

METALHEADS CHARACTERISTICS: SOME STATISTICS FROM THE MAIN FRENCH METAL EVENT (HELLFEST)

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Abstract

What is it that characterises metal music enthusiasts, sociologically speaking? Over the last twenty years this question has been asked in numerous field surveys looking to provide possible answers. More often than not however, these studies have used qualitative methods, with samples of just a few people. There have been very few quantitative surveys using a broader canvas, and giving a better understanding of metal enthusiasts and their behaviour²⁹. With a view to rectifying this research blind spot, our contribution draws on results obtained from a survey of a sample of 8,700 participants at Hellfest (2011), the main French metal music festival. We also look at these results through the lens of an ethnographic survey.

Introduction

Any musical work follows social codes and *'there is nothing for example which, as much as musical tastes, allows us to affirm our 'class', nothing by means of which we are so infallibly classified'*³⁰ (Bourdieu, 1984). When it comes to musical proclivities, 'metal', as part of popular culture and as a musical style, is far removed from socially dominant tastes such as classical music, or even to a certain extent jazz (Coulangeon, 2010).

Taking this as our starting point, what is it that characterises metal-music enthusiasts in France, sociologically speaking (in terms of their social makeup)? Is there, as Bourdieu hypothesises in his cultural model (Bourdieu, 1984), a shared ancestry between the social position of listeners and the music they listen to? This question has often been asked, and numerous studies have suggested possible answers over the last twenty years. More often than not however, these surveys have used qualitative methods (interviews, observations) when focusing on metal. Studies covering larger numbers of people have usually, on the other hand, had a generalist focus (they concern the cultural practices or musical tastes of the population as a whole) and only enabled a very restricted amount of data to be collected on metal. As such, very few quantitative studies have been conducted using a wide selection of people interested in metal music. Our contribution to the question draws on an innovative set of results obtained by questioning a sample of 8,700 participants at the main French heavy metal festival, Hellfest. This figure was made up of almost a third of all attendees at the event that year, in 2011. The questions asked fo-

²⁹ Nevertheless this includes Hein (2003), which focuses on a population of amateur or semi-professional musicians practicing music, such as Roccor (2000). If it is based on Brown's study (2011), a lot of quantitative work done in psychology does not measure the distribution of metal fans according to their social origin, but rather the effects of listening to metal music and / or its lyrics on listeners.

³⁰ *'il n'y a rien par exemple qui, autant que les go ts en musique, permette d'affirmer sa "classe", rien par quoi on soit aussi infailliblement class '* Bourdieu, 1984.

cused both on how the survey subjects interact with metal (musical preferences, ways of listening and lifestyles) and their social make-up (age, gender, level of education, professional status, parents' professions etc.).

Methodological approach

With the support of the event organisers (*Hellfest Productions*), those French festival goers who had attended Hellfest at least once before were asked to complete a questionnaire comprising around forty questions. The questionnaire was made available online via a permalink on the festival internet site (<http://www.hellfest.fr>). With online purchases the most common method of obtaining festival passes, this was the method chosen to distribute the survey. This also meant that the number of respondents didn't need to be limited quantitatively. Over a period of two and a half months between 15 March and the end of May 2011, over 8,700 usable questionnaires were filled in (this was the first festival-related survey of this size to be conducted in France). The questions (numerical, closed, text, etc.) were designed around three main themes: relationships to 'extreme' music; practical aspects of life during the festival; the social characteristics of the respondents. The very low number of questionnaires (around ten) that were filled in with absurd or whimsical information such as giving 1666, the year of the Great Fire of London, and a mythically satanic act such as a date of birth, would seem to indicate that the respondents took it to heart to answer the survey conscientiously. An analysis of the regional daily press, the national press, metal music internet sites and anti-Hellfest sites was carried out as of 2010. Interviews with those in charge at Hellfest Productions and the Clisson tourist office were also conducted between 2010 and 2012.

Hellfest and the meaning of the festival

Running for three days every June since 2006 in the small town of Clisson (10,000 inhabitants) in the west of France, Hellfest is a festival for what is termed 'extreme' music by the organisers (a non-profit organisation with around ten staff members). It is in fact a heavymetal and hard rock music event (along with some punk and hardcore) at which over a hundred groups, some of whom are known around the world (Kiss, Scorpions, Motörhead, Alice Cooper, Slayer, Guns & Roses, Deep Purple, Black Sabbath and Iron Maiden being among the most famous), play concerts from morning until late at night. Increasing from 20,000 attendees in 2006 to almost 115,000 in 2013 (with around 25% coming from abroad, according to the organisers), Hellfest – 'now playing with the big boys'³¹ – is the biggest metal-music festival in France in terms of numbers of festival goers and groups playing: '*Forced into exile in Belgium and Germany for many years, French fans of heavy metal can finally raise hell within their own borders*'³². While concerts and festivals, independent magazines, metal bands, record labels, music-loving fans and so on make up what could be defined as the '*champ*' (Bourdieu, 1984, 1991) of metal, or a '*sous-champ*' of particularly French cultural production (Guibert, Hein, 2006), the present analysis is focused solely on Hellfest.

³¹ *Ouest-France*, 'Le Hellfest s'installe dans la cour des grands', 18 June 2012.

³² Our translation of: 'Longtemps obligés de s'exiler l'été en Belgique, en Angleterre ou en Allemagne, les fans français de heavy metal peuvent enfin vivre chez eux une saison en enfer.' *Le Monde*, 'La France, terre d'accueil des festivals de heavy metal', Culture section, 17 June 2011. Other 'metal' music festivals are organised in Vannes, Paris, Toulouse and Strasbourg, among others, but none is able to rival the success of Hellfest (in terms of media coverage, numbers of groups and numbers of festival goers).

For festival goers Hellfest is above all 'a way for fans to get to see their favourite groups'³³. In other words, what attracts people to the event is above all 'metal' music (87.4% selected this answer in a questionnaire filled in by 9,000 festival goers between March and June 2011). 'Not being judged' and 'mixing with other fans'³⁴ were two other popular responses, with 65.7% and 61% of respondents selecting them respectively. This sense of community is expressed through an unashamed love of 'metal' music in general, above and beyond its different variants, rather than shared social characteristics such as social background, profession or even age, the idea being to distinguish oneself from the majority of the general population, who often, do not like heavy metal (Donnat, 2008)³⁵.

Only 87 festival goers (1% of the sample) say that they go to Hellfest 'in all seriousness to celebrate values such as Satanism and death'³⁶ and of course such declarations must be treated with a certain amount of scepticism in as much as it can be tempting to exaggerate with such subject matter.

An over-representation of 'higher' professions and social categories and those who have gained a higher education degree

Heavy metal music encompasses 'a multitude of musical genres and sub-genres the roots of which stretch back to the end of the 1960s'³⁷ (Guibert, Hein, 2006). Now past its fortieth birthday, it has not (yet?), as a musical style, been subjected to the cyclical phenomena affecting so many categories of cultural productions through, for example, the intermediary of symbolic re-coding. While technically demanding and elitist (in the technical sense of the term), heavy metal remains part of popular culture, unlike jazz or classical music, which represent fully-fledged domains of high culture all in themselves. However the social heterogeneity of the audience at Hellfest, confirmed in the results of the questionnaire, adds credence to the idea that metal is not, in fact, particularly representative of exclusively working-class tastes.

Using standard variables common to this type of study, the main trends from the responses to the questionnaire allow us to arrive at an interpretation of the social characteristics of the festival goers. As such, more than 4/5^{ths} (81 %) are men, attesting to the very gendered-orientated nature of this musical genre. The 'highest level of qualifications achieved'³⁸ section – which, however, does need to be understood in the light of the average age of festival goers (over 26 - see below) – shows that metal fans are generally well-qualified. Almost 70 % of surveys were completed by people with, at the very least, a baccalaureate or higher diploma (BTS/IUT - technical diplomas awarded after a 2-year post-baccalaureate course -, a *licence* or undergraduate degree, masters, engineer-

³³ Our translation of: '*permettre aux fans d'écouter leurs groupes favoris*' Questionnaire, 2011.

³⁴ Our translation of: '*Ne pas être juger*' and '*se regrouper entre fans*' Questionnaire, 2011.

³⁵ According to the French Ministry of Culture survey on French cultural practices (Donnat, 2008), [<http://www.pratiquesculturelles.culture.gouv.fr/>], heavy metal is the most hated musical genre among those aged over 15 (more than 50% say that they hate this musical genre most of all).

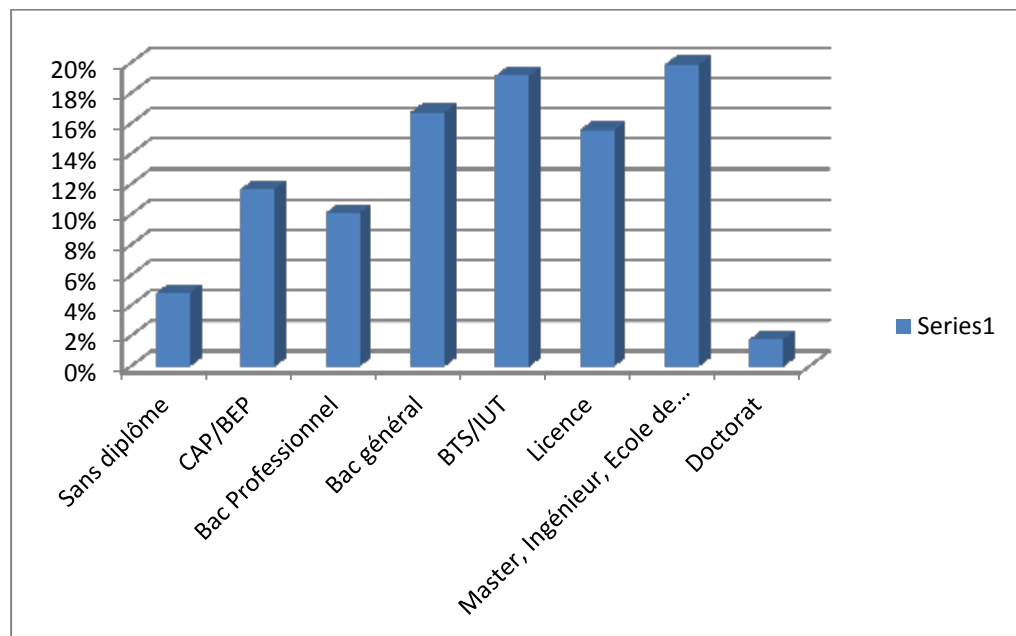
³⁶ Our translation of: '*célébrer avec sérieux des valeurs comme le satanisme et la mort*' Questionnaire, 2011

³⁷ Our translation of: '*une multitude de genres et de sous-genres musicaux dont les racines plongent à la fin des années 1960*' (Guibert, Hein, 2006). 'There are today more than seventy genres and sub-genres that fall within this vast musical family and this is without taking account of the fact that this affiliation is never exclusively due to musical register but also results from social, aesthetic, geographical, media, economic and cultural conditions. Indeed, this makes any definition of heavy metal particularly complex, even impossible'. Our translation of: '*On compte aujourd'hui plus de soixante-dix genres et sous-genres affiliés à cette vaste famille musicale. Sans compter que cette appartenance ne relève, en outre, jamais exclusivement du seul registre musical. Elle procède également de conditions sociales, esthétiques, géographiques, médiatiques, économiques et culturelles. Ce qui rend toute définition du metal particulièrement complexe, sinon impossible.*' (Guibert, Hein, 2006).

³⁸ Our translation of: '*plus haut niveau de diplôme obtenu*' Questionnaire, 2011

ing and so on). Festival goers with a CAP/BEP (minimum vocational qualification), a professional baccalaureate (the next level of vocational qualification) or 'no specified qualifications' (*sans diplôme*) only make up 25.3% of respondents compared to 46% of the French population as a whole³⁹. Hellfest, like rock concerts, is attended by audiences whose cultural capital, as individuals, is statistically pretty high. This analysis supports the results of the survey carried out by the French Ministry of Culture (Donnat, 2008). Regarding attendance of choreographed and musical performances – and if the variable of age is excluded – rock concerts are among those performances which are attended by a high proportion of people with a higher diploma, higher than that of pop concert audiences and on a par with jazz but lower than those attending classical music concerts (Lacroix, 2011).

Figure 1: Distribution of festival goers according to highest level of qualification obtained (Source: Questionnaire, 2011). See above paragraph for explanations of French educational terminology.



The most common occupation is student (over 20%), which comes ahead of labourer (9.8%) and engineer or technical manager (9.5%). This data therefore contradicts the received wisdom regarding heavy metal fans, which categorises them as 'marginalised', school dropouts and/or with difficulties fitting in to the workforce (Brown, 2009).

Jobseekers (the unemployed) only make up 6% of the sample (compared to 10% of the active French population as a whole), which is low for a relatively young cross section of the population, the average age of respondents being 26, while the average for the French population as a whole was 39.6 in 2010 according to INSEE. The audience at Hellfest therefore has far fewer unemployed than the French average, especially if we take into account that those under thirty are more frequently unemployed.

³⁹ According to INSEE, the French national statistics body, in 2009, 8% of second cycle (baccalaureate level) secondary school pupils, 21% of CAP and BEP students and 17% of professional baccalaureate and BP (vocational diploma) students do not complete their course of study (source: INSEE, 2012).

Thus, the relative proportion of jobseekers in the Hellfest audience would be even lower if we took account of the age pyramid distribution of the French population. Indeed, according to the ILO, the rate of unemployment in mainland France in 2013 among the active population of 15-24 year-olds was 22.8%, while it was 9.2% among 25-49 year-olds⁴⁰. However the cost of the festival pass (in 2011 the day pass cost €60 and the 3-day pass €160) and the fact that the survey was conducted online – in spite of widespread internet access – no doubt contributed to a bias against the number of less well-off jobseekers and individuals who are fans of heavy metal but not part of the Hellfest audience.

Table 1: Principal occupation of festival goers (Source: Questionnaire, 2011)

Principal occupation	Percentage
Pupils (secondary school)	5.3%
Students	20.6 %
Active population ('in employment')	60.4 %
Unemployed, Jobseekers	6.3 %
Retired	0.2 %
Others	7.3 %

Over 31 year-olds nevertheless make up 33% of all questionnaire respondents (compared to around 63% of the French population as a whole). Thus 'going out remains a characteristic of the young as all studies conducted in this field show'⁴¹ (D'Angelo, 1997). However, Hellfest is also characterised by a high proportion of festival goers in their thirties (24.6%) and forties or over (8.2 %). The cost of the pass, added to accommodation and travel costs are part of what prevents there being a higher proportion of younger festival attendees, who statistically have more limited financial resources (16-18 year-olds, students). Two thirds of festival goers aged under 20 uses the festival campsite, compared to less than 29% of those aged over 41. On the other hand 19% of festival goers aged over 41 preferred to opt for a paid hotel or *gîte* type accommodation compared to just 4.6% of those aged under 20.

Table 2: Age: a heterogeneous grouping (Source: Questionnaire, 2011)

Age categories	Percentage of Hellfest attendees	French population as a whole (INSEE, 2011)
Under 20 year-olds	13.6%	24.5%
20 to 30 year-olds	53.6%	12.4%
31 to 40 year-olds	24.6%	12.7%
Over 41 year-olds	8.2%	50%

Lastly, although this trend is also present in the French population as a whole, the 'father's profession'⁴² question shows that overall respondents are better qualified and/or occupy more highly-valued positions than their fathers (for whom, at over 17%, 'labourer'⁴³ is by far the most commonly cited profession). This illustrates the concept of social and educational mobility according to which a significant proportion of festival goers are, to a certain extent, social climbers. Overall, the distribution by social backgrounds contradicts received wisdom which says metal fans are from working class backgrounds. The re-

⁴⁰ Source: INSEE, <http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/info-rapide.asp?id=14>, consulted on 21 March 2014.

⁴¹ Our translation of: '*sortir reste une caractéristique de la jeunesse comme le montrent toutes les études réalisées dans ce domaine*' (D'Angelo, 1997, p. 50)

⁴² Our translation of: '*profession du père*' Questionnaire, 2011

⁴³ Our translation of: '*ouvriers*' Questionnaire, 2011

sults show that almost a third of festival goers (gender analysis reveals no significant variations) are from higher social classes: 30.4% of festival goers say they have a father who is an executive or a senior intellectual worker (teacher, engineer, professional and so on):

Table 3: Profession of festival goers fathers: an over-representation of higher social categories (Source: Questionnaire, 2011)

	Women	Men	AVERAGE
No answer	13.1%	12.1%	12.6%
Farmer	2.9%	2.8%	2.8%
Artisans, shopkeepers and business owners	13.7%	13.9%	13.8%
Executives and senior intellectual workers	30.5%	30.6%	30.4%
Middle management	12.6%	12.2%	12.3%
Employees	9.5%	10.4%	10.2%
Labourers	16.4%	17.4%	17.2%
Jobseekers and unemployed	1.4%	0.7%	0.8%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%

Conclusion

To a certain extent, Hellfest had to prove itself at first, whether in terms of safety around the site during the festival, the social behaviour of the festival goers influenced by the music or the impact on tourism and the local economy (Guibert, 2012). Little by little, the event has become recognised as part of the ordinary cultural offering of 'big festivals' in France. In recent years, the local and national press has paid a great deal of attention to the benefits of the festival for tourism and the local economy – 'an economic driver' which 'brings in a lot of money'⁴⁴ –, with local development receiving a real boost as a result of the influx of visitors. The fact that higher social classes are not immune to the appeal of metal, and that attempts by people 'peddling morality'⁴⁵ (Becker, 1985) have failed to prevent the festival from being held, have contributed to the gradual establishment of the cultural legitimacy of heavy metal music in France.

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⁴⁴ *Ouest-France*, 'Festival Hellfest: une locomotive économique', 16 June 2009; *Ouest-France*, 'Hellfest à Clisson, un festival qui rapporte gros', 15 June 2011.

⁴⁵ Our translation of: 'entrepreneurs de morale' (Becker, 1985)