Do you know the origin of the term "heavy metal"?



The term "heavy metal" is now inseparable from the powerful and energetic musical genre that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, the origin of this term does not come from the world of music but rather from literature. It was popularized by the American writer William S. Burroughs in his novel **"Nova Express,"** published in 1964.

To understand how Burroughs used the term "heavy metal," it is essential to place this novel within the context of his work and his time. William S. Burroughs is a central figure of the Beat Generation, a literary and cultural movement that emerged in the 1950s in the United States. This movement, which included writers like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, was characterized by exploring the boundaries of consciousness, a radical critique of American society, and formal experimentation in writing.

"Nova Express" is part of the "Nova Trilogy," a series of three novels by Burroughs (along with "The Soft Machine"

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and "The Ticket That Exploded") marked by a nonlinear narrative structure and a cut-up technique, where fragments of text are rearranged to create new meanings. This trilogy explores themes such as control, freedom, and rebellion against oppressive forces, often described through complex metaphors and surreal imagery.

In **"Nova Express,"** Burroughs uses the term "heavy metal" to describe something far more sinister and abstract than what it would later signify in the context of music. Burroughs refers to "heavy metal" in relation to a particular type of characters, the "Heavy Metal Kids," who represent dehumanized and alienating entities. These characters are agents of destruction, products of a society controlled by media, drugs, and other forms of mind control.

For Burroughs, "heavy metal" symbolizes the crushing and inevitable nature of these controlling forces. It’s not just a literal heavy metal, but a broader concept embodying the psychological and spiritual weight of modern society on the individual. "Heavy metal" is thus associated with a form of oppression and dehumanization, a weapon against individual freedom.

Burroughs' use of the term "heavy metal" inspired various artists and musicians, and its transition from literature to music happened gradually. It was in the 1970s that this term was adopted to describe a genre of rock music that stood out for its sonic intensity, distorted guitars, and powerful rhythms. Bands like Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, and Deep Purple are often cited as the pioneers of heavy metal in music.

Interestingly, the use of the term in the musical domain retains some of the original connotations from Burroughs. Heavy metal music, like Burroughs' concept, is often associated with themes of rebellion, struggle against oppression, and the exploration of human experience's limits. Heavy metal bands have often drawn on dark, fantastical, and dystopian themes, resonating with Burroughs' apocalyptic visions.

Today, the term "heavy metal" is primarily linked to music, but it is essential to remember its literary origins and the depth of meaning that William S. Burroughs gave it. The fact that this term was popularized by a writer before becoming a musical genre shows the reciprocal influence between different fields of culture and art.

Sources

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