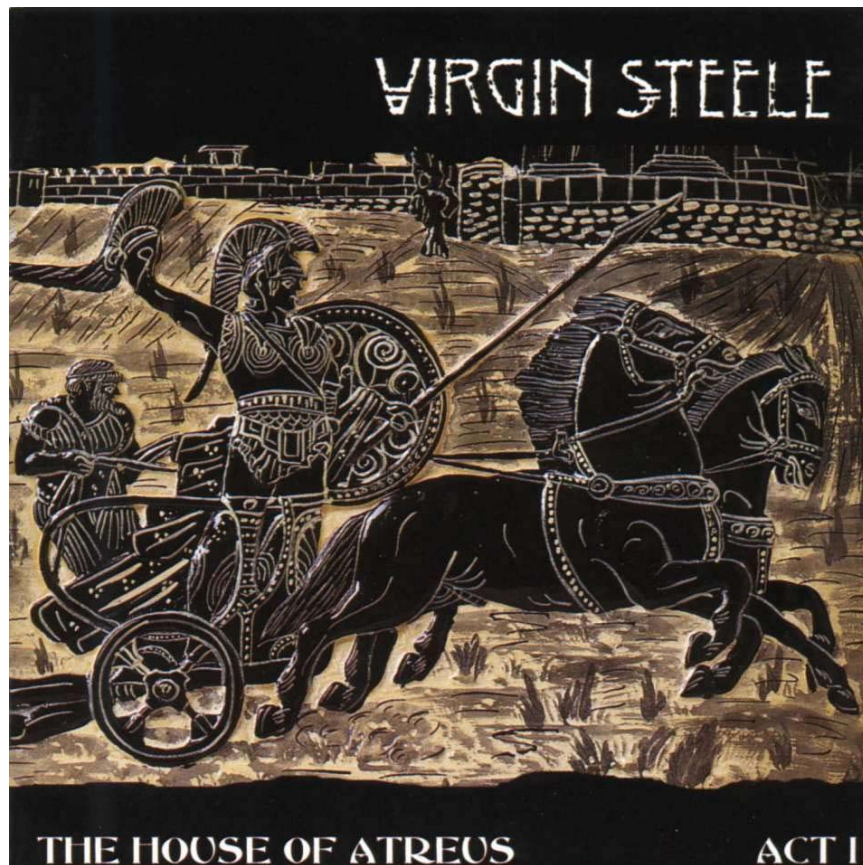


# HEAVY METAL THE CULTURAL ROOTS

A WORK BY  
FILIPPO FESTUCCIA



Despite being – quite truthfully, I have to admit – known in for many years as an extremely noisy and immoral music, there is no doubt that heavy metal gives the most cultural suggestions to modern music. It is indeed true that the press never states this fact. (Even musical magazines have some sort of repulsion against heavy metal). They do nothing but praise the newest fashions. However, we are not going to generalize, we are not going to hide all the explicitly satanic, noisy, violent, disgusting side of heavy metal, all the evil figures that are rightfully associated with sub-genres such as black metal (we have a clear example in Burzum, who is still in jail after having committed a brutal homicide; but it's true that even in black metal we can find fine musicians and really polite people): that kind of music is the expression of situations as hard to deny as to accept. But I don't see fairness in how heavy metal is spoken of by the "others", every time our music becomes an instrument in the hands of scandal-mongering press in every day's reality show. I believe therefore that we need a little rehabilitation for all the amazing musicians who dedicate their lives in spreading culture and good values through heavy metal.

### **AND THEN THERE WERE BLACK SABBATH**

The birth of metal is still a riddle. We won't plunge into the unsolvable debate about the first heavy metal artist (some say Led Zeppelin were the first, some say Steppenwolf, Grand Funk Railroad, Cream, Deep Purple, Jimi Hendrix and many others...), but we will assume here as fact that Black Sabbath were the first heavy metal band. The Birmingham quartet – led by guitarist Tony Iommi and vocalist Ozzy Osbourne – in 1970 reshaped rock music with their homonymous debut-album and its successor, *Paranoid*. Black Sabbath's bass player was – and still is, even if Sabbath are called Heaven & Hell – Geezer Butler, who is quite an expert of occult sciences. Undoubtedly the first cultural imprinting to heavy metal is a rough mix of the satanic and the mysterious, as in the song *Black Sabbath* (from Black Sabbath, 1970).

For his knowledge and understanding of black magic, Butler could have been easily considered an alchemist and/or a black wizard; he was indeed so deep into satanic iconology that music prevented him from becoming a new Aleister Crowley, as he often said. So his explosive creative vein, brutally visionary, contributed (alongside with Tony Iommi's thunderous guitar and Ozzy Osbourne's dirty voice) to create the somehow false myth of Black Sabbath as Satan-worshippers, a myth that further on also became associated with Ozzy's solo career in the early Eighties.

But in the origins it was not all Black Sabbath: in New York City, after years spent playing side to side with the Velvet Underground and Patti Smith, there emerged the Blue Oyster Cult. Often considered as the most genial hard rock band in the Seventies, they made strong efforts to enrich their already brilliant song-writing, not only with the collaborations of Sandy Pearlman – their manager – and Michael Moorcock – a well-known fantasy writer who later had a major part in Hawkwind's brief success – together their work featured highly refined hidden quotations.

But it is really hard to find some sort of resemblance between Neruda's melting love poem and BOC's *Wings Wetted Down*, a song that probably speaks of the bombers's flight over Dresden in the Second World War, like Iron Maiden's *Tailgunner*. We can only suppose that Blue Oyster Cult subdued the Chilean poet's vivid imagery to their tales of death and mystery: a brilliant poetry act, even more evident if we shall analyze every word's symbolic value. But this would take up too much space, so let's move on. In the same years we see

that Deep Purple used baroque music's features in hard rock songs, thanks to the amazing technique of guitarist Ritchie Blackmore and Hammond organ player Jon Lord; then Alice Cooper, Frank Zappa's true disciple, took on stage a vaudeville show, Jethro Tull and Pink Floyd wrote great stories and put them into music...Seventies' rock was heavy metal's background, both on the musical and the conceptual side.

## **A REVOLUTION NAMED IRON MAIDEN**

This will of elaborate structures found a stop at the end of the Seventies, when bands like Ac/Dc, Aerosmith, Motorhead, Saxon (and more generally the whole New Wave Of British Heavy Metal) showed that heavy metal could be fun, girls, alcohol, drugs and leather jackets, enhancing the newborn hostility between public opinion and metal musicians. We must then jump to 1981, a crucial year in the history of heavy metal: as Iron Maiden, (after Paul Di'Anno's dismissal), engaged former Samson singer Bruce Dickinson, it became the start of a new era. Dickinson (who in the years has proved to be both an excellent singer and a capricious rockstar), had a degree in the History of English Literature, and was determined for Iron Maiden to become the first band to "metalize" Great Britain's cultural heritage. Since 1983's Piece Of Mind (the first record Dickinson is composing in) we notice that Revelations (full of quotations from Gilbert Keith Chesterton), Flight Of Icarus (somehow inspired by the Greek myth), Still Life and To Tame A Land (heavy metal transpositions, respectively, of H.P. Lovecraft's The Colour Out Of Space, and Frank Herbert's Dune) are witnessing an all new literary sensibility. But Iron Maiden's most massive attempt to celebrate the deep union of heavy metal and Literature was still to come. In 1984's Powerslave (whose artwork is based on a dying pharaoh, just like the contemporary The Last In Line by Ronnie James Dio), track n°8 is called Rime Of The Ancient Mariner.

Not only there are two quotations from Coleridge's original (The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner, lines 111-118 and, with a few changes, lines 204-211), also Maiden tried to recreate in a 14-minutes song (93 lines-long lyrics) the magic atmosphere and the richness of mystic images contained in the 658 lines poem. Many coleridgean formulas are bound to this aim, contaminated with references to the British gothic tradition (for example, the hint about mesmerization, taken from Arthur Conan Doyle's last works); and, especially in the third and fourth part, where heavy metal tercets slow down into an atmospheric narration, the mood is incredibly similar to the poem's. So, thanks to the musicians' skill, the song is some kind of summary of Coleridge's work; therefore it's not strange that many british teachers use Iron Maiden to introduce Wordsworth/Coleridge's Lyrical Ballads. Fifteen years after Powerslave Bruce Dickinson, who had split from Iron Maiden to embark on a solo career, published an enigmatic, heavily metallic record called the Chemical Wedding. In songs such as the title-track, the mystic Gates Of Urizen and the thunderous Book Of Thel Dickinson does not just repeat Blake's words (even when quoting him), but offers us an intelligent mix of all the different suggestions from Blake's prophetic books. Also he tried to put the magniloquent images of Jerusalem in the elegiac atmosphere of 1789's Songs Of Innocence: the result is a song, homonymous to the poem.

For a full explanation of Blake's symbols it would be better to read The Prophetic Writings Of William Blake, by D.J. Sloss and J.P.R. Wallis (Clarendon Press, 1926), anyway I will try to give the reader a short guide about Jerusalem's iconology. Jerusalem is the emanation of Albion. Albion stands for humanity, therefore Jerusalem can be seen as human race's visionary skill (in fact Jerusalem's opposite is Vala, the expression of

“selfhood”). More properly is the Visions’ whole (or Divine Vision, sum of knowledge and morality), the Immortal Gospel. When Dickinson – quoting Blake – says that Jerusalem shall be built “in England’s green and pleasant land”, he gives us a perfect key to understand Jerusalem and Albion’s “bivalence”: they are both places and human symbols, and the task of men is to find them into his spirit.

## HEAVY METAL AND PHILOSOPHY

During its incredible zeitgeist, in the middle of the nineteenth century, German philosophy often bound itself to art and to the process of making art. Undoubtedly the most influential thinker to heavy metal was Friedrich Nietzsche, for he theorized both the human being’s duplicity and the chance of an Übermensch (a word whose best translation is overman, though even this one does not catch the real meaning of Nietzsche’s thought). We shall focus first on the Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy, because it has an evident relationship with music. In *The Birth of Tragedy from The Spirit of Music*, a pseudo-philological work that led to flaming debates between the German philologists, Nietzsche made an analysis of the whole Greek cultural history, turning upside down Winckelmann and Mengs’ idea of the fifth and fourth century as the *achmé* of Greek art. Nietzsche instead saw “Classic Age” as an age of decadence, due to Socrates’ philosophical revolution, which had took the Dionysian (the instinctive side of human soul) away from men, branding it as immoral. In the early tragedy (that of Aeschylus) he individuated the perfect coexistence of the two inner forces of man, the rational and the instinctive side – or, as in mythology, Apollo and Dionysus. They were represented respectively by the acting and by the chorus; this harmony can be found also in Wagner’s Operas, two thousands and three hundred years later. But these are also the most evident features of **Virgin Steele’s** music, a band that is known on the web as “the most underrated heavy metal band in history”, despite almost thirty years of militancy under the colours of metal. After the commercial failure of *Age Of Consent* (1988), and the consequent rebirth with *Life Among The Ruins* (1992) and the *Marriage Of Heaven And Hell-Invictus* trilogy, Virgin Steele created one of the most ambitious concepts of all times: *The House Of Atreus*, that narrates the events from Agamemnon’s comeback and death, and Orestes’ suicide in a two-albums-(3 disc) long journey. One of the high-adrenaline pounding moments is the judgement of Orestes by the Aeropagos, the special court created by Athena to judge homicides. In *Judgement Of The Son*, Athena (the judge), Apollo (Orestes’ defending) and one of the Erinyes, (brutal goddesses of revenge, sent by Orestes’ mother’s ghost) prepare for the trial.

ATHENA:

*Goddess of all the Silent Wastes, thou are not found unkind  
There's no Black and White, Thy Truth is not so keen  
Although the Crime is Great, withhold your Sovereign Blaze*

APOLLO:

*Rise up rise again after the RING OF FIRE  
My friendship's not feigning, your cause is my own  
Rise up rise again after the RING OF FIRE  
We'll beat them in Sunlight on this Day of Task*

ATHENA:

*Gods and all Athenians, Proud Black Erinyes  
Brook no Anarchy, nor bear a Tyrant's Rule  
Maintain in balance Fear the Guardian of Grace*

*ERINYES:*

*Rise up rise again after the RING OF FIRE*

*A Godless suppliant Burning in Chains*

*Rise up Ride the Wind, this is the End of Silence*

*The moment of Never on this DAY OF WRATH...*

Everything is set up for the struggle between rational forces and instinctive power: but, while in Aeschylus this fight is seen as the clash of modernity and order against the barbarian, Doric traditions, in Virgin Steele's purposes rationality cannot find a full victory against instinct. So, despite being absolved from his faults by the Aeropagos, Orestes will commit suicide: for the curse of the Erinyes cannot be stopped, even by deities like Athena or Apollo. The Socratic way of life is not a bringer of salvation, as soon as it restrains the purest forces internal to man. This idea is also one of the focal points of Anton LaVey's Church of Satan, an extremely clever and peaceful way to express rebellion against God, seen as an instrument in the hands of the power-holders. Nietzsche, the Barbaric Romantic vision, "good" Satanism: different ways for a return to man's pureness, which gets hidden again and again under a mask of convenience. Speaking of the overman, we see that American heavy metal gods Manowar made themselves characters representing strength and self-assertion (even though their macho behaviour would have given Nietzsche a lot of disappointment...), feeling life as a constant war against those who do not see the truth, a war whose prize is nothing else but a place in Valhalla.

### **SCI-FI: THE DISTORTION OF SCIENCE IN MUSIC**

Let's start with an all-time problem: freedom and science. Through the ages, too many scientists have been condemned or reduced to silence just for telling the truth. Nowadays, the governments have a deep control on every new discovery. But what if a genius finds something the government does not want to be known? Let's find it through Blaze Bayley's (former Wolfsbane and Iron Maiden singer, on the road for ten years with an amazing solo project) *The Tenth Dimension*, title-track for the second of his four records.

Again, we see that *freedom* is in open contrast with *mass*, and that science is a weapon: it can be used for the greater good, or just for the human race's sake, it all depends on how clever society's dominant forces will be. That's what happened with Einstein's studies, after all: he worked on the atoms and their reactions, and the US built the Atom Bomb...anyway, going back to more-properly-scientific subjects, one of the most interesting prog metal records of the last ten years is undoubtedly Ayreon's double-cd concept, *The Universal Migrator*. The plot is, in a few words, this: the last colonist on Mars, after witnessing Earth's destruction in 2084's final war, decides to spend his last hours inside the Dream Sequencer, a machine that allows him to briefly reincarnate in a fragment of soul, and live in the first person past events. He witnesses his own childhood, the final war, man's landing on the moon, Rembrandt's making of *The Shooting Company Of Captain Frans B. Cocq*, Queen Elizabeth I's speech to Francis Drake, magic rites amongst Mayas and Celts, and the birth of the first man. But the second part is even more interesting: the colonist decides to go backward and backward in time, at his own risk, for no one had ever done that. He finds himself inside the primordial atom that produced the Big Bang, and then in the fragment of cosmic soul who, after trespassing a black hole, reached Planet Y and finally Earth. When this small particle of life enters the black hole, not only does it not get crashed because of the immense gravity, as we would expect, but... it finds a way to get through the hole and then exit via a white hole. Telling us such a journey, Arjen Lucassen (Ayreon himself, or at least the creator of the project) shows

himself as a follower of the “hyperspace tunnels” theory, which was believed to be true when the albums were composed. According to this theory, black holes are the entrances of tunnels which allow one to travel from one side of the Universe to another with no loss of time; the exit of these tunnels would be a white hole, an object we have never seen. It’s undoubtedly an intriguing idea, the chance to travel across the universe and to see new planets without developing extremely modern technologies, but, as we speak, it’s nothing else but science-fiction. What astronomers believe is that, once one crosses the Horizon (the black hole’s border), gravity becomes too high to sustain, and everything that gets caught, even a big star like Sirius, gets crushed and smashed to its very core. Of course, would the “hyperspace” theory prove itself as true, Ayreon, alongside science fiction writers and directors such as George Lucas, will be considered a foreseeing genius.

## **WARS AND BATTLES**

Heavy metal, too often referred to as a brutal and violent music, is surprisingly full of pacifism. It may seem strange – I know – especially when we speak of epic metal bands that love to sing of battles, slaughters, victory, pride and so on. But the key is: heavy metal is against *today’s* war, because in modern war there is no chance for a man to make a difference between life and death with his own skills. It’s all a roll of the dice, whether you’re alive (and scarred forever) or dead. Heavy metal praises pre-gunpowder wars, where heroes were able to dominate the odds and win battles for their bravery, strength and passion. To have a clear vision of how insane a twentieth century war can be, the best song we can analyze is *Paschendale*, from Iron Maiden’s *Dance Of Death* (2003).

## **BONUS TRACKS**

The following is the highlight of the whole essay: a very interesting e-mail exchange with none other than Virgin Steele frontman David DeFeis. I’ve decided to post the whole “conversation”, to avoid any kind of misunderstanding.

***Filippo: How much is your idea of “Barbaric Romanticism” influenced by Nietzsche’s work “The birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music”, and consequentially from Wagner’s Operas?***

**David:** To be completely honest with you...my idea about “Barbaric-Romanticism”, has absolutely nothing to do with Nietzsche or Wagner. I have never read that Work by Nietzsche. Perhaps one day I shall! I was foremost thinking of musical elements, and how to describe them. I am very interested in opposites, and I was searching for a word or phrase that could hopefully describe the sound of the music I make, along with some of the ideas or ideology that is infused within the sounds.... Before hitting upon the title, Barbaric-Romanticism, I had come up with “Symphonic-Blues-Based Metal”, “Romantic-Expressionism”, “Savage-Poetry”...etc....but then it seemed to me that Barbaric-Romanticism, painted a clearer picture of what I was attempting to do. From the Barbaric side, I am referring to what I call the “Bones Of The Mountain” sound. By this I mean the primitive, raw, earthy, quality found in modal music, (the 7 ancient modes that is, the Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolidian, Aeolian, Locrian and occasionally the Ionian). These modes can be found in Gregorian Chant, early folk idioms, or Black Sabbath. It is that primal quality of which I speak. On the Romantic side, I am referring to the extended harmonies (the 9th, 11th and 13th chords) of the Romantic Movement in Music which happened in the 19th century and is best exemplified by composers such as Chopin, Liszt, Berlioz and of course Wagner & Verdi. I am also very interested in the Poetry of the Romantic era. People Like Byron, Shelley & Keats were doing for Poetry what Chopin was doing for Music...I wanted to take the idea of the beautiful & the brutal, the primitive & the complex, the savage and the refined, and create a new kind of Music...That was my goal.

Some of this approach has ruffled feathers, but that's OK! People rioted at the first performance of Stravinsky's "Rite Of Spring"! Some people have found the softer moments of VS to be "not metal"...whatever that means. But for me the inherent quality that is built into a composition is what makes a song "heavy", or a Metal song. Metal to me is more than a loud guitar and a pounding drum. I mean even Punk Rock has that. My Metal, or my Barbaric-Romantic Music, has this specific kind of harmonic & melodic vocabulary, a special phrasing and inflection that exists even when performing this music on an acoustic guitar or piano. It is a Philosophy, a Spiritual quest, and a life long commitment to strength, honour, dignity and maintaining one's place in the world in the face of adversity. I write songs from my Mind, Body & Spirit. I have my history, my roots, my knowledge of where I came from, and I have my hunger, my thirst to keep pushing the envelope, to constantly bring in new aspects, without denying the "core" identity of what I believe VIRGIN STEELE to be.

***Filippo: Your double album concept, The Marriage Of Heaven And Hell, has the same title of an intense prophetic book written by William Blake in 1790: have you read it? Could you tell me if there's anything in common between your lyrics and Blake's poetry?***

***David:*** I never even heard of it until we were mixing the "Marriage Part 2" album! I was only aware of Blake's "Songs Of Innocence & Experience" and that was all. I was not well versed in him at that time. Again...I was simply thinking of opposites, and how to take the idea of Barbaric-Romanticism, and apply it to an album title. I thought how much further apart can one get than the idea of a Marriage Of Heaven & Hell! It was actually our drummer Frank Gilchrist who alerted me to the fact that Blake had a Work bearing the Title "The Marriage Of Heaven & Hell". He came over my house to pick up some VS discs to learn, as he was preparing to audition for us, (for we had parted ways with our previous drummer after completing marriage Part 1). Anyway, Frank came by and I gave him a copy of the "Marriage of heaven & hell Part 1 album", and he said, "wow...William Blake!", and I said..."huh???" He then informed me about Blake's Work which I then promptly went out and bought. I believe there are some connections there, but the lyrics to Part 1 & Part 2 were already finished...Part 1 was out already, and on Part 2 all the songs were completely written already and almost ready to be mixed. All that still needed to be finished in terms of actual recording was Emalaith, Crown Of Glory & Prometheus, but again...they were already written. We just had to complete some tracking on them. I think the idea of opposites is a common thread and Blake was into pushing boundaries and buttons in all directions, never staying in the same place...exploring, etc., and that is what I attempt to do in my life & work as well. My "career" is not so much a career, but really a way of life that I have lived & loved and hope to continue to do so for many more years...

***Filippo: Do you think culture is important for a musician? How did the experience of reading Aeschylus change your vision of making art?***

***David:*** In the context of bringing in various aspects from "serious" art and history, yes I believe it is important. It can inspire & impart great knowledge and insight when combined with this metal music we love! If we are talking about "Current Popular culture", I again do believe that culture is important and a composer, artist, performer should be aware of it. However one should not be a slave to it or one runs the risk of becoming a cliché, or an anachronism, or irrelevant when the current fashion or flavour passes on...I believe in eternal truths and ideas that are relevant forever, not just for the moment. I try to make music that expresses the human condition now and forever...

I grew up with the Works of Euripides and Aeschylus...and all the various Greek Myths. That is the food of my childhood and is the instruction of my adulthood. I was raised in a

theatrical household. My father was and still is a producer/director of Plays. Growing up, I would watch rehearsals & performances of Plays by Euripides, Aeschylus, Shakespeare, etc., and this was incredibly inspiring to me. After being introduced to the Ancient World via these various Plays, I then read all the Mythology I could lay my hands on. I devoured the Myths! I enjoy not only Greek Myth, but also Myths from all other Cultures. In them I see parallels to our own time, and I see that we have not changed at all since those days! If anything...we are more backwards now! The Myths contain universal themes and truths that are timeless. I also love the fact that the Greek Gods & Goddesses are portrayed in Human form with the same aspirations, lusts, strengths and weaknesses as us all. They created the Divine, in the image of the Human. Today we are all searching for Magick, for Beauty, Passion, Love...Transcendence. That is why we enjoy Music, the Arts, Wine, etc. The Myths remind us that we can transcend, that we can become Zeus, Athena, Prometheus, Herakles, Odin, Thor, Lilith, King Arthur or Isis or whatever we choose to be. We can make our lives a Work of Art... My ideas about Art, Music, etc, and how to perform it or create it are deeply rooted in all that I absorbed, and all that I learned from all my various teachers, be they academic ones such as my piano teacher growing up, or teachers like Jimmy Page from Led Zeppelin or Brian May from Queen. They taught me the idea of the solo...and I have tried to make my voice perform like their guitars wail.... Inspiration comes from Life and all that it has to offer...the good, the bad, the ugly & the beautiful...

I write about what I know, what I experience and what I feel deeply about. I am not one for listening to what someone else is doing and then trying to regurgitate that. I am all for trying to forge my own particular direction and vision. With every album that we have done we have always tried to bring out the best we could under the circumstances that each album was made, and we shall continue to do so...

## CONCLUSION

Speaking of less than ten bands we have found many kinds of cultural roots, and (too) much has been left to leave place for the essential. But, as a form of respect to all the bands we could have spoken of, here is a little list of other heavy metal bands who deserve respect:

- Black Jester: in their courageous The Divine Comedy, a three-track, seventy minutes long album, they put in music the whole Dante's poem
- Blind Guardian: in their twenty years long career they've sung of Arthur's cycle, of science fiction masterworks, but most of all of Tolkien's Silmarillion, in 1998's Nightfall In Middle-Earth
- Grave Digger: in the 90's this German power metal band went out with Heart Of Darkness (inspired by Joseph Conrad's novel) and Tunes Of War (which speaks of Scotland and its unlucky fight against England to obtain freedom)
- Iced Earth: among all their excellent albums, really interesting is 2003's The Glorious Burden (with the great Tim Ripper Owens on vocals), that puts in music events that changed History (the American Revolution, Europe's invasion by the Huns, Red Baron's deeds during the First World War, Napoleon's defeat in Waterloo)
- Judas Priest: this thirtyfive years old British combo released in 2008 Nostradamus, a concept album based on Jean Michel de Nostredame's life, and not on his "prophecies"
- Sabaton: four albums entirely devoted to war in its every form: from the horrors of Nazism to Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu's the Art Of War

These are the main ones, but it would be a real shame to forget all the Power and Viking metal bands whom make an incessant work of recovery of Norsemen's traditions, and the



high literary results obtained by many progressive metal bands (Savatage, for example, or Queensryche) via the concept album formula. To hold in high esteem these amazing musicians means we're able to recognize the cultural background they have in common with each and every one of us and to understand how good can their influence be for the youngest.

Stay metal.

*A "THANK YOU!" straight from the heart goes to:*

*Every band I spoke of, for you keep the flame alive in our hearts!!!*

*David DeFeis and Mark Groman for you made this essay really special*

*My lovely girlfriend, for without you I would have been really prolix, and less interesting after all; thank you for what you give me every day of our life, hope I can love you in return...*

*Every musician that taught me something with his extremely polite and kind attitude: Dave Andrews (bass player and roadie for Blaze Bayley), Trevor (singer in Sadist), and every musician who took part at the benefit show for the victims of the earthquake in Abruzzo (Osanna, Ritchie Kotzen, Carl Palmer & Aquatarkus, Kee Marcello, Jack Meille, Pino Scotto, Kai Hansen, Tobias Sammet and Uli Jon Roth)*

*MAY THE FLAME OF METAL NEVER DIE IN OUR HEARTS!!!*