

Factory music: How the industrial geography and working-class environment of post-war Birmingham fostered the birth of heavy metal.

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## **Factory Music: How the Industrial Geography and Working-Class Environment of Post-War Birmingham Fostered the Birth of Heavy Metal**

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### Abstract

Factory Music, based on original interdisciplinary research, is the first study into the relationship between industrial geography and musical development. Today, heavy metal music is both mainstream and global; however the roots of heavy metal can be traced to the industrial, working-class neighbourhoods of post-war Birmingham in the late 1960s. Surveys, maps and statistics detailing Birmingham's physical and demographic landscape from 1945 to 1970 show a heavily industrialized city in the process of implementing

sweeping modernization initiatives. Birmingham's youth culture also began to transform after the war; young people drifted away from their traditional ties to the Protestant Church and began seeking secular forms of entertainment –such as music. As these youth began creating music of their own, they incorporated sounds from the industrial factories which dominated their lives and expressed their working-class frustration lyrically –in turn creating a new genre later called heavy metal. Studying the lyrics and instrumentation of early heavy metal, coupled with interviews given by members of pioneering Birmingham heavy metal bands Black Sabbath and Judas Priest, this article draws a direct link between the industrial geography of Birmingham's working-class neighbourhoods and the birth of heavy metal in the late 1960s.

### SECTION III REGIONAL THEMES

#### FACTORY MUSIC: HOW THE INDUSTRIAL GEOGRAPHY AND WORKING-CLASS ENVIRONMENT OF POST-WAR BIRMINGHAM FOSTERED THE BIRTH OF HEAVY METAL

By Leigh Michael Harrison

University of Western Ontario

Today, the popularity of heavy metal music is both mainstream and global; however the origins of heavy metal can be traced directly to the industrial, working-class neighbourhoods of Birmingham, England in the late 1960's.<sup>1</sup> Birmingham bands Black Sabbath and Judas Priest created and defined the genre, drawing upon the industrial geography of the city and their working-class backgrounds for inspiration, both of which are reflected in their music –both lyrically and instrumentally.<sup>2</sup> Almost two hundred years of continued industrial expansion meant that residential areas and schools were surrounded by factories, continually subjecting the city's children to the sounds of heavy industry. The difficult, sometimes impoverished working-class existence meant working-class children developed aggressive demeanours as a means of surviving the tough physical and social environment of everyday life.<sup>3</sup> As Birmingham's post-war youth culture moved away from its traditional ties to the Protestant Church and towards secular dance halls and clubs, these children drew upon their working-class experience and the industrial sounds of the city when creating their music. When studying the lyrics, sound and style of Black Sabbath and Judas Priest's music, coupled with interviews conducted with the band members, recurring themes and patterns emerge. Feelings of anger regarding their poor, working-class experience is a sentiment that is continually expressed in band interviews and is reflected in the lyrics of both groups. The grey, congested industrial landscape and the noise of Birmingham's heavy industry is cited by the band members as having a direct impact on the sound and development of their music. Maps and surveys of post-war Birmingham show a city shaped and dominated by heavy industry, a dominance that reached its zenith following the end of the Second World War. The industrial geography and working-class environment of post-war Birmingham directly influenced the lyrics and sound of Black Sabbath's and Judas Priest's music, which in turn became a new form of music later known as heavy metal.<sup>4</sup>

This study fills a gap as the first probe into the relationship between industrial geography and musical development. Geomusicology, the study of geography and music, is still a relatively new subfield of cultural geography, the methodologies and theoretical approaches of which have yet to be firmly established. Sporadic research concerning the relationship between music and environment first appeared in the late 1960s and the 1970s, but it wasn't until the early 1980s that geomusicology began to emerge as a viable subfield of cultural geography. Research conducted since has focused primarily on American country music, with increased



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