

# Nedim Hassan

Editor of  
*Metal Music Studies*

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Dr Nedim Hassan is a senior lecturer in media and cultural studies at Liverpool John Moores University's School of Humanities and Social Science. Nedim is particularly interested in researching the roles of music, media and culture in everyday life.

*What first drew you to the study of metal music as an academic field?*

As Professor Deena Weinstein famously described it, historically metal was a pariah genre. In other words, during the 1970s and 80s metal was rarely taken seriously by the music press (outside of its own niche media that began to emerge) and rarely given radio airplay. This notion that metal was on the periphery or outside of the 'mainstream', even though that idea has been overstated at times, was one that sparked my interest. It was also something that seemed to be important to the self-identities of many fans and to the understandings of the genre that were being fostered in various quarters. Growing up in the UK as a hard rock and metal music fan I had the perception that the genre was something of an underdog. Even though it was very popular during the mid-to-late 80s, it always seemed pushed to the margins. On BBC radio for instance, specialist metal music programmes were confined to late night slots. Partly because of such things, this led fans to understand metal music culture in terms of marginality. Those aspects of metal music interested me as I was starting to study cultural studies and popular music studies as both an undergraduate and postgraduate.

My initial contemporary engagement with the field of metal music studies very much came from my own research interests. Between 2015 and 2020 I conducted ethnographic fieldwork into the metal music scene in the city of Liverpool, UK. What fascinated me about that was how Liverpool is a city globally acclaimed as a 'music city' and yet there was very little research into its metal scene. To outsiders it was as if the metal scene didn't exist and yet what I began to unearth was that not only was there a great deal of work going on to develop and sustain a scene, but that there was a rich heritage of extreme metal music production within the area. My research, therefore, led me to metal music studies as I worked to understand these phenomena.

As editor of *Metal Music Studies*, how do you see the discipline evolving in recent years?

I think former second section editor Nelson Varas-Díaz articulated it best when he suggested in an article written to commemorate the 10th anniversary of *Metal Music Studies* journal that the field has undergone three major paradigm shifts.

Writing in an era when heavy metal was the subject of moral panics, especially in the US, scholars in the 1980s and 90s were often initially concerned with assessing the extent to which metal could be understood as a problematic influence on its audiences. This 'pathologization paradigm', as Varas-Díaz puts it, had a strong influence on scholarship and residues of this remain today, not least because it has a connection with metal's pariah status that I mentioned earlier. I do not think it is a coincidence that landmark books published in the early 1990s such as Deena Weinstein's *Heavy Metal: the Music and its Culture* and Robert Walser's *Running with the Devil* had sections devoted to critiquing much of the early scholarship and also justifying metal as an object of serious cultural, sociological and musicological study in the face of previous critical dismissal.

Such books, together with influential later monographs such as Keith Kahn-Harris's *Extreme Metal*, prompted a second paradigm shift that sought to legitimate the serious scrutiny of metal, and several publications in the 2000s began to appreciate metal as a global phenomenon. Albeit, as Varas-Díaz notes, by taking the Global North as a lens through which to appreciate this development.

That brings me (finally) to a direct answer to your question. For me, the most significant evolution in the field of metal music studies in the last decade or so has been the dramatic rise of scholarship that has decentred perspectives from the Global North. There have been several publications by Western authors such as current *Metal Music Studies* associate editor, Edward Banchs, that have sought to examine metal's global diversity through studies that have illuminated distinct scenes in Africa, Asia and the Global South more broadly. Moreover, there has been a significant rise in metal music scholarship from the Global South, and this interest constitutes what Varas-Díaz terms the 'Distorted South' paradigm, insofar as it highlights aspects such as diversity, inequality and the legacies of colonialism.

There has also been a concomitant rise in scholarship that has critically engaged with metal music culture as a site of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity. I have personally found studies such as Rosemary Lucy Hill's *Gender, Metal and the Media* or my colleague, *Metal Music Studies* co-editor, Susana González-Martínez's forthcoming book *Feminist Metal*, to be absolutely vital in their critical engagement with a genre that has often been male dominated in the past.

## What do you think distinguishes metal music studies from other areas of popular music research?

There are lots of commonalities between metal music studies and the broader field of popular music studies. Having studied at the groundbreaking Institute of Popular Music at the University of Liverpool for several years, I was aware of how popular music studies had to fight to establish legitimacy in comparison to the study of classical music and traditional musicology. That notion of having to consistently justify the objects of your scholarly research is one that is shared with metal music studies. In many respects, both fields are interconnected and they also share a strong debt to cultural studies. The pioneering work of scholars such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall in the 1970s and the assertion that 'culture' does not only equate to so-called 'high culture' – classical music or certain kinds of literature by 'great' authors for instance – but that culture is 'ordinary' was pivotal for laying the foundation for the study of popular culture. The growth of popular music studies and metal music studies was made possible after this point.

Yet, I do think that there are certain unique factors that have shaped metal music's journey into the academic world. One is the residual sense that metal is a genre that has historically not been afforded credibility in comparison to many others. Andy R. Brown's examination of how metal and its fans were largely excluded from the classic subcultural studies of the 1970s and 80s is a case in point. Consequently, one distinct aspect of metal music scholarship as it has grown is the sense that its object of study still retains a semblance of a 'pariah' identity. Metal music historiography, then, including some of my own research into metal's representation on film during the 1980s, has had to deal with an interesting paradox. At the height of its commercial success, and during a period when it certainly became a dominant genre of US popular music, it was not only denied critical acclaim but also subject to moral panics that sought to construct the music and the fans in terms of deviance. It was, in that regard, both mainstream and other Hard rock and metal dominated MTV playlists and had significant chart success, but their artists and fans were seen largely as 'outsiders'.

The other distinct factor that is related to this 'pariah' identity is metal's longstanding association with the 'extreme'. As it matured during the late 20th and early 21st centuries, metal music splintered into sub-genres such as death, doom and black metal that seemed to increasingly push at sonic and aesthetic boundaries. This fascination with extremity has bled into metal music studies in some highly productive ways. It is no coincidence that some of the foremost contemporary scholars on extremity as a concept have roots in metal music studies. Writers such as Nelson Varas-Díaz, Daniel Nevárez Araújo, Niall Scott and Vivek Venkatesh position 'extremity' not as an aberration within societies but as a pivotal everyday concept for helping us to understand the challenges posed by an uncertain future.

## Are there particular themes or topics you feel are currently underexplored in metal music scholarship?

Metal music studies is a field that consists of a growing number of upcoming researchers, many of whom I met at last year's International Society of Metal Music Studies (ISMMS) biennial conference in Seville, Spain. So, my suggestions here will probably quickly become out of date as I know that there is exciting work emerging.

There is a growing body of research that examines the industrial practices and processes involved in the production of metal music. Most notably, the Heaviness in Metal Music Production project at University of Huddersfield, spearheaded by Jan Herbst and Corentin Charbonnier's work on the hugely successful Hellfest in France, are two examples that come to mind. Yet, I think that there is scope for metal music researchers to build on such work and to examine metal music industries and the diverse kinds of work that takes place within them. There are still probably not enough studies of sectors such as live music, metal music media (including niche metal music publications both offline and online), record labels, musicians and the creative process.

We continue to get a lot of submissions interested in musical texts or focusing on specific metal music artists, rather than metal music audiences. While there is a growing amount of work on the reception of metal and why it becomes meaningful to fans, as the latest Special Issue on 'Metal and Dance' shows us, there is still untapped potential for us to examine how and why people respond to metal in diverse ways.

## How do you balance academic rigour with the passion and subjectivity that often comes with studying metal?

I think all the *Metal Music Studies* journal editors would agree that this is a crucial issue. Every so often we get articles that are clearly written by fans and advocates of a particular genre, scene or artist. Sometimes this can be highly beneficial in the sense that the writer is highly invested in their subject matter, and they often have a strong level of expert knowledge. On the other hand, enthusiasm can sometimes get in the way of rigour and an academic rationale. In such instances, the writers need to ask themselves an important question – what is my purpose in writing this research article? Following on from this, the writer needs to have a clear sense of methodology and an ability to justify this. They also need to be as clear as possible on how their research contributes to the field of metal music studies or possibly to wider fields such as sociology, leisure studies and so on. I think as long as they can reflect in this manner then, in most cases, they will be able to successfully navigate the tensions between passion, subjectivity and the requirements of academia.

## What role does interdisciplinarity play in shaping the journal's direction?

Our first Chief Editor, Professor Karl Spracklen, was very clear from the outset that *Metal Music Studies* is an outlet for interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research interested in metal music as a subject. To use a well-worn phrase, we really are a 'broad church'. There are scholars who come to us from fields you might expect such as musicology, sociology, popular music studies and cultural studies, but there are also scholars who come to us from the likes of education, religious studies, medieval studies, philosophy and music production. The editorial team at the journal are very open to receiving articles from a wide range of disciplines. Interdisciplinarity is fundamental to what we do because it creates possibilities to take metal music studies in fresh directions.

## How has the relationship between metal music and issues like politics, identity or community shifted in recent years?

Partly through the work of the *Metal Music Studies* journal, alongside a diverse range of metal specific media outlets, I think that there is currently more of a willingness to critically engage with and acknowledge metal's role in such issues. While writers like Rosemary Lucy Hill have made clear that there is still plenty of work to do, I think that there is more willingness for those researching metal, taking part in metal music scenes or those engaged with metal music production to critically reflect on their relationship with such issues. Moving away from academia for a moment to give two examples from the UK, the rise of organisations interested in supporting communities such as Metal for Good or the Sophie Lancaster Foundation and the support they receive from the Bloodstock festival illuminates how seriously the industry takes initiatives that foster community engagement.

## What challenges do scholars face when researching a genre that is often misunderstood or marginalized?

The challenges continue to be manifold. As with other areas of popular culture, historically metal was not seen as a cultural form worth preserving in the same way as others that were seen as more 'legitimate'. Recently I have been conducting research into a rock show broadcast on Independent Local Radio in the UK during the 1970s and 80s and I found that archival material of such shows (in comparison to broadcasts of other more celebrated genres) was in short supply. Metal music scholars interested in history may have to contend with the fact that the items they are interested in studying were not considered part of a country's 'heritage' and therefore could be lost or disposed of. For this reason, metal historians and archivists may be more reliant on fans' personal collections, rather than suitably catalogued collections.

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Perception is another key challenge. Despite its popularity and loyal fan base, to outsiders metal is still often viewed as an object of curiosity at best or something to demonise at worst. Of course, cultural context plays a significant part in this. While metal has found its way into the museum and has begun to be seen as a legitimate part of British heritage in cities like Birmingham, Pasqualina Eckerström's research into metal music production in Iran and Saudi Arabia shows us that musicians are literally sometimes risking their lives for the music they love.

### How do you approach broadening the diversity of voices and perspectives within the journal?

One approach to this has been to try to be forward-facing. At last year's ISMMS conference the editorial team spoke directly to delegates, outlining our requirements and advising people who have not previously considered submitting to a journal on how to contribute. This is an approach that we want to continue at the next ISMMS biennial conference, and we want to engage with broader ISMMS members to support those who wish to publish their work with us. If people feel that we are accessible to them then hopefully that will encourage them to have the confidence to submit material.

We are also proud of the fact that this journal has worked to recognise the contributions of scholars from the Global South. Back in issue 7.1 we had a second Special Section on Latin America, the second time the journal had such a section (the first being in 2018). In the editorial for that issue, Nelson Varas-Díaz noted how the six short articles from scholars in countries like Mexico and Peru, was indicative of how metal music studies was starting to grow in that region. Exposure for emerging scholars, perhaps for whom English is not a first language, remains a key aspect of our work and our second section teams in particular have worked to afford different opportunities. It is anticipated that, in the future, as the journal continues to evolve that we will utilize our online presence more so that we can incorporate non-standard ways of disseminating research or things like industry-based knowledge via things like interviews, podcasts and so on.

### In your view, how has digital culture (streaming, online communities, etc.) transformed metal scenes and their study?

Undoubtedly, the rise of digital culture has partly democratized the study of metal music. Through engagement with online sources, whether this is social media groups or things like digital archives, many scholars have at their fingertips opportunities to conduct rich and fascinating research without leaving their desks. Furthermore, these are opportunities that were not always replicable prior to the internet. For fear of persecution or other social factors, previous research has sometimes shown us that people may feel more comfortable in online spaces.

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The web also provides scholars with options to disseminate their research in ways that can be accessed by stakeholders beyond academia. For instance, with my own research, after the publication of my study into the Merseyside metal scene in 2021, I was fortunate enough to be able to continue to collaborate with locally based stakeholders. Together we developed a website, a YouTube channel and social media pages that enabled some of the intentions behind the book such as raising awareness of the existence of the hitherto under-represented metal scene within the Liverpool city region to be carried out in ways that were accessible to non-academics.

Nonetheless, the abundance of material online can sometimes obscure how deceptively rich scenic activities are. While dwelling in online spaces can be an integral part of research into metal music scenes and cultures, it should be noted that this should where possible be combined with the sorts of dwelling that would have typified research prior to the rise of the internet. After all, it can be difficult to replicate phenomena such as mosh pit culture in an off-line setting. People can tell us about this but sometimes it is equally as important to physically experience it.

### What advice would you give to early career researchers interested in publishing in *Metal Music Studies*?

There are several things that you can do to help you prepare your research for publication in *Metal Music Studies*.

Firstly, I know it sounds obvious, but ensure that you carefully look at the Notes for Contributors on the Intellect website for the journal prior to sending us anything. There have been several instances where prospective authors have not submitted articles in the correct format or where authors have not conformed to the Intellect style guidelines. Getting stuff like that right first time will save you a lot of time and will prevent initial rejection.

Secondly, again without wishing to state the obvious, it is vital that prospective authors have read the journal before. If you can, taking the time to look at examples of previously published articles is hugely beneficial. Not only does it serve as a reminder that you are going to potentially contribute to a vibrant scholarly field, but it also gives you a clear insight into our expectations for published work.

Finally, I would say that presenting work that you intend to seek to publish at conferences, workshops and so on, is a very good way of gaining feedback. If you have ideas, then come and talk to us at such conferences. Certainly, I think there is a strong chance that a few of us will attend the next ISMMS biennial conference at the University of Liège, Belgium in June 2027. We are all approachable and, contrary to the mythology of one of metal's favourite sons, we don't bite doves or bats or people.