



Breaking the Law? Heavy Metal in 1980s Socialist East Germany

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When In 1987 a cultural functionary of the "Central Working Group on Dance Music" described heavy metal as the "current magic formula in popular music" of the 1980s socialist East Germany, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), it may be surprising that cultural politics is at all concerned with this musical phenomenon. The official further stated that heavy metal is a "legitimate part of the socialist music culture". This positive attitude towards metal is in general rather surprising in the 1980s, since the debate about heavy metal in Western countries was dominated by the so-called moral panics (NACHWEIS). Unquestionably, in socialist East Germany heavy metal was a popular youth culture in the 1980s. At the same time, however, as an originally Western youth culture it was quite problematic. The quoted expression therefore reflects a general change of heart in the second half of the 1980s and the attempt to accept and integrate the popular youth culture with the aim to not lose the connection to youth completely. However, this did not mean that heavy metal and its fans could develop freely in the GDR.

Heavy Metal in the 1970s and 1980s

Heavy metal is a form of music that has developed since the late 1960s, first in the Anglo-American area from blues rock and hard rock (Walser 1993, Weinstein 2000). The musical language differentiated during the 1970s, especially in Britain (Elflein, 2010: 97-172), but quickly spread beyond. The youth culture was characterized by an enormous dynamic. In the 1980s, an intensive and rapid differentiation into other sub genres such as thrash metal or death metal took place. Parts of this evolution of heavy metal can be described as extreme metal, as it marked a prolonged transgression not only in musical terms (Kahn-Harris 2007).

Today, the 1980s are considered the golden era in the world of heavy

metal, which is also related to the continuing popularity among former adolescents (Walser, 1993: 3; Zaddach 2015). In the 1980s, heavy metal inspired many young people alike in Europe, North and South America, and Japan, supported by both the music industry and locally rooted Do-It-Yourself practices by fans and musicians (Wallach & LeVine, 2011: 120; Walser, 1993: 3-7; Weinstein, 2000: 145-198). Despite the Iron Curtain and the consequences of the political block confrontation of the Cold War, heavy metal was also widespread in the GDR. By the example of heavy metal the ambiguity and ultimately instability of the late state socialism in the 1980s can be traced and discussed.

Perspective of the State and Public Discourse

At the beginning of the 1980s, when the music increasingly spread into the GDR, it was initially referred to as "Heavy Metal Rock" or "Heavy Rock", proclaiming that heavy metal would not have any peculiarities, as Hans Peter Hofmann wrote 1983 in the third edition of the very popular lexicon *Rock. Interpreten, Autoren, Sachbegriffe* [Rock. Interpreters, Authors, terms] (Hofmann, 1983: 105). The first officially classified heavy metal band of the GDR – classifying and registering bands and musicians was a standard procedure and instrument of censorship – was the Berlin-based band Formel 1. They were heavily influenced by the at the time very popular New Wave of British Heavy Metal and bands such as Iron Maiden and Judas Priest, and were initially also described as "Heavy Metal Rock" group (Hofmann, 1983: 85). Without question, varieties of rock, as promoted intensively by the state since the 1970s, could be more easily legitimized than the new term "Heavy Metal", even though the music was quite different.

However, the Ministry of State Security (MfS), which had been particularly interested in observing the developments of youth since the 11/66-order of 1966, quickly became convinced that heavy metal was a threatening Western youth culture. The music and its followers in the GDR were classified as a Western and thus "negative-decadent" youth cultural movement. From the point of view of the MfS it was used as a weapon of political-ideological diversion (PID), an ongoing ideological influence by the enemy with the aim of destabilizing the state socialism. As a result, heavy metal was regarded as a "genuine product of PID" still in the mid-1980s (MfS HA XX 6015: 57). In the archive of the Federal Commissioner for the documents of the State Security Service of the former German Democratic Republic (BStU) there are numerous files of the MfS for the entire decade, which document the observation and counting as well as harassment such as regular personal checks or the recruitment of informal staff ("Informelle Mitarbeiter"). The most obvious is the hostile attitude in the objectives of so-called "decomposition" and "liquidation", standard MfS-jargon, meaning the forced dissolution of bands

by withdrawal of the license, the ban or closure of fan or youth or individual consequences such as prevention of career paths. In parts of the country, this hostile perspective of local MfS district administrations lasted until the collapse of the state in 1989/90 (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: A confiscated fan-picture, used to identify fans and gather further information about them such as family background and private life, school/work and compile them in files (source: BStU, MfS, BV Berlin, Abt. XX, Nr. 3111, Bl. 138).

Opposed to this was a changing public discourse in particular driven by journalists, who from 1984/85 onwards offered a different perspective of heavy metal. Besides few appearances of foreign heavy metal bands such as the British Angel Witch on TV in 1981 and the mentioned early career of the Formel 1, there was a clear tendency to discuss and accept the music and its scene. Since 1985, the popular music journal "melodie und rhythmus" [melody and rhythm] had become an essential vehicle for this development. With the March issue of 1985, the magazine launched a two-part feature titled "Heavy, Hard and Wild: Heavy Metal" by journalist Anja Böhm. Subheadings such as "hair-raising", "in war with Satan" or "ghost train and nonsense" (Böhm, 1985b: 14), the article picked up widespread prejudices. On closer reading, however, it becomes clear that the informed author creates a certain distance to these prejudices. She classifies them in the sense of the rather harmless "traditional bourgeois function" (Böhm, 1985b:15). By doing that she benevolently weakens the threat scenarios and offers a different and affirmative perspective. For the scene, the article could be very helpful due to

its list and stylistic classification of more than 40 international bands. The author provided important and hard-to-reach access to knowledge. In fact, in this and many subsequent articles, for example in the youth magazine "neues leben" published by the FDJ in August 1985, widespread stereotypes about youth culture are taken up and tend to be weakened. This development culminated in the interview with the director of the ZAG Tanzmusik (Central Working Group at the Zentralhaus für Kulturarbeit, Leipzig) quoted at the beginning. At this time, heavy metal already was and widely accepted music scene in the GDR besides the secret investigations by the MfS. That's why the director could emphasize the high degree of "artistic perfection" with an empathic look and certify the music a "vital, activating charisma", finally proclaiming, that heavy metal has a "legitimate place in socialist musical culture.

Fandom Behind the Iron Curtain

For the heavy metal fans themselves, the music and the community were the main focus. Hard rock and heavy metal were hardly represented in the five-year plans of the GDR planned economy, which also set the annual production rates for popular music, as well as the few licensed publications of Western recordings. However, this did not prevent the dissemination of the music. To deal with these limitations and the shortage people developed unofficial practices of exchange on black markets, sharing and selling records, band merchandise, magazines or posters of popular bands mainly from the Western countries. The prices, which were called for used LPs e.g., could reach quite half of the monthly income for a trainee. If one came into the possession of such a "sacred" LP from the West, they were repeatedly copied onto cassettes and circulated within the network. The "heavies", as they were also referred to by the MfS, could rely here on a widespread handling of media and practices of hearing: individual and personal sound carriers were independently compiled and curated, covers of the cassettes often extremely creatively designed. A lot of fans were part of supra-regional exchange networks that formed over concert acquaintances, pen pal-networks or want ads out of enthusiasm for the music and almost irrepressible will to cope with the shortage.

The Importance of Broadcasting for the Scene

Another major source for the music was the radio. Listening to Western radio stations was generally widespread in the GDR. Numerous stations from the West offered hard rock and heavy metal, such as the BFBS ("The HM Show" with Tony Jasper), the West-Berlin station RIAS II, as well as the public broadcaster Hessen 3 ("Metal -Stunde"), Bayern 3, NDR 2 ("

Heavy-Special ") and WDR 1 ("Scream"). Another essential source of broadcasting was – and this may come as a surprise – the state broadcasting of the GDR. The journalist and blues expert Leo Gehl broadcasted increasingly from 1982/83 onwards pieces of a harder pace, including "Hard Rock and Heavy Metal titles from the West," as Gehl remembers (cited by Martell & Höhne, 2014: 180). In the years following 1983, the format "From the tape for the tape" on the station "Voice of the GDR" became an important source for metal fans. Above all, this format served as a recording service, and hearers' letters increasingly also expressed a need for heavy metal. In fact, there are numerous of such letters from heavy metal fans in the current stock of the German Radio Archive by youth, some of them only 14 years old, who often wrote with concrete title wishes.

In 1987, due to the high demand, they even decided to create a show specializing in heavy and extreme metal with the title "Tendency Hard to Heavy", which gained notoriety beyond the borders of the GDR, especially due to its high share of extreme metal. In the "Tendency", led by hard rock fan Matthias Hopke and the extreme metal connoisseur Jens Molle, an astonishing freedom arose. For the fans, the "Tendency" offered towards the end of the 1980s, in addition to expert title selection and stylistic range, a relatively timely reception of the recent publications of the Western metal scenes. Hopke and Molle made this happen by obtaining LPs from the black market and frequently evading the so-called 60:40 rule, basically a law regulating the relationship between socialist (60 %) and Western productions (40 %) for public use. Special Freedom unfolded in moments, for example, when "Bomb Hail" ["Bombenhagel"] by the West-German band Sodom was aired. The song contains the national anthem of the BRD, distorted as an expressive guitar solo. The moderators could defend that decision in the language of socialism as a pedagogical gesture to learn to recognize the enemy – what by no means was in any interest for the metal scene. The increasing acceptance and popularity of heavy metal is also reflected in the title lists of the youth broadcasting DT 64: While "Tendency" created a program for the absolute extremes, hard rock and even tougher heavy metal increasingly diffused into the general pop and rock formats like "Hi, now music" [Hei, jetzt Musik] or "beat box" [Beatkiste]. Through the intensive listener mail, which was repeatedly discussed in the program, the radio became a veritable place of scene discourse, in which the musical developments of the music as well as the self-image as a scene were debated and constructed (Zaddach 2018).

Swap, Share, Haggle and Do-It-Yourself Practices

While the shortage of LPs could be compensated over the radio, black market and exchange networks, the access to suitable garments was far more problematic. Apart from a few procurement opportunities in socialist foreign

countries, especially in Hungary, the lack of important clothing and accessories such as leather jackets, stud bracelets and especially T-shirts with the logos of the favorite bands, was difficult to cope with. The metal scene, as many other music scenes in the GDR, developed practices self-production of band shirts and other metal accessories, and this in every major clique and all regions of the country. With food color and persevering exercise, the original LP covers or band-shirts from the West were copied (see Fig. 2). Fans created unique items that are still today stored in the cupboards of the former youth like treasures. Especially skilled painters got orders and could use their skills on the back market and for swapping with other goods.

These practices of exchange, sharing and haggling on black markets and in some exclusive exchange networks were a typical consequence of the socialist scarcity economy, whereby it is remarkable with what financial and temporal effort young people operated. The fact that it was ultimately more than a hobby that for many young people is also evident, for example, in the importance of (technical) knowledge and the memory within youth culture. The expertise was seen as an award, as it demonstrated the ongoing and intense engagement with heavy metal. The transfer of knowledge was just as affected by limitations as concrete artifacts. For example, the subgenre term "Thrash Metal" emerged in the first half of the 1980s in Anglo-American space. Initially it was perceived and distributed as "Trash Metal" in both Germany. While the correct spelling established relatively quickly in West-Germany, the spelling without "h" was still used by numerous GDR-fans – simply because the correct spelling spread only slowly due to lack of scene media, but also less English language skills.

The community of like-minded people had a special significance. Heavy metal fans founded local fan clubs, wrote numerous letters not only to fans and musicians within the GDR, but also in West-Germany or the USA. The experience of music and community in concerts or the discos made sure that the "heavies" was important, by gathering the fans turned public spaces such as FDJ youth clubs into temporary scene places. The most important place of the scene was undoubtedly Ost-Berlin, whereby in cities like Leipzig, Karl-Marx-Stadt (Chemnitz), Magdeburg or Erfurt equally large concentrations were established. In addition, heavy metal was also very present in the province.



Fig. 2: Comparison of a self-made fan shirt with original Western merchandise of American band Manowar (source: the author).

Heavy Metal Musicians in the GDR

The extent to which heavy and extreme metal was anchored in the GDR becomes clear in particular from the practice of making music. Concrete forms of playing and style, some of which only developed in the 1980s, could be acquired in the GDR with only a slight delay. The GDR bands independently and in a remarkable way contributed to the musical language of

metal and went well beyond imitating Western models. The recordings of the GDR bands bear witness to a comparatively high level of craftsmanship, which was due to the well-founded musical education of the vast majority of musicians – an essential difference to Western scenes. Covering songs by Western bands, in turn, functioned as a "substitute" for the unreachable Western scenes.

Heavy metal musicians, if they were classified as professional by the state, could partially belong to the above-average earners in the GDR. However, most of the bands faced the legal burden weekly workload in any profession and concert activities on weekends. In addition, the procurement of suitable instruments and equipment, usually via private classifieds want ads or black markets, was associated with high costs, because the DDR products barely satisfied the sonic demands of the heavy metal. Apart from the radio show "Tendency" of the youth station DT 64, however, the influence of East German metal on the Western scenes was relatively small. Although after the fall of the Berlin wall record deals were offered to numerous GDR bands. Some were able to assert themselves relatively successfully for a short time, such as Blitz from Erfurt. Ultimately, however, almost all former East German bands failed due to the circumstances of agitating in a free and still unknown market, without tabulated concert billings and state subsidization, and hardly any experience, for example, in contract negotiations. Nevertheless, the scene itself quickly became an important part of heavy and extreme metal in Germany (Zaddach 2017).

Conclusion: Heavy Metal in Socialism

Heavy and extreme metal in the GDR meant for many young people first and foremost aesthetic pleasure, emotional support and physical acting, a community of like-minded people and temporary life content, but also intellectual stimulation and the feeling of being on the pulse of (Western) time. Listening to and experiencing music was at the core of the youth culture. All activities were aiming for continued listening and experiencing, whereas the circumstances of everyday life in the SED dictatorship set the limits of the possible. Metal fans in the GDR understood themselves as part of an international youth culture, for which the political was a secondary or even unimportant. Nevertheless, the youth culture and its music always symbolized the other, the hard-to-reach, the West. It is this ambivalence of youth culture that probably made it hard for the state to assess it. Parts of society were – one could almost say, quite in the spirit of the socialist idea of progress – already much further in embracing the youth culture, such as when Schiller's "Die Räuber" was staged in the Thale mountain theater with a heavy metal band. Further, heavy metal and the interest in the music also has to be understood as the consequence of a distancing and alienation from the dictatorial

conditions. Ultimately, the metal fans demonstrated that the parties conflictual understanding of youth culture and possibly of youth in itself passed reality in the 1980s.

Archives

BStU–Der Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former German Democratic Republic).

DRA – Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv (German Broadcasting Archive).

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