinkers took biblical myths seriously in search of timeless truths. Similarly, metal music journalist Dan Franklin wrote that metal music "embraces mythic truths" (Franklin, 2020, 264). Indeed, prior to Black Sabbath, Iommi and Ward even played in a band called Mythology.

That Black Sabbath take apocalyptic myths seriously is a testament to the significant resonance these myths have taken on in the last century. The threat of nuclear war and the devastation of climate change have given apocalyptic prophecies a real-life correspondence that previous generations of naturalists did not think possible. I term Black Sabbath's apocalypticism "materialist" because their music refers less to supernatural intervention in history, and more to real human activity and genuinely possible futures. They forged their materialist apocalypticism in the correlation of moral reasoning, biblical imagery, and dread-filled music, all held with an awareness of real-world atrocities.

Inspired Madness / Transvaluation of Values

In his influential work *The Genealogy of Morals*, philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche argued that morality originated as the transvaluation of aristocratic values by the poor. Whereas the higher caste of the world reckoned themselves “good” and “create values for their own profit” (Nietzsche 2003, 11), the lower caste enacted the “cleverest revenge” by turning the tables and declaring “the wretched alone are the good.” The powerful, they deemed, “the evil, the horrible, ... the damned!” (p. 17). Nietzsche named the prophets of the Hebrew Bible as the originators of this transvaluation (Nietzsche 1989, 117).

Black Sabbath exhibits just this quality, as they transvalue the values of conservatives, warmakers, brainwashers, and naive optimists. Sociologist Deena Weinstein profiled heavy metal culture and described metalheads as “proud pariahs” engaging in “symbolic rebellion.” They profane the sacred, defy conformity, and resist authoritarians. “The symbolic rebel,” Weinstein wrote, “makes sure that dominant values and symbols are never mistaken for the way that things must be” (Weinstein 1991, 275).

Metalheads are even known to antagonize progressive ideals of equality and love. Aware of the ways such ideals can be used to manipulate a populace while only creating the appearance of freedom, metalheads tend to distrust appeals to niceness and liberal humanism. Black Sabbath reflect this tendency. Since the beginning, they have described their cultural performance as a rebuttal to “flower power” (Iommi and Lammers 2011, 82).

For Black Sabbath, *madness* is inspiration. Madness reveals what the dominant construal of sanity tries to hide. If we follow sociologist Michel Foucault’s analysis of madness, Black Sabbath resemble the classical Western understanding (from the Medieval to the Romantic periods), wherein madness was feared as a confrontation “with the secret powers of the world” (Foucault 1965, xiii). The madman was a marvel to society. They were seen as a potential doorway to knowledge of hidden depths of existence. They might be possessed by a devil, or passive recipients of ecstatic inspiration. By contrast, the age of Enlightenment reduced madness to derangement of the imagination, rejected all appeals to inspiration, and resolved to segregate and confine “the insane” to mental health facilities, where they cannot threaten respectable society. Subverting this arrangement, Black Sabbath embody madness. They shine a light on respectable society’s intolerance of difference, and sabotage mainstream efforts to strictly define sanity and determine norms of the human mind.

Frontman Ozzy Osbourne is a quintessential icon of the “madman.” His second solo album is aptly titled, *Diary of a Madman*. From the beginning of Black Sabbath, Osbourne played the part of the offense, the jester, the “crazy” one. And Butler provided the perfect lyrics for this madman’s first musical diaries:

*Finished with my woman 'cause she
Couldn't help me with my mind
People think I'm insane because
I am frowning all the time
All day long I think of things but
Nothing seems to satisfy
Think I'll lose my mind if I don't*

*Find some way to pacify
("Paranoid," 1970)*

*I don't know what's happening
My head's all torn inside
People say I'm heavy
They don't know what I hide
You're gonna go insane
I'm trying to save your brain
("Cornucopia")*

*Has he lost his mind?
Can he see or is he blind? ...
Is he alive or dead?
Has he thoughts within his head?
We'll just pass him there
Why should we even care?
("Iron Man," 1970)*

*Long ago I wandered through my mind
In the land of fairy tales and stories ...
Lost in the wheels of confusion
Running through valleys of tears
Eyes full of angry delusion
Hiding in everyday fears
("Wheels of Confusion," 1972)*

*Obsessed with fantasy, possessed with my schemes
I mixed reality with pseudo-god dreams
The ghost of violence was something I'd seen
I sold my soul to be the human obscene
How could this poison be the dream of my soul?
How did my fantasies take complete control?
("Megalomania," 1975)*

Madness has many functions in these lyrics. Sometimes it is escape, other times it is a traumatic response to reality. Sometimes it stands for alienation, other times it is the occasion for an epiphany. But it does not fully take over. Black Sabbath represent the embrace of madness as a process of catharsis, in which their irreconcilable conundrums and crises come to a head, and they openly feel their despair. The clash of

opposites culminates in their mind with an electric frenzy, but after reaching its peak, it gives way to relief. As Osbourne himself said, "When someone identifies with the downer song that I'm singing, they're able to put their energies into the music and relieve their frustrations. It's good therapy" (quoted in Bronson 1972). In Black Sabbath, "freaking out," to use a popular expression, is not suppressed or denied, but accepted as a part of life, a natural consequence of confronting one's woes. So, the very thing for which Black Sabbath and their ilk have been ridiculed, is that which binds them to their sense of self, grounds them in reality, and clarifies their direction. They are not afraid of madness, for they know what to do with it.

Here is another commonality between Black Sabbath and the biblical prophets. Notorious for their foreboding, epic visions, provocative spectacles, and mysterious claims to authority, the prophets too were marginalized, derided, and ignored. They were seen as freaks, lunatics, alarmists, disturbers of the peace, and devils. Max Weber, in his influential treatment of the psychology of the prophets, remarked:

The prophet of doom emerged from his solitude after having experienced his visions and born out his inner conflicts. He returned to the solitude of his home viewed with horror and fear, always unloved, often ridiculed, threatened, spit upon, slapped in the face. (Weber 1952, 293)

Weber describes the prophets' invectives as stemming from ecstatic experiences and intense inner turmoil. More recently, Joseph Blenkinsopp, in his assessment of the prophet Jeremiah, criticized the prophet for what struck him as lack of nuance and uncompromising self-assurance, "combined with a deep sense of isolation and rejection." These ingredients, Blenkinsopp judges, make for "a bad psychological profile" (1996, 146). So still today, prophets of doom, full of pathos and moral indignation, are deemed unstable madmen.

Weber's description of the prophet resonates with Foucault's description of the pre-modern understanding of madness. The prophet is one whose blunt, pessimistic proclamations of coming devastation earn them derision and ridicule. Prophets are "extremists," carried away by hysterical visions, which are little more than dreadful figments of their imagination. Similarly, Black Sabbath's "downer music" (Wall 2015) was derided by music critics as "monotonous" (Doherty 1975), "bleak" (Fortnam 1994), "gloomy" (Mendelssohn 1972), "doomy" (Carr 1971), and "cretinously simple" (Mendelssohn 1971). Osbourne's petrified voice billowed from his unnerving countenance, as his wide-eyed gaze hinted at possession by alien forces. What words emitted therefrom were no less disturbing, as he transgressed popular notions, invoked evil, and heralded a future day of judgment and retribution. Is he a freak, or an apocalyptic prophet?

In an album review, music critic Lester Bangs called Black Sabbath "moralists" (Bangs 1972), recognizing in their lyrics the recurring themes of confronting evil, calling out injustice, and beckoning the world to pursue goodness and love. As another music critic wrote in 1974, Black Sabbath offer a "vision of the awesome dangers confronting the planet, and their eventual defeat by the forces of love and unity" (Murray 1974). Black Sabbath's awesome music captures the awesomeness of their apocalyptic visions. Because the music so poignantly captures horror and despair, like the prophets the subtle words of hope they sneak through in their lyrics are particularly compelling.

So you children of the world listen to what I say
If you want a better place to live in spread the word today
Show the world that love is still alive you must be brave
Or you children of today are children of the grave
("Children of the Grave")

They see the horrors of the status quo, yet they encourage their audience to take responsibility and push the world toward goodness. Such is the power of apocalyptic literature, that in the face of an insurmountable foe, the people are called to action and promised a miracle.

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Discography of Black Sabbath Studio Albums

w/Ozzy Osbourne on vocals, and featuring all original members:

- *Black Sabbath*, Feb 1970, Vertigo, Warner Bros.
- *Paranoid*, Sep. 1970, Vertigo, Warner Bros.
- *Master of Reality*, July 1971, Vertigo, Warner Bros.
- *Vol. 4*, Sep. 1972, Vertigo, Warner Bros.
- *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath*, Nov. 1973, WWA, Warner Bros.
- *Sabotage*, July 1975, NEMS, Warner Bros.
- *Technical Ecstasy*, Sep. 1976, Vertigo, Warner Bros.
- *Never Say Die!*, Sep. 1978, Vertigo, Warner Bros.
- *13*, June 2013, Vertigo*

w/Ronnie James Dio on vocals:

- *Heaven & Hell*, April 1980, Vertigo, Warner Bros.
- *Mob Rules*, Nov. 1981, Vertigo, Warner Bros.
- *Dehumanizer*, June 22, 1992, I.R.S.

w/Ian Gillan on vocals:

- *Born Again*, Sep. 1983, Vertigo, Warner Bros.

w/Tony Martin on vocals, and guitarist Tony Iommi the only original member featured:

- *Seventh Star*, Jan. 28, 1986, Vertigo, Warner Bros.

- *The Eternal Idol*, Nov. 23, 1987, Vertigo, Warner Bros.
- *Headless Cross*, April 24, 1989, I.R.S.
- *Tyr*, Aug. 20, 1990, I.R.S.
- *Cross Purposes*, Jan. 26, 1994, I.R.S.**
- *Forbidden*, June 5, 1995, I.R.S.

*Original drummer Bill Ward is not featured on 13.

**The original bassist Geezer Butler is also featured on *Cross Purposes*.

Statistics on Black Sabbath Songs with Apocalyptic Themes

Out of Black Sabbath's 197 original songs, I counted 77 with apocalyptic themes—39% of their entire catalog. I arrived at that number by counting all the songs where classic apocalyptic concepts, characters, or images are mentioned. The classic terms I chose were: heaven, hell, God, Satan, Lucifer, devil, cross, judgment day, and Jesus. I chose these terms based on their obvious connection to apocalyptic literature, but also for their frequency in Black Sabbath's lyrics. Other apocalyptic terms and themes show up in Black Sabbath's catalog, but these were the most consistent, and therefore indicative of the typical ways Black Sabbath deploys apocalyptic imagery. The themes that recurred the most were heaven/hell, sin/evil, God, and Satan/Lucifer/the devil. 35 songs mention heaven or hell. 34 mention sin or evil. 26 mention God, and 24 mention Satan, Lucifer, or the devil.

14 of Black Sabbath's songs mention three or more apocalyptic themes. These were the most common combinations:

Songs that mention heaven/hell, sin/evil, and Satan:

- "Devil and Daughter" (1989)
- "Evil Eye" (1994)
- "Heaven & Hell" (1980)
- "When Death Calls" (1989)

Songs that mention sin/evil, God, and Satan:

- “Cardinal Sin” (1994)
- “Computer God” (1992)
- “God Is Dead?” (2013)
- “War Pigs” (1970)

Songs that mention heaven/hell, sin/evil, and God:

- “The Law Maker” (1990)
- “The Sabbath Stones” (1990)
- “Damaged Soul” (2013)

Songs that mention heaven/hell, God, and Satan:

- “Black Moon” (1989)
- “Black Sabbath” (1970)

Songs that mention judgment day:

- “War Pigs” (1970)
- “Eternal Idol” (1970)
- “Seventh Star” (1986)
- “Too Late” (1992)

The two Black Sabbath songs which feature the most apocalyptic themes (four each) are “War Pigs” and “Eternal Idol.” “War Pigs” mentions evil, sin, God, Satan, and judgment day. “Eternal Idol” mentions heaven, hell, God, judgment day, and Jesus.

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