

Is

**HEAVY
METAL**

queer?



Angela D'Alessandro

ATTN ALL HEADBANGERS:

Heavy metal is inherently **queer**. The word "queer" has a long history of different meanings that have historically been regarded as negative. In 1513, queer was defined as "strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric"¹. With this understanding, the origins of heavy metal can absolutely be described as queer. Heavy metal is strange, it breaks the rules of "normal" music and pushes the sonic and visual boundaries of what a musical genre can do.

Heavy metal's toxic masculine facade can be considered just one aspect of the many subcultures of the genre as a whole. If you explore the deep cuts, this genre has been a haven for LGBTQ people to express themselves. "It stands as an example of the kinds of imaginative transformations and rebuttals people produce from within such oppressive systems."². Take Judas Priest for example; they wrote songs about cruising and dressed up in S&M attire in the 1970's (page 3). This was decades before their frontman, Rob Halford, publicly came out as gay but he used Judas Priest as a creative outlet to express his true identity.

The culture of this genre caters to people who feel outcasted by society at large. A failure of the capitalist heteropatriarchal norms, perhaps. Heavy metal can project utopian fantasies because it takes the opportunity to push boundaries and reject norms. Living out the failures of modern society. Jose Munoz talks about the "connection between queers and failure in terms of a utopian 'rejection of pragmatism' and refusal of societal norms."³ We can reframe failure and look at it as liberation from the norm. Heavy metal is liberated from the radio-friendly constraints and positions itself in boundary pushing territory. Some of the most iconic bands in heavy metal's history have had members who identify as LGBTQ. The ethos of heavy metal is inherently queer, but we also see queer people sharing their experiences in this art form.




JUDAS PRIEST

Rob Halford has been the frontman of Judas Priest since 1973, where he felt like it was the "first real chance to express himself artistically."⁴ During the early years, he struggled with his sexuality as he was creating and coming into this heavy metal culture. Halford suppressed his sexuality for almost 25 years in fear of losing fans or negatively affecting his band mates.

The leather and studs image was cemented into heavy metal culture by Judas Priest. By the cis het male fans it was, and still is, considered to be an attribute of traditional masculinity. Rob Halford confirms that this style choice was an attempt to revamp their image and project more intensity, not to bring gay culture into the band's image. Skeptical fans wonder about the clear connections to this style and the British gay club culture and S&M. Regardless of the intentions behind this rebranding, Halford's influence on the performance of heavy metal was monumental.

Halford came out as gay in 1998. His legacy as a gay man who basically founded heavy metal helped to create a sense of normalcy for queer themes and experiences in this culture. Halford's art opened spaces for queer people in a culture that also clung to themes of brutal heteromascularity. Rob Halford is the self-identified "stately-homo of heavy metal"⁵.

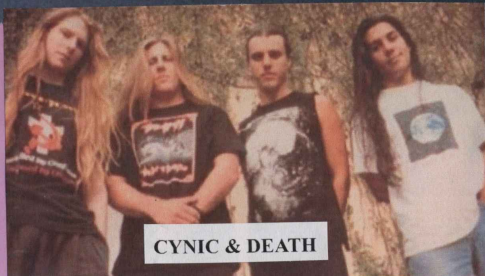


HELLBENT FOR LEATHER

Seek him here, seek him on the highway
Never knowing when he'll appear
All await, engine is ticking over
Hear the roar as they sense the fear
Wheels! a glint of steel and a flash of light!
Screams! from a streak of fire as he strikes!
Hell bent, hell bent for leather
Hell bent, hell bent for leather
Black as night, faster than a shadow
Crimson flare from a raging sun
An exhibition, of sheer precision
Yet no one knows from where he comes
Fools! self destruct cannot take that crown

Dreams! crash one by one to the ground
Hell bent, hell bent for leather
Hell bent, hell bent for leather
There's many who tried to prove that they're faster
But they didn't last and they died as they tried
There's many who tried to prove that they're faster
But they didn't last and they died as they tried
Hell bent, hell bent for leather
Hell bent, hell bent for leather
Hell bent, hell bent for leather
Hell bent, hell bent for leather





CYNIC & DEATH

Paul Masvidal and Sean Reinert were members of Cynic and Death; both influential bands in heavy metal's history. The queer nature of both these bands can be seen in their divergence from the expectations of metal and rock fans. Masvidal and Reinert did not publicly come out as gay until 2014, but both were influential members in the progressive rock genre. When asked about LGBTQ acceptance in the metal scene, Masvidal equates his gay identity to his ethos as a musician.

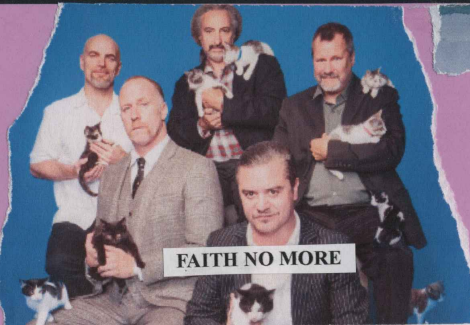
"The thing is that [Cynic was] outsiders. We were always outsiders as a metal band, not only sonically with our influences coming at it from a totally different direction, but we never wore the masculine badge as being tough guys or any of that. We oftentimes wore very colorful clothes, so we were just a little more eccentric and kind of outside the box."⁵

Sean Reinert opened up about his struggles as a young gay man in the 1990's, saying that there weren't enough gay male role models for him. By the time they came out in 2014, the two felt that the metal fans had evolved enough to be accepting and relate to their queer identities, especially with new generations of open minded fans discovering their music. As for the homophobes out there, Reinert declared "If you have a problem with that, then throw out our records. That's your problem, not mine."⁶



Death was formed in 1984 by Chuck Schuldiner and is considered to be the pioneering force behind, you guessed it, **death metal**. The band's 1991 album "Human" was the only one to feature Masvidal and Reinert, which brought an interesting dynamic to the music. The band's politics were always about not being confined to the forced brutality and machismo themes of metal because they wanted to defy expectations of what metal should be. Although Schuldiner is considered to be one of the forefathers of death metal, he spent his career fighting against the culture-at-large expectations of what he was supposed to sound and look like.



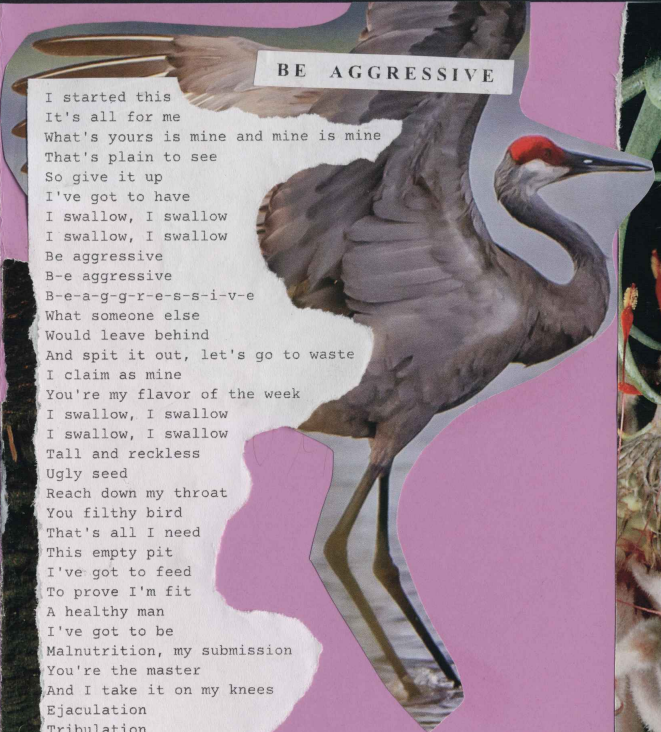


FAITH NO MORE

Faith No More is recognized among metal fans as a boundary-pushing, provocative, brutal and absolutely iconic band. They changed the world's perception of what a rock band could be. Roddy Bottum is the keyboardist for Faith No More and he came out as gay in 1993, before Halford, which makes him the first openly gay rockstar.

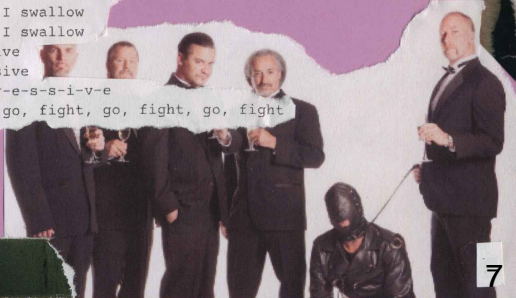
Faith No More released their most powerful album entitled "Angel Dust" in 1992. Bottum wrote a song called "Be Aggressive" that has a chorus mimicking a cheerleader chant and the lyrics are clearly gay (page 7 "It's about swallowing.") They wanted to break the heterosexual tropes of metal lyrics and recognize the homosexual infatuations that no one talks about. Bottum believes that everyone has more than one sexuality in them, "It's just that the special people let the homosexual elements surface."

Today, Bottum also releases music categorized as gay hymnals under the name MANONMAN with his boyfriend. They use this music project to connect LGBTQ+ people worldwide through a pen pal program and a newsletter.



BE AGGRESSIVE

I started this
It's all for me
What's yours is mine and mine is mine
That's plain to see
So give it up
I've got to have
I swallow, I swallow
I swallow, I swallow
Be aggressive
B-e aggressive
B-e-a-g-g-r-e-s-s-i-v-e
What someone else
Would leave behind
And spit it out, let's go to waste
I claim as mine
You're my flavor of the week
I swallow, I swallow
I swallow, I swallow
Tall and reckless
Ugly seed
Reach down my throat
You filthy bird
That's all I need
This empty pit
I've got to feed
To prove I'm fit
A healthy man
I've got to be
Malnutrition, my submission
You're the master
And I take it on my knees
Ejaculation
Tribulation
I swallow, I swallow
I swallow, I swallow
Be aggressive
B-e aggressive
B-e-a-g-g-r-e-s-s-i-v-e
Go, fight, go, fight, go, fight, go, fight
Win



¹ University of Pittsburgh, Keyword Project: Queer:
http://keywords.pitt.edu/keywords_defined/queer.html

² Walser, Robert, *Forging Masculinity*, "The Gender and Media Reader" 575.

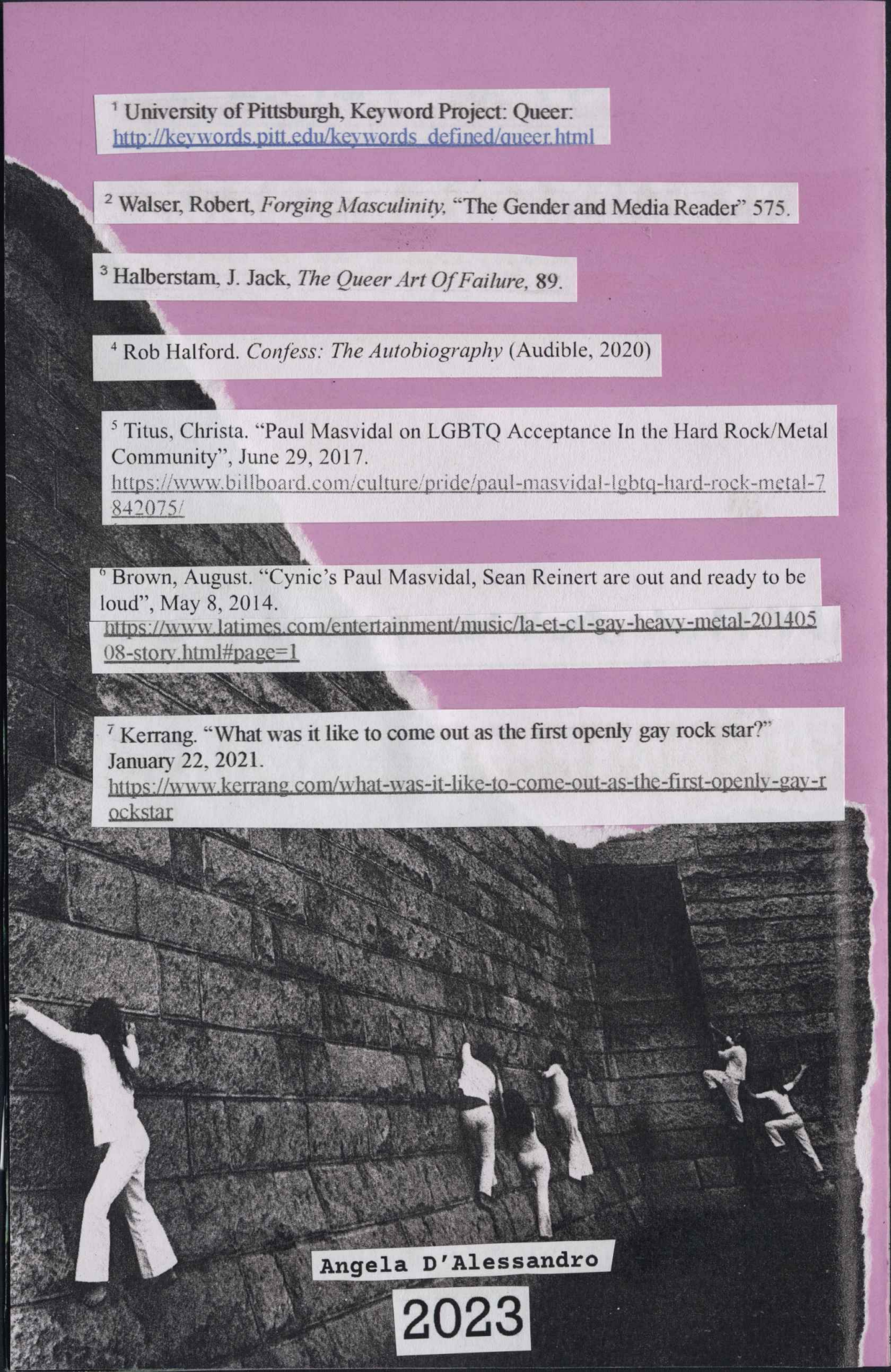
³ Halberstam, J. Jack, *The Queer Art Of Failure*, 89.

⁴ Rob Halford. *Confess: The Autobiography* (Audible, 2020)

⁵ Titus, Christa. "Paul Masvidal on LGBTQ Acceptance In the Hard Rock/Metal Community", June 29, 2017.
<https://www.billboard.com/culture/pride/paul-masvidal-lgbtq-hard-rock-metal-7842075/>

⁶ Brown, August. "Cynic's Paul Masvidal, Sean Reinert are out and ready to be loud", May 8, 2014.
<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/la-et-cl-gay-heavy-metal-20140508-story.html#page=1>

⁷ Kerrang. "What was it like to come out as the first openly gay rock star?"
January 22, 2021.
<https://www.kerrang.com/what-was-it-like-to-come-out-as-the-first-openly-gay-rockstar>



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