



KEITH KAHN-HARRIS

I have to admit that when I think of music and spirituality, the sounds and images that first spring to mind are overwhelmingly negative: fundamentalist Christian rock, acoustic guitars and tambourines, overly emotive singing, humourless piety, inane ravers in Goa pretending to access Indian mysticism while bewildered Indians look on. But then my sociological training kicks in, I begin to overcome my prejudices and a serious fascination with the complexities of music and spirituality asserts itself. Spirituality is a concept that has been debased through over-use. Whereas religion is a concept that is viewed negatively by many, spirituality has become a suitably vague replacement. For me, a more helpful concept is "*transcendence*". Transcendence is something that "*the spiritual*" frequently aims for but rarely achieves: a sense of moving out of time, a sense of escape from the mundane, a sense of universality that escapes the prison of our limited reality. Transcendence is difficult to achieve as the messy reality of our temporal bodily existence constantly reasserts itself.

Music is a powerful method of achieving transcendence. Unlike practices such as meditation that take a long time to learn and great discipline to successfully manage, musical transcendence is potentially available to all. Music has a way of stimulating our more transcendent, non-verbal, instincts. It can surprise us and move us in ways that can be hard to articulate. Yet whilst easier to achieve than other forms of transcendence, musical transcendence can never be a permanent property of our engagement with any form of music. Music is always produced and consumed within contexts that are inextricably connected to social institutions and social realities. The mundane conditions from which music emerges can never be permanently erased or forgotten. So it is a mistake to look at a particular musical genre as embodying spirituality or transcendence. Rather, music's transcendent potential ebbs and flows within individuals and collectivities in unpredictable ways. In my research on Extreme Metal scenes I was struck by how far boredom and mundanity characterize the lives of scene members. A transcendent experience of musical pleasure occurred rarely for members and involvement in the Extreme Metal scene represented a continual attempt to recapture this transcendence.

The same is true with less avowedly secular musics. It would be wrong to look at self-declared religiously or spirituality-focused musical events and see them as continually producing a religious, spiritual, or transcendent experience. Participants in a Jewish worship service, many of which I have attended in my life as a semi-observant non-orthodox Jew, may experience both moments of distraction and of intense spiritual attention in succession. One of the reasons



why I appreciate Jewish liturgy is that the rhythm of the service continually changes, disrupting monotony. One of the main reasons why I am suspicious of “*happy clappy*” Christianity and Judaism is that they assume that transcendence can be turned on and off like a faucet simply by setting the right kinds of music and saying the right kind of prayers. To return to the question then, the spiritual significance of music does not necessarily lie in music that announces itself as spiritual. Rather, it is a powerful potential within any kind of musical experience, but one that can only be released with frustrating unpredictability.



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“*EXTREME METAL: MUSIC AND CULTURE ON THE EDGE*”**