

Headbangers, y'all

By **Hunter Pope** on 05/22/2012 01:00 PM

A thick fog settles over The Get Down on Haywood Road. Inside lurks the spawn of the great beast metal. The marquee snarls a trio of names: Shadow of the Destroyer. Mutilation Rites. Inquisition.

This is the first stop in a quest to comprehend the Asheville metal scene. The idea was simple: learn about this underground genre; do not succumb to stereotypes.

A burst and bloody eardrum (flu-induced) coincided with the first day of research, which may or may not have put this reporter on equal footing with the less careful of the regular audience (i.e., those without ear plugs). The packed-to-capacity crowd was raucous, but had clear customs of respect and conduct. While metal has an aggressive air (or what performers of the form call its “cathartic aspect”), the sound that night had a meditative quality, an “om” with fangs. Yes, there was screaming (Shadow of the Destroyer’s lead singer, Jason Cronk, could challenge the Kraken). Yes, it was loud (speaker stacks nearly outnumbered the fans), but the vibe had the warmth of a backyard fire.

This is the Asheville metal scene. All it asks of the new listener is to show a little curiosity. Scrap the rumors of evil and fret none for lack of leather and big boots.

Into the woods

The local metal scene is large for such a small city. It exists under the nose, ready to blast the willing ear. Sub-genres make up the Asheville metal stew: black, death, doom, hair, alternative, sludge, stoner, punk, art, rap and “unidentified” all attract a tribe of like-minded and like-dressed. [Note: We’re going to make a lot of subjective statements in the rest of this piece. You’ll probably disagree with some of them. Fine. But this is what we’ve come up with as outsiders looking in.]

Each local band has a unique personality, contributing to the artistic diversity of Asheville. Read on for a sampling — a bestiary.

Kings of Prussia may be the royalty of the Asheville metal scene. A three-year winning streak of Best of WNC awards has solidified the band's prestige — and gotten the name out for an audience perhaps unfamiliar with the metal genre. A full spread in *Alternative Press* speaks to why the band reaches a large demographic. Last year, the quartet became the first metal band to headline Lexington Avenue Arts Festival. KOP live shows are decked to the hilt with projections, masks and total crowd involvement. "We come equipped with strobes and visuals," says guitarist Josh Chassner.

Then there's black metal, perhaps the most populous of the subgenres. Slews of these bands, huddled underground like dormant warriors, unleash their style in familiar domains. **Shadow of the Destroyer**, along with **Ritual** and **Zero Messenger**, emerge as some of the most recognizable of local black metal.

Other underground bands blend genres, working to stand out from the pack.

"There are so many generic sounding bands," says Kings of Prussia drummer Tommy Garrett. "It's hard to weed out all the shit bands. People and media will start paying attention when you can make a unique sound."

Envy of the Wicked offers an alloy of rap, prog and metal. **As Sick As Us** combines death metal with global progressive sounds. **Temptation's Wings** (a self-described, "no frills, no gimmicks" metal band), shoots for epic with the concept-album, narrative approach. A forthcoming EP, *Bloodshed and Conquest*, follows the story of Krom, God of the Barbarians, and his quarrels with several giants.

Telic is another better-known group (the band is a second-place Best of WNC winner). Diverse sounds (descriptions range from Celtic to progressive metal) along with the serious skills of its musicians could propel the band to larger stages beyond WNC. Metal-heads to the core, Telic remains a faithful steward of the sound. "This is going to sound very hippie of me, but I think that everyone has a different level of energy (or aggressiveness) they enjoy in their musical mind," says Telic's drummer Rob Elzey.

“We metalheads just have a lot of that energy. Anything less than high-energy music just doesn't make sense to us.”

Euro-thrash

Some of Asheville's metal bands maintain admirers across the Atlantic and beyond. It feels like there's a better audience there at times, say some local musicians — in the U.S., many performers feel that metal is the runt of the genre litter. “We're just too goddamn religious and litigious here,” says drummer Justin Whitlow, who plays in Shadow of the Destroyer as well as U.S. Christmas. “Judas Priest got sued for a kid killing himself. Europe embraces metal; it seems to blend more into the fabric there.”

Space-rock metal band **U.S. Christmas**, or USX, comes from Marion, but thanks to its signing by Neurot Records and shared bills with Neurosis (who earned a mainstream audience after a late-'90s tour with Pantera), its metal star continues to rise overseas. USX's 2010 album, *Run Thick in the Night* (Neurot Recordings), earned four stars from the UK rock magazine *Mojo*. The German *Rolling Stone* included the band in a space-rock compilation CD.

So why the lack of metal love at home? Or is it just Asheville? Local musicians say larger Southeastern cities — such as Raleigh and Charlotte, for example — seem to devote more media attention to metal. Asheville metal bands get noticed when touring in those areas, the venues are more visible and there are more festivals dedicated to the genre. “Regionally, I think media attention is pretty strong,” says Micah Nix of Temptation's Wings. “We've seen a lot of papers similar to *Mountain Xpress* in other towns we've played in the Southeast, and we see plenty of articles about local/regional metal bands.”

[Ironically, while *Xpress* labels this genre underground, *Xpress* may help contribute to that status by not offering coverage as much as for other genres.]

Ironside, another big band with marketable credentials (the status of which is currently pending), has had success outside the Asheville area. With a tone somewhere between Iron Maiden and Lamb of God, Ironside approaches mainstream metal (although a side

project, **Gutter Hound**, sounds less accessible). Ironside recently announced a “personnel change” on its Myspace page, and touring is at a stand-still.

No place to lay my banging head

Another possible difficulty for the burgeoning metal scene is a dearth of supportive venues.

Jason Cronk, a mainstay of the Asheville punk community, understands the scene from top to bottom. And he’s witnessed a few metal venues crumble. A promoter in this town for more than 10 years (and currently working with The Get Down), he also plays in bands, including Shadow of the Destroyer, **Autarch** and longtime crust-punk vets **Kakistocracy**. “I’ve been promoting since I’ve been here,” says Cronk. “I did tons of shows for Static Age, Gourmet Perks, the Asheville Community Resource Center and the Candle factory [now the Riverview Station artists’ studios]. All of them now are defunct.” [Static Age Records on Lexington Avenue had to cease holding shows at its former location, but has since moved down the street and opened a new back room for occasional concerts.]

So where are the metal havens? The most recognizable include The Boiler Room (downtown, in the Grove House complex), The Garage at Biltmore (Biltmore Village), The Get Down (on Haywood Road in West Asheville) and Asheville Music Hall (downtown where Stella Blue used to be), which held its first metal show earlier this year with headliners Kings of Prussia. The Orange Peel has hosted a few local metal showcases.

The Orange Peel’s Jeff Santiago has advocated for the scene, and organized the metal nights. Santiago, a singer-songwriter with a roots-rock indie bent, seems an unlikely champion for the legions of loud. “The metal showcase seems the most consistent in success of all the different showcase genres we put up,” says Santiago. “This may be because metal doesn’t have as many outlets or venues to build upon as these other genres. We’re seeing the most evidence of a built-in crowd for these shows.”

Another unlikely cheerleader is Boiler Room promoter Andrew Wheeler. The musician-turned-promoter (he also runs Newfound Sound production studio) claims reggae roots. Wheeler's band, Crystal Kind, played the reggae scene for years. Metal seemed alien to Wheeler, until he started booking the venue. "I'm riding the wave of it right now," Wheeler says. "Metal's done better than any genre at the Boiler Room. There are new local metal bands that I've never heard of. It's shocking to me that there is so much of it."

Judge not

Some musicians feel like they're fighting against stereotypes, and that ultimately limits the genre's audience. "It's a shame that metal gets put on the back burner because of social taboos, ignorance and presumptions," says Dustin Allen, drummer for the local black-metal band Ritual. "For many, it's not about 'being angry' or juvenile angst, but more about musical intricacy and the raw power of expression ... and often classically rooted virtuosity. And most importantly, being very loud and scary. Just kidding," he says with a laugh.

Misconceptions obscure outsider interest and distance potential new listeners, who might shy away from the seasoned fan base and its "tribal garb" (leather, shit-kicking boots, sleeveless T-shirts, etc.). "When you explain to most folks about being in a metal band, it's generally, 'Isn't that nice, you make noise in a basement,'" says Elzey.

Cronk, an intimidating looking person with the demeanor of a teddy bear, knows metal misrepresentation all too well. In his opinion, Asheville likes the party bands, and groups that are more serious, loud or menacing don't draw crowds. Although the Beer City USA title has been good for some, the scene that underlies the win hasn't been a boon to the metal community. "The culture of metal is lacking, and I don't know why," he says. "It's frustrating, especially when people will show up for party metal. People have a drinking problem in this town."

The Kings of Prussia, who claim to "bring the party" to shows, also attest to those

frustrations. "We started handing out a lot of flyers to promote our shows," said guitarist Josh Chassner. "This town's a drinking town and people aren't going to remember five minutes from now, especially if you just make an Internet announcement."

Good promotion is a heavy yoke, and some local metal bands seem unable to bear its weight. The business model for success lies with Kings of Prussia. "Bad Ash, a former DJ with 105.9 FM, called us a 'walking promotion,'" says Chassner. The band lives the metal life, from body language to hairstyle to attitude, and uses their visibility on the local streets. "Flyers solidify the connections," explained guitarist Graham Halton. "You stop and talk to people, you put a face to the name and they're going to remember you and come see the show because you're having that personal connection on the street."

The promotion problem is manifold, but the main telltales are band apathy, the media turning away and occasional band reluctance to reach beyond Asheville's comfort zone. "The metal scene is beginning to have some really great local bands, but it lacks a unifying force," explained Ritual's Allen. "Individual bands (including my own) don't promote as much as necessary to draw bigger crowds," he says. "My instinctual feeling is that this demographic requires more promotional effort (from local media and bands) to build a self-sustaining following."

Wherever they may roam

Is Asheville metal Asheville? Bluegrass and drum circles are what tourists usually perceive as our town's hallmarks. Metal doesn't seem to appeal to most visitors. But it's there, and it's woven into the fabric of the community. Maybe it doesn't "sell," and maybe that's just fine. "There are two Ashevilles: what the tourists see and what they want to see. It's different from what we have here and what we as Ashevilleans see and accept," says Whitlow. "How's it going to go? Is it going to be what sells and what makes Asheville money? Or is it the fact that we don't care about the tourists and we're going to do what we want?"

That attitude laid out, it's also true that metal bands and metalheads are basically a

friendly bunch in an already affable Asheville — at least, from what this reporter found. And beyond that, they're working hard to hone a sound and reputation.

“Most of these guys are working just as hard, if not harder, than artists in other genres,” says the Orange Peel's Santiago. “They deserve as much attention, even though they're not getting it. However, it seems they still make it happen regardless.”

Is crowd-pleasing where Asheville metal should place its energy? Or does it continue its underground push with the faithful? Yes to both. All genres have their poster child to attract the masses. Ultimately, a scene must have personality, complexity and a busload of sub-genres.

Metal will never bow fully to the mainstream. It needs the attention, but it also needs to hide and express its angst-ridden nightmares. Some will seek these edges and empathize. Others will accompany friends, or catch the random underground band opening for a more well-known headliner. Not everything needs sunshine to thrive. The Asheville metal scene can grow without it. Occasionally, a good dose of promotion will keep it honest.

“I've become good friends with a lot of these guys,” says Santiago. “These are good people from within our own community. They're the smiling faces at a lot of local business helping you out. They just happen to express themselves through metal music when not at work.”

Wheeler shares in Santiago's camaraderie. “Metal bands' niceness and the respectful way they speak go a long way,” said Boiler Room's Wheeler. “It opens doors.”

— *Hunter Pope really did have a bleeding eardrum that night. Reach him at casadorpope@gmail.com.*

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