Return from Exile: How Extreme Metal Culture Found Its Niche with Dethklok and Postnetwork TV

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In the premiere episode of Metalocalypse, an original animated series entering its fifth season on the Adult Swim channel, 300,000 metalheads travel to the Artic Circle to witness Dethklok, “the world’s greatest cultural force,” as they perform a coffee jingle for the Duncan Hills Coffee Corporation. Despite adverse conditions and a mere single song set list, thousands of fans risk life and limb for the chance to witness the legendary death metal band as they perform a raucous musical ode to the virtues of “ultimate flavor.” As one reporter on the scene observes, “Never before have so many people traveled so far for such a short song.” In a further testament to the band’s outstanding popularity and market value, concertgoers eagerly sign “pain waivers” excusing Dethklok from legal liability in the all too likely event they are somehow “burned, lacerated, eaten alive, poisoned, de-boned, crushed, or hammer-smashed” during the show. Meanwhile, the performance launches the international coffee mogul Duncan Hills to monopoly status, “obliterating” the competition. When asked by news reporters if such an act of corporate sponsorship means that Dethklok is “selling out,” frontman Nathan Explosion growlingly rejoins: “We are here to make coffee metal. We will make everything metal. Blacker than the blackest black . . . times infinity.”

Touting “the biggest entertainment act in the universe,” Metalocalypse chronicles the imperious feats of Dethklok, a fictional Scandinavian-American death metal band with a global fan base large enough to sustain “the seventh largest economy on earth.” Described by series co-creator Brendon Small as both a celebration of metal and a pointed attempt to make fun of the music industry, Metalocalypse is one in a tradition with This is Spinal Tap for the way it plays with heavy metal’s exaggerated claims to power and authenticity; indeed, the show’s comedic premise rests on the ironic juxtaposition of metal’s nihilistic ethos and the celebrity-star system underpinning commercial popular music at large. As the heavy-handed absurdity of the Duncan Hills coffee episode attests, Metalocalypse

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aims to satirize the promotional logic of popular music by amplifying it to the highest decibel.

And yet Dethklok’s pretension to world domination is far from mere farce. The show debuted during the fall season of 2006, drawing an unprecedented number of target viewers (men ages 18–24) and garnering the highest rating for a series premiere in the Adult Swim channel’s short history. Since then, the series, and Dethklok in particular, has served as an inexhaustible locus of cross-promotions, media tie-ins and other cultural commodities, running the gamut from DVDs and CDs to action figures, comic books and video games. Only a year after the show’s premiere, for example, *The Dethablum*—a soundtrack showcasing a two-disc collection of full-length songs taken from the first season of *Metalocalypse*—was released; it debuted at 21 on the *Billboard* 200, reportedly the highest ranking ever for a death metal record. Since then, Dethklok’s music has appeared across an array of film and video game soundtracks, as well as satellite radio and on-line venues like YouTube, MySpace, Last.fm, iTunes and Pandora. The show’s synergistic strategies also include a host of brand endorsements for music instrument manufacturers like Gibson Guitars and Marshall Amplification. What’s more, in the fall of 2012, Dethklok completed its fourth nationwide tour, performing “live” in the virtual-flesh via large-screen video projection and co-headlining a bill that included longtime metal stalwarts Machine Head, All That Remains, and The Black Dahlia Murder.

Needless to say, this kind of metal-infused marketing bonanza serves to corroborate all the more forcefully Simon Frith’s fundamental assertion that “the dominant use of music on television is to sell things” (Frith, 281). But before we consign *Metalocalypse* to the culture-industry dustbin of ostensibly shameless, cross-promotional made-for-TV rock, I want to suggest that we consider the peculiar nature of this particular brand of cartoon death metal. For unlike earlier forms of “glam” and “nu” metal popularized by MTV, the subcultural codes at work in *Metalocalypse* recall branches of extreme metal culture that have remained, by and large, outside the purview of commercial television. Accordingly, these codes invoke the kind of underground strains of death, speed, and black metal typically associated with the extreme metal scene (Kahn-Harris), and thus exhibit less a fascination with the generic pleasures typically associated with erstwhile heavy metal and more an interest in the “fundamentalist” strains characterized by Deena Weinstein as effectively constituting underground metal (Weinstein, 48).
Indeed, as Weinstein argues in her book, *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture*, metal’s vitality as both a genre and a subculture is, in part, a result of its uneasy relationship to the media, especially television. Specifically, Weinstein emphasizes the role played by MTV in contributing to the fragmentation of metal culture during the 1980s; she argues that this had the inadvertent effect of intensifying the differentiation of metal subgenres into two broad categories: on the one hand, a commercial friendly form of “lite” metal was popularized by MTV, mainly as a way to accommodate the broader youth market, while on the other hand a stridently noncommercial, even confrontational form of metal “fundamentalism” emerged as part of a subcultural backlash against the more melodic, pop-oriented strains of the genre (Weinstein 161–71). According to Weinstein, this more extreme metal culture took shape “in exile” of mass commercial media, yet nonetheless involved the selective appropriation of distinct “media codes” as a way to maintain subcultural distinctions (161). Hence the discursive positioning of different media outlets according to “specialized” forms of knowledge (or subcultural capital3) is evidently what allowed the metal subculture to coalesce around a distinct set of media relations. As Weinstein puts it, “MTV was too much a mass medium to serve the members of the metal subculture” (171), and so metal’s hardcore audience was forced to disseminate itself underground, amongst a host of niche media, where it would eventually cultivate an image as “a cultural form... unacceptable to the mass media” (161). In short, a new extreme metal culture was born here at the margins of television culture, alongside MTV as its “evil twin” (Weinstein 284).

The following article seeks to explore metal culture’s “return from exile,” as it were, in the form of the prefab cartoon death metal featured on *Metalocalypse*. Through this examination I will argue that accounts such as Weinstein’s can be understood as overemphasizing metal’s opposition to television culture, and that, in particular, contemporary iterations of “metal media” imply changes to the genre’s overall commercial and cultural standing with respect to extramusical practices of media consumption. Specifically, I will consider how the show, which is billed as both a parody of and tribute to metal culture, mobilizes subcultural distinctions as a way to distinguish itself and the Adult Swim brand from what John Fiske elsewhere refers to as “more ‘normal’ popular audiences” (Fiske 46). The goal is not to reiterate the conventional argument that television simply exploits popular music—its genres, markets, and audiences—for commercial ends, but to point up how erstwhile mass media like television increasingly look to
capitalize on the subcultural distinctions specific to popular music, and how these distinctions, in turn, get inflected by developments in media culture.

Such an approach aims to complicate more conventional accounts of commercial cooptation, wherein truly “authentic” music cultures are those that thrive somehow “outside” the institutional machinations of multinational corporations and marketing trends. This notion entails, of course, the reiteration of rock’s enduring antiestablishment ethos—or as Keir Keightley puts it, a sense of “rebellion and countercultural identity that rock ideology affirms for its fans and musicians” (“Reconsidering Rock” 141). No doubt this “rock ideology” informs Weinstein’s formulation concerning metal’s historically fraught relationship to “the mass media,” which, again, reiterates a longstanding subcultural conflict between marginal, “hardcore” tastes and mainstream media cultures. However, rather than accept this distinction as somehow natural or inevitable—as if divisions between the “underground” and “mainstream” are not already implicated in struggles over economic and cultural capital—I would like to consider how these categories are, in effect, put to work by media producers in order to draw lines of distinction within media culture, and not just between a given underground popular music audience and its mainstream Other. In other words, I want to consider how bids for subcultural distinction function as an industrial means of tailoring tastes for the market.

Among the upshots of this approach, considering the industrial function of subcultural distinctions requires taking into account how subcultures such as extreme metal, which have historically been defined in opposition to dominant culture (often represented by television), now find themselves amidst an increasingly fragmented media landscape in which proliferating outlets, channels, fandoms, and niche cultures make it difficult to identify a coherent “center” against which subcultural ideology might be directed (cf. Bennett and Kahn-Harris). It also entails making allowance for the fact that, if subcultural ideologies do indeed persist today around such cultures, they rely on a distinct set of media relations to do so. And hence it is important to examine the institutional underpinnings of these relations in order to understand how contemporary media industries work to produce a sense of distinction in conjunction with televisual consumption of underground music cultures.

More generally, examining the transindustrial utility of popular music means, as Norma Coates might put it, considering the “television part of television music,” that is, how the “industrial, economic, programming, production, and business aspects of the medium are informed by the
engagement with popular music” (“Filling in the Holes” 23; my emphasis). Insofar as such relations lend themselves to conceptualizing the terrain of popular music as, likewise, informed by the media, the institutional basis of metal culture will be emphasized here over its regional, ethnic, gender, and class dimensions. Nonetheless, it is certainly the case that, as the major studies have shown, metal’s sense of subcultural authenticity and distinction typically rests on normative identity formations with particularly masculine inflections (Walser, Weinstein, Kahn Harris). It follows that the feminized connotations of the “mainstream” implied in such distinctions belie the apparently gender-neutral (or masculine) claims to authenticity underpinning subcultural capital, which “reveals itself most clearly in what it dislikes and what it is emphatically not” (Thornton 105).

In other words, to the extent the integrity of underground metal culture rests upon an opposition to a commercial “mass” medium like television, which has long been positioned as “low” and feminine by both elite critics and popular audiences alike (cf., Keightley, “Low Television, High Fidelity;” Coates, “Teenyboppers, Groupies, and Other Grotesques”), then the sense of subcultural identity that results, and defines its “extreme” or “hardcore” audience, remains implicated in a broader ideological logic that equates television with femininity, passivity and conformity. On the other hand, “specialized” or niche media are consequently positioned to maintain the “harder,” more aggressive (and hence more masculine) aspects of the genre (cf. Brown 2007 and 2010). As a result, the cultural oppositions at play in metal discourse, particularly as they are organized around distinct “layers” of media, serve to perpetuate not only entrenched notions of exclusivity and authenticity (longtime staples of rock mythology), but also a subcultural politics that tends to accord with Thornton’s account of “authentic” musical subcultures as those which are predisposed to exclude a feminized commercial, mainstream audience (101–5).

Indeed, the same might be said of Adult Swim’s use of extreme metal, which, as in the case of Metalocalpyse, functions to convey both the character of its programming as well as the channel’s overall desired audience—the “kidult” male imagined as an eccentric, pop-savvy consumer (Lee). Extreme metal culture is, in this case, showcased on Adult Swim as part of a broader effort to facilitate the sorts of taste and lifestyle distinctions of the format itself, divisions which are in turn designed to indicate not just “signature programming” but who belongs and who does not. As Variety noted in 2011:
Adult Swim’s absurdist comedy programming... has a distinctly musical bent, showcasing some of the most cutting-edge acts in America, both established and emerging... It [has] made [Adult Swim] a bona fide destination for that coveted demographic—the 18- to 24-year-old male cultural influencers and early adopters who appreciate the network’s grasp of underground music as much as its subversive programming. (Ryder)

Hence the Adult Swim audience is constructed in such a way to accord with the language of lifestyle segmentation and subcultural distinction, as it is evidently the “cutting-edge”—and thus supposedly “subversive”—inclinations of Adult Swim viewers that make it a viable media outlet for underground (masculinized) musical tastes.

Insofar as these discursive constructions lend themselves to Adult Swim’s business plan, they provide insight into how television shows like *Metalocalypse* rely on tactics of subcultural distinction and displays of subcultural capital as a way to confer value upon the program and a sense of cultural identity for the audience. In fact, one might say that Adult Swim operates as a kind of “subcultural forum” (Lotz 43), in which specialized popular-music competencies and niche-programming strategies align to (re)produce a commercially valuable (masculine) taste culture against a more ostensibly mainstream (feminized) taste formation. To that end, *Metalocalypse* embodies not just an emergent platform of television music,^4^ structured, as we shall see, according to Adult Swim’s own brand reputation for “pushing the limits of taste in its quest to draw young adults to television” (Keveney) and thus “becom[ing] a place where viewers can find music from fringe and underground genres” (McKinley); it also embodies “a chain of discourse that characterizes television as a repository for cultural anxieties about taste, technology, and gender” (Keightley, “Low Television, High Fidelity” 256). As such, the show typifies the industrial practices and branding strategies of the postnetwork era.

**Television Music in the Postnetwork Era: Examining the Metal Pitch Aesthetic**

As theorized by Amanda Lotz, postnetwork television encompasses both the industry’s ongoing transition to a “narrowcast” medium, defined by ever more refined niche markets and lifestyle categories, as well as the greater changes affecting the media culture within which commercial television exists. Specifically, it describes emergent practices of digital
transmission, audience fragmentation and specialization, mobile content, the expansion of channel options, and the increasing use of product placements and branded media entertainment as content. Accordingly the label “postnetwork TV” codifies a range of institutional practices that have been crucial to the industry over its decade-long transition to a multi-channel, multi-media environment. It also signals, according to Lotz, a “revolution” in television address, moving away from old-style mass entertainment toward the proliferation of television markets and the concomitant “polarization” of media audiences. The result is such that television now basically operates as form of “niche media,” leading different groups of viewers to consume substantially different types programming with no single protocol to unite them (Lotz 14).

Put another way, postnetwork television functions as “an electronic newsstand” (Lotz 5), according to which a profoundly segmented market of television viewers pursues deliberately targeted interests and lifestyle-oriented forms of branded entertainment. The result is something akin to the publishing model that underwrites the contemporary music magazine, an industry that, as Lotz notes, “thrives on specialty, distinction, and niche taste” (34). In parallel manner, postnetwork television plays itself out on three interrelated fronts: first, through specialization, or the cultivation of highly concentrated audiences; second, through the logic brand distinction, which operates as a structural imperative—not simply a feature of television networks broadly, but a characteristic of specific programs themselves; and third, as a platform for niche taste, wherein channels like Adult Swim utilize a host of lifestyle-oriented approaches designed to capture an exclusive taste market. As Lotz suggests, the latter strategy entails chiefly “the development of programming with a clearly defined edge that openly hails particular groups while unabashedly repelling others” (48). In the case of *Metalocalypse*, producers look to pursue programming strategies aimed at marginalizing the majority of TV viewers via the discourse of underground music, while at the same time catering to the select tastes of its preconceived masculinized audience.

One way it does this is through the show’s “pitch aesthetic” (Caldwell). As John Caldwell describes it, the pitch aesthetic refers to a “new twist” in television production, whereby emergent textual practices can be traced back to their origins in industrial practices via institutionalized rituals of production. Among these, Caldwell highlights the customary business practice of “pitching” as one of the “tried-and-proven modes of institutional interaction” that organizes contemporary programming strategy: “Pitches
work by hooking the buyer with a short but recognizable convention of some sort, then glomming, spinning, or aggregating it with some other unconventional element in order to create a “just like X but with Y variant” (58). The result, as Caldwell notes, is its own conventionalized structure (“just like X but with Y variant”), which can be utilized on behalf of aspiring producers and showrunners seeking to “hook” a potential audience (in this case network executives) into green-lighting a show idea. As a function of this institutionalized practice, then, the pitch aesthetic persists as one way for television producers to position a show “over and against a competing network or programming entity” (ibid.), while avoiding redundancy through the strategic deployment of pop cultural capital. As Caldwell sums it up, “the stylistic outcome of this social ritual means that contemporary TV in the multichannel postnetwork era owes more to Andre Breton and surrealism than it does to an Aristotelian telos and the classic three-act plot structure” (ibid.).

The same might be said of Metalocalypse, which combines morbid black humor and over-the-top cartoon hijinks into short eleven-minute episodes. Fittingly, the show has been “pitched” by television critics and producers as “the metal lover’s answer to quality cartoon viewing” (“Dethklok’s Brendon Small”), or, as “Spinal Tap meets Scooby-Doo meets Norway”—the latter being a reference to co-creator Brendon Small’s inspired vision for a show about “a half American/half Scandinavian metal band that is about a million times bigger than the Beatles. But a million times more dangerous and a million times more stupid” (Ken P.). As Small himself recalls of the initial pitch session with Adult Swim brass: “Verbatim, what I said to the head of Adult Swim was, ‘I think I got an idea for a show; it’s about an extreme metal band and there’s gonna be a lot of murder and a lot of blood and fiery guitar, and I’m not terribly interested in having anyone understand anything that anyone is saying’” (“Dethklok’s Brendon Small”). According to Small, this initial pitch, coming from a then small-time comedy writer and cartoon TV voice-actor, was enough to not only convince Adult Swim executives they had a potential cult hit on their hands but also to secure for Small and fellow co-creator metal enthusiast Tommy Blacha the necessary creative leeway to successfully develop a show around a conspicuously “extreme” metal aesthetic. As Small recounts the early stages of the show’s development: “After I talked to Adult Swim, they said, ‘Write up a treatment, something on paper’ and I said, ‘I don’t want to put something on paper yet. I want to find out what this band sounds like.’
So I wrote the theme song. I thought that was the more important thing to me, what the band sounded like” (ibid.). The result was the “Deththeme,” a thirty second death metal tune that plays over the opening credits and, indeed, stays true to Small’s original pitch for a show about “fiery guitars” and unintelligible speech.

The principle is clearly employed in the “Deththeme,” which contains expository lyrics about the band, delivered in a menacing, at times indecipherable, performance style sung by the band frontman Nathan Explosion (voiced by Small). Indeed, the latter’s indifference to having anyone actually “understand what anyone is saying” is evocative of the conventional death metal style, including a vocal mix of guttural performance, garbled speech and screaming for ominous aesthetic effect. Not only does the song provide testament to Small’s own fannish enthusiasm—his devotion to extreme metal—it also affords insight into the way he and others at Adult Swim imagine the conventional aspects of the genre. As Small describes it:

When I was submerging myself in metal, I was going, “OK, in order to make this heavier and faster and sound more like metal, you’ve got to tune down your guitars; you’ve got to kind of do a guttural voice or a screaming kind of voice. When you tune down to C standard and you start chugging away on a low E, you can just feel it. And the double kicks with the blast beat or whatever.” And it just happens instantly. So, it’s just kind of tuning the instruments to what’s popular in death and extreme metal. (“Dethklok’s Brendon Small”)

Here Small’s description of the “Deththeme” as the primary indicator of what the band (and the show) “sounds like” demonstrates not only a keen awareness of the stylistic codes associated with the underground scene, but also an underlying sense of subcultural distinction driving the show’s pitch aesthetic—a distinction centered on what Weinstein again might call a “fundamentalist” attitude toward the genre, as being essentially about sonic extremity, impenetrable sound, and exclusionary deployments of subcultural capital.

As regards the latter, for instance, each member of Dethklok represents, according to Small, a distinct archetype taken from the extreme metal scene; as he describes it, their personalities illustrate the putative interpersonal dynamics of the prototypical metal group:
We have the fastest guitarist alive and the second fastest, and that creates a little bit of friction. In metal the bass is completely mixed out almost all the time. So we have a self-hating bass player who’s always trying to act like he’s more important than he is. The singer is a kind of quarterback . . . we actually did base [him] on a person: George “Corpsegrinder” Fisher from the band Cannibal Corpse. (quoted in Robair)

Additionally, the show incorporates voice-acting cameos of renowned metal celebrities (e.g., King Diamond, Mike Patton, James Hetfield, Kirk Hammett, Marty Friedman, Michael Ammott, George Fischer, Angela Gossow) and one-off characters whose names provide a knowing wink to the subculturally initiated (e.g., Adam Nergal, J.F. Amarth, Nick Ibsen, Kip Slaughter, Mr. Gojira, Rikki Kixx). Overall, these references work to shore up a privileged sense of being “in the know” (of possessing the “right” subcultural capital) regarding the star system that operates within the contemporary metal scene.

More broadly, these esoteric aspects of the Metalocalypse pitch aesthetic (“heavier and faster guitars,” “guttural screaming,” insider references) function to sustain a sense of authenticity amongst the show’s creative team, encapsulating the institutional strategies that underwrite a program deliberately targeting “guitar geeks and metalheads” (“Dethklok’s Brendon Small”). The overriding rationale, as Small summarizes it, is “credibility,” which is to say, distinguishing what is and what is not metal: “everything in this world is a little bit extreme. This is the kind of band where, when they watch TV, they change the channels with a stompbox on the ground. Everything is music driven” (Small quoted in Robair). Accordingly, each episode features an original Dethklok tune, which is performed by the band using “real” instruments and musical equipment. According to Small, the main purpose of these installments is to generate a sense of “legitimacy” with the audience: first, by adhering to the visual aesthetics of the genre—capturing in bluescreen “real” stage movements (e.g., guitar-fingering, head bangs, bobbing knees, hair windmills, and the like)—and, second, by showcasing a particular form of commercial authenticity via recognizable brand endorsements. As Small states:

Every time there is a song on the show, I basically have a production video and give the animators a guitar lesson . . . I kind of play to the song live so they can see what’s going on, and they match it up.
Sometimes it’s pretty accurate. I was like, “You know what? I didn’t realize how much responsibility I’ve given us.” First of all, it was the responsibility to make it credible metal because in the metal world credibility is everything. Secondly, it’s musically credible. So it was like, “Why not have them play actual guitar models? Why don’t we have them use actual real gear? That will make the world a little more realistic and make people kind of get it. Why not have them get a Gibson endorsement deal?” So I have a Gibson endorsement deal, too, through this. (“Dethklok’s Brendon Small”)

While the implication of Small’s comments appear to run against traditional notions of cultural authenticity—as unmediated by commercial interests—the overarching theme is quite different: that is, here “credibility with the metal world” is presented not in terms of “selling out” (or cashing in), but in terms of subcultural “responsibility,” an ethos defined by a lack of pretense, or a fidelity to what truly counts as metal vis-à-vis its brand-name affiliations. In this sense, authenticity is not predicated on repudiating commercial interests but articulating, self-consciously, one’s subcultural commitments within them. Hence getting the “right” endorsement deal becomes a basis for establishing credibility with metal fans—those who presumably “get” the fact that an otherwise “fake” band is using “real gear” and “actual guitar models.”

As a result, constructions of “credible metal” have less to do with artistic expression than authentic displays of subcultural capital—hierarchies of cultural status embodied in the sorts of specialized knowledge and commercial artifacts that connote a sense of being “in the know,” of belonging to an exclusive taste culture. In Small’s case, these hierarchies are communicated through the logic of the brand, as “being metal” becomes less about displaying an aesthetic affiliation with metal culture than articulating that affiliation through endorsements and consumer tastes. As he explained to Guitar Player magazine in 2007: “We wanted everything to be as authentic as possible . . . So as soon as the Cartoon Network [Adult Swim’s parent channel] gave us the green light, the first thing [co-creator] Tommy [Blacha] and I did was contact manufacturers for endorsements . . . It was only after we got the gear that we developed the characters” (quoted in Jones). In this way, constructions of branded authenticity—of an authentic creative/cultural space defined in terms of branding—serves as the prop undergirding the show’s pitch aesthetic, taking precedence over basic creative decisions like developing characters. As Small says, “it [brand-name endorsement]
legitimates the musical aspect of the show” (quoted in Robair). And thus the idea of maintaining “credibility with the metal world” seems to coincide not so much with a strictly musical influence but with a promotional logic that is geared toward a niche-consumer lifestyle shot through with brand experience. So long as the pitch aesthetic conforms to this sense of being metal, it is perceived as sincere—or “realistic”—to the subcultural formation.

Packaging Underground Music at Adult Swim

No doubt this strategy fits comfortably with the broader production environment at Adult Swim, a cable network that continues to appropriate distinct forms of underground music as a means of standing out in a highly competitive, multichannel television landscape. As the head of Adult Swim Mike Lazzo puts it, “We’re music lovers above all,” but “we try to steer away from average pop-type music” (quoted in Ryder). Hence Adult Swim’s brand profile winds up dovetailing with the subcultural politics of underground music, as steering away from the “average pop-type stuff” becomes a way to convey promotional attitudes about the channel’s brand identity as a late-night programmer of risqué, off-the-wall “adult” animation that ostensibly flies in the face of “mainstream television” (Itzkoff). Insofar as this brand reputation hinges on the sorts of subcultural (anti-mainstream) distinction common to underground popular music, the latter takes on renewed brand currency.

For instance, not only does the channel feature a staple series about a fictional death metal band, it also boasts a number of high-profile music collaborations, from Jay-Z and Kanye West to lesser-known artists T-Pain, Killer Mike, and El-P. Perhaps most famously in 2005, it worked to cross-promote The Mouse and the Mask, a collaboration album between DJ Danger Mouse and MF Doom, which took samples from the Adult Swim catalogue and other staple series such as Aqua Teen Hunger Force (2001 to present), Harvey the Birdman (2001–2007), and Space Ghost Coast to Coast (2001–2004); the album ranked twenty-fifth in Spin’s “40 Best Albums of 2005.” More recently, Adult Swim launched a sketch comedy series starring members of Odd Future, the underground hip hop collective from Los Angeles, infamous for their controversial lyrics and provocative video imagery. The New York Times dubbed the series, titled Loiter Squad (2012 to present), “a perfect match for the grotesque and puerile style of the producers” (McKinley). Variety similarly proclaimed the “dark, subversive
lyrics [of Odd Future] . . . a perfect fit for the Adult Swim audience,” noting the collaboration would shore up Adult Swim’s brand of musically-inflected absurdist comedy (Ryder).

In this fashion, Adult Swim has earned a brand reputation among critics as a preeminent showcase for “cutting edge” music. As Variety stated in 2011: “Once upon a time, young music fans might have tuned to MTV to hear the latest sounds by alternative bands. With MTV now firmly in the mainstream, Adult Swim is filling the void, showcasing the kinds of genres—death metal, shock rock, screamo, South African rap, you name it—you’re unlikely to hear anywhere else on cable” (Ryder). It follows that Adult Swim strives to preserve this sense of “difference” from the mainstream by packaging a particular sort of television music. As Lazzo recalls of the channel’s origins:

From day one, it was decided that the music heard by viewers should match the unconventional content. One of the things that we did when we started making Adult Swim was the packaging. For bumper music, we didn’t want to use the typical music that we saw in a TV library. We went to Jason Demarco [Creative Director of Sales and Promotions] and said, ‘Help us find interesting music.’ And from there we just got in deeper and deeper. (quoted in Ryder)

Concomitantly, Adult’s Swim’s use of television music reflects an equally iconoclastic attitude among its (discursively imagined) audience: male viewers who supposedly possess the minimum level of subcultural capital needed to grasp the channel’s signature use of “interesting music.” Accordingly, viewers are hailed as “hip” and “eager to separate themselves from what came before” (Crupi); most importantly, they are envisaged as constituting a distinct, coherent taste culture, which can be sold to advertisers through the logic of subcultural distinction. For example, as Lazzo reveals in his comments on Adult Swim’s use of “bumper music” (i.e., those brief musical interludes placed between programs and commercials), such music is circulated on Adult Swim primarily as brand “packaging,” promotional material designed to compliment an overall mode of television address: a form of interpellation that positions Adult Swim viewers as party to a legit subcultural platform for exclusive underground music.5

To that end, Adult Swim maintains its own affiliate label, Williams Street Records, which regularly produces original music for the channel, as well as a commercial partnership with independent label Stones Throw
Records, a producer-distributor of underground hip hop. The result is an emergent platform of television music structured according to Adult Swim’s own brand reputation for “pushing the limits of taste in its quest to draw young adults to television” (Keveney). Since 2005, for example, Adult Swim has either released or co-released over two dozen full-length studio albums, including a number of genre-specific compilations of “rare and unreleased tracks” from various electronic dance, metal, hip hop, and indie-rock artists (e.g., *Ghostly Swim, Metal Swim, African Swim, Garage Swim, Warm & Scratchy*). As the label’s founder Jason Demarco describes it, the point is to generate “authentic” cross-promotions:

> The number one thing is, obviously, television exposure, which is something most artists do not get anymore. . . . even MTV does not air videos very often anymore . . . The structure of our bumps allows us to say directly to the viewer, “You are listening to El-P. His new record is in stores. We think it’s great. Check it out.” And our viewers know that we don’t do it all the time, it’s not something that we’re bludgeoning them with, so they hopefully understand that when we do, it’s because we really like the music and we want to get that across to them. So there’s also a little bit of authenticity—it’s not just some marketing deal. (quoted in Stutz)

Notwithstanding the disingenuous nature of Demarco’s account, the overarching theme is, again, authenticity: developing a credible relationship with viewers via underground musical selections that ostensibly go beyond marketing imperatives. As such, the label combines a pastiche of niche sounds and narrowly specific genre cultures to cultivate a musical following on the basis of its link to an offbeat cable television network.

In turn, the channel is afforded an opportunity to capitalize on the principals of subcultural difference first elaborated by Hebdige, through an appeal to the “forbidden meanings” and “subterranean styles” that distinguish “authentic” subcultures from “orthodox” cultural formations (103). Whereas the latter seek to associate with conventional tastes and “nonobvious” modes of cultural consumption, spectacular subcultures “stand apart” by contrast, in their “loaded choice” that communicates difference by borrowing “transgressive” styles and “deviant” forms of “minority culture” so as to construct identities that “go against the grain of mainstream culture” (Hebdige 101–02). In a similar way, Adult Swim mobilizes discourses of subcultural distinction to develop postnetwork
programming that openly hails particular types of viewers while explicitly repelling others (Lotz 48). Adopting otherwise marginal genres—“the kind of music you’re unlikely to hear anywhere else on cable”—the channel is thus able to build a sense of authenticity into its format at multiple layers—from programming and bumpers to ancillary content. From this vantage point, terminology like “average pop-type music” can be understood to reflect the way Adult Swim works to build a distinctive audience on the basis of oppositional taste. As Demarco puts it, “We want the fact that it’s on [Adult Swim] to mean that whatever it is, it’s not going to be the expected thing you hear on television” (quoted in Stutz). Much in sync with the subcultural politics of underground music, then, Adult Swim aims to promote a specific type of subcultural distinction at once predicated on a “mainstream” cultural form (television), yet explicitly defined against it. Within this context underground music supplies a unique token of status distinction, conferring a sense of authenticity for the brand.

**The Importance of Being Metal in the Postnetwork Era**

It follows that while the pitch aesthetic embodied in *Metalocalypse* owes something to Adult Swim’s selective use of underground music (with its inherent value distinctions of subcultural capital, mainstreams, undergrounds, credibility, realism, and so on), both the show and its host channel seem to be reflective of the broader imperatives of brand culture. That is, both appear to amplify the dynamics described by Sarah Banet-Weiser as “branding the authentic,” whereby branding becomes reliant upon basic social and cultural relations: “brands are as much about culture as they are economics” (4), and hence branded authenticity is not simply a substitute for “selling out” or “selling cool” but a matter of tapping into the subcultural commitments (e.g., what counts as “metal”) that operate *within* brand culture.

Recall, for example, the opening episode of *Metalocalypse*, where the endorsement of a coffee brand gets rationalized by Nathan Explosion (in an echo of Small’s comments about the pitch aesthetic) as an act of branded authenticity: not a matter of “selling out” but affirming subcultural allegiances: “to make coffee metal, to make the whole world metal.” No doubt these sentiments square with the marketing strategies of multinational corporations, but they also provide the impetus for the development of brand culture as a whole, wherein, as Banet-Weiser argues, “the brand matters more than the product, and corporations sell an experience or a lifestyle more than
a thing” (70). Likewise, the relationship between postnetwork-era television and its audience has become one based on “brand bonding, where differences between ‘authentic’ experiences and the experiences sold through corporate branding are no longer (if they ever were) distinct” (ibid).

Consequently, one might say the driving critical issue of Metalocalypse is not so much the corporate appropriation of underground aesthetics but the way particular subcultures and media systems converge—how they forge a distinct type of relationship at the intersection of brand culture (including outlets like Adult Swim) in which branding authenticity becomes a way to explain how predominant conceptions of musical authenticity (like Small’s) get displaced onto issues of brand association: what matters here are the discursive articulations between brands and individuals (producers, consumers, artists, fans), and how these articulations get constructed as “authentic” via reference to popular music. In this context, the language of branded authenticity—subcultural capital, distinction, lifestyle, identity—works to uphold the logic of brand culture, providing the context for the more specific economic and institutional developments shaping postnetwork-era television music (cf. Meier).

Hence the importance of “being metal” signifies more than a devotion to the music; it also encapsulates a broader “lifestyle address” that invites viewers to identify with metal’s anti-mainstream ethos. As Andy Brown notes in the context of the metal music magazine, metal was “negatively constituted from the outset,” which is to say both historically and discursively defined in opposition to mainstream popular music yet equally beholden to the authenticity claims of rock discourse (“The Importance of Being Metal” 112). So conceived, metal continues to flaunt its “proud-pariah image” (Weinstein 161) via extreme musical practices that ostensibly remain “on the edge” of mainstream media culture (Kahn Harris) yet find their way toward authenticating a niche cable channel which aspires to “destroy television” (Lazzo quoted in Itzkoff). In this context, “being metal” characterizes a specific mode of “authentic” media consumption and “credible” television music.

Indeed, similar to the subcultural address of metal music tabloid magazines, programs like Metalocalypse offer “a way of constructing a commodified identity that is, in some sense, in opposition to or an alternative to a mainstream practice” (Brown, “The Importance of Being Metal” 115). Yet such forms are contradictory in their subcultural function: on the one hand, they promote the images and values of underground metal culture, while on the other hand they act as “conduits for the markets and commerce
that sustain the niche categories around which contemporary metal music is packaged as a *commodified* experience” (Brown, “Everything Louder Than Everything Else” 642). As such shows like *Metalocalypse* provide the conditions for cultivating a discrete subcultural community and a consumer market.

Like this, the practice of narrowcasting television through music-genre cultures seems to illustrate Simon Frith’s point that “the relationship of music and television is not organic but a matter of branding,” that is, it belies “the circular logic beloved of advertisers: because this is your sort of music this must be your sort of television; because this is your sort of television this must be your sort of music” (282). However, this article has tried to show that such positions overlook the specific character of musical-media articulations that occur throughout television music, and how these serve to reinforce (rather than take for granted) institutionally defined patterns of musical consumption. Rather than lead one to the general conclusion voiced by Frith that “it is not music in television that is important but television in music”—or put differently, “the very voraciousness with which television consumes all kinds of music suggests that is has very little concern for music as music at all” (287)—the very fact that there appears to be a strong correlation between certain types of programming (such as adult animation) and certain types of music (such as extreme metal) does not mean that “any music can be used this way” (ibid.). To the contrary, it means that within certain programming contexts (such as Adult Swim), the increasing use of popular music, especially those genres associated with marginalized tastes and underground cultures, do in fact provide television producers with an expedient way to “package” television audiences, albeit into refined and potentially lucrative branded media formats.

**Notes**

1. Adult Swim is the sister channel and “adult” version of Cartoon Network, a property of the Turner Broadcasting System owned and operated by Time Warner.

2. Three albums have since been released compiling music from the show: *Dethalbum II* (2009), *Dethalbum III* (2012), and *The Doomstar Requiem* (2013), the latter being the soundtrack album to the 2013 “rock opera” *Metalocalypse: The Doomstar Requiem A Klok Opera*.

3. Sarah Thornton defines subcultural capital as a subcategory of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “cultural capital,” or “knowledge that is accumulated through
upbringing and education which confers social status” (10). In contrast to the latter, which operates primarily in the fields of high culture, subcultural capital operates decisively in the realm of popular culture. Moreover, it is not a class-bound category (as in Bourdieu’s formulation) but rather a form of cultural distinction that takes place through media consumption. In other words, distinct taste cultures are commercially constructed in relation to corresponding distinctions between “mass,” “niche,” and “micro” media, which in turn play a role in organizing subcultural knowledge and affiliations (13–4; 116–62). Rather than homogenize “mass” tastes, media/cultural industries thus actually work to nurture subcultural distinctions and audience segmentation.

4. The phrase “television music” is here broadly defined; it signifies both the televisual context in which the circulation and promotion of popular music involves niche cable channels dedicated to music-based programming (e.g., MTV affiliates, VH1, CMT, Palladia, etc.), but also and more generally the way television attempts to incorporate aspects of popular music aesthetics outside of these contexts, particularly as a feature of programming strategy (cf. Goodwin, Coates).

5. So far the strategy has paid of; as The New York Times reported in February 2014, Adult Swim remains the top-rated cable network among the much-coveted 18-34 male demographic. As the “perennial demo darling” among late-night advertisers, moreover, the channel maintains an equally important reputation for being “DVR proof”—for delivering audiences through the commercial breaks—and this reportedly due in no small part to the music. As the trades have it, “Adult Swim’s signature bumpers may be the flour that binds the secret sauce” (Crupi), and indeed these fifteen second snippets have even spawned their own “bump worthy” website (including downloads, live streaming, and musical artist information), as well as their own Android app, iTunes category, and Facebook page. Whereas commercial bumpers had once been a standard feature of US television—in cartoons of the 1970s and 1980s, for example, commercial breaks were regularly intercut with voice bumpers like “We’ll be back after these messages”—the practice is now more common to radio. Nonetheless, Adult Swim’s extensive usage of bumper music demonstrates not only the central role that music itself plays in forming the channel’s brand identity but also in building its reputation as “the best place on TV to find new music” (Stutz); in effect, it points to how musical culture helps to mediate the brand and constitute the audience as a musical audience.

Works Cited


