

Scream for me, Africa! Heavy Metal Identities in Post-Colonial Africa

Edward Banchs

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As Edward Banchs observes, heavy metal bands, texts, and practices that have come out of Africa have been “viewed as a surprise within the metal world” (2022: 30): “they are a disruption of the norm, a disruption of what we have come to expect from Africa and from rock and metal music” (2022: 1). Certainly, this discourse of ‘surprise’ is one that Banchs has long been critical of in his engagements with and discussions of the diverse heavy metal scenes of the African continent, where his earlier text *Heavy Metal Africa: Life, Passion and Heavy Metal in the Forgotten Continent* (2016) sought to respond to this forgetting or overlooking of metal scenes and histories in Africa, through a travel narrative that engaged first hand perspectives of the profiled musicians.

Scream for me, Africa: Heavy Metal Identities in Post-Colonial Africa then represents, as the author notes, an extension of the work undertaken for *Heavy Metal Africa* through responding to the questions and challenges that had arisen from his increased engagement with academia in the years since his initial fieldwork and the book’s subsequent publication. However, this latest monograph may also potentially be read as an attempt to critically situate the popular and academic response to this first book, and moreover, the wider emergent body of work that has profiled heavy metal in the African continent where, as Banchs’ work maps, discourses of surprise, peculiarity (2022: 57), and novelty (2022: 78) persist in Western responses to African creativity, accomplishments, and cultural contributions.

It is then a tricky task that Banchs undertakes in this book: namely, to understand and explore how African rock and metal musicians use music to express their circumstances “through the lenses that shape their existence” (2022:30), whilst also critically investigating how the reception of such work in the ‘Global North’ is immediately shaped by what Banchs calls “the bias of the genre’s audience and Western-based industry” (2022:30). In the context of a Western music market that has “long marginalised African musicians [and dictated] that they perform ‘African-sounding’ music”, Banchs then argues, there emerges a blunt conflation of ‘local’ with ‘national’ (or even continental) identity within the lexicon of ‘African metal’, a broad signifier that will linger “until Westerners can clear their vision of the exotic gaze” (2022: 30).

These critiques of exoticism and the gaze are central to the praxis of *Scream for me, Africa!*, where the ethnojournalism approach undertaken by Banchs “in order to fully comprehend the localised circumstances of the musicians” (2022: 4) is a notable feature of this work, particularly in expanding the methodological repertoire of metal music studies. Such an approach, he argues, did not operate under the aegis of an applied academic practice, but rather saw academic fieldwork and journalism “[meeting] halfway” (2022: 4) through a research practice centred on active participation, building trust, and the stripping away of “any inclination to exoticise [his] subjects” (2022: 5).

Scream for me, Africa! documents this fieldwork and reflections in two parts: in the first, ‘Cultural Confrontations’, the means through which “Africans are seen and heard” (2022: 6) is called into account through three chapter-based case studies of musicians in Togo, Ghana, and Botswana. In Part II, ‘Political Confrontations’, two chapters—on South Africa and Kenya respectively—explore the political operations of two of the “more recognizable nations within the continent” (2022: 8) to explore how complex histories of authoritarianism, institutional racism, and the desire for ‘new’ identities shape the operations of these heavy metal scenes.

This latter part of *Scream for me, Africa!* raises complex questions of what it means to speak of the ‘post-colonial’, in a context where colonisation is still very much visible within the systems and structures of a nation, and where the violent trauma of colonialism continues to mediate every day life. Moreover, this exploration of the different ways in which the ‘colonial’ and its discursive—and material—practices can manifest in and through heavy metal scenes, practices, and texts is a necessary reminder of metal scholars and communities to take stock of how colonising ways of viewing are also present in the ways scenes are represented, documented, and understood. This is articulated particularly in the third chapter, where Banchs explores the international interest in and response to the Botswana metal scene (1), “the most documented and recognizable in the African continent” (2022:57), and the subsequent role of photography in the consumption of this scene’s practices and participants by global audiences. “Othering, fetishism, and exoticism” were not the motivations of the photographers, he argues (2022:84), but rather such framing emerges from the Western gazes that continue to hold such imaginings of Africa as a novelty.

Ultimately *Scream for me, Africa!* is an important contribution to metal music studies, and popular music studies more generally, in its engagement with and thoughtful discussion of often-underlooked—and frequently wilfully stereotyped

and exoticised—music communities. Moreover, Banchs provokes salient questions about the politics of representation, agency, and Otherness, and the shape of researcher encounters therein, that continue to be navigated within metal music studies. What is at stake for metal music studies as it looks beyond the West, Robert Walser argued in 2011, was not just the “actual reality” of the representation itself, but the context and purpose of the representing (333). Such questions will no doubt persist beyond *Scream for me, Africa!*—of who does the representing, under what circumstances, and for whose benefit—but Banchs here has taken up this challenge, to show how the need to engage meaningfully as researchers, in order to confront lingering stereotypes and expectations within heavy metal, will be vital to the genre’s ongoing evolution.

Endnote

(1) The metal scene in Botswana, as Banchs explores, was drawn into widespread global attention in the early 2010s through the circulation of Frank Marshall’s 2011 photographic series *Visions of Renegades*, where one such image—‘Trooper’—forms the cover of this book.

References

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