



Rhetoric and Rock

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In this analysis of the song lyrics, music videos, and album art of hard rock bands like Five Finger Death Punch, Redlight King, and Art of Dying, Shawn McDaniel's rhetorical perspective reveals the constructive and empathetic messages underlying a musical genre widely misunderstood as violent and depraved. This essay was written for Rhetoric & Composition with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

AS THE GREAT rhetorician Aristotle once wrote, “Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (24), and rhetorical devices such as ethos, pathos, kairos, and others help to focus rhetorical observation. However, when it comes to music, specifically the genre of rock and its subgenre of hard rock, rhetorical observation is rarely used by the masses, who instead focus on the stereotypes associated with the genre, those being that this genre is associated with violence, anger, suicide, and, in some cases, demonic or satanic worship. However, should those same masses pause to listen some lyrics or watch a music video and apply rhetoric, they would discover a genre about fighting through hard times, about dealing with mental health issues such as depression, about helping those who for

whatever reason can't help themselves, and about staying strong despite suicidal thoughts. These messages become clearer when analyzing rhetorical devices such as God and Devil terms, metaphor, ethos, image, and pathos.

God and Devil terms tend to invoke a good-versus-evil mentality with their names alone. However, as rhetorical tools, the terms were coined by Richard Weaver, who described the god term as “that expression about which all other expressions are ranked as subordinate and serving dominations and powers” (212). And according to Ken Broda-Bahm, “Devil terms are not terms you avoid, but are rather terms that you embrace in describing the other side, and in helping to frame what your audience should be against.” Neither of these concepts are necessarily good or evil, but because of their names, we associate them as one or the other:

A god term means more than just a “good term” but is instead a “rhetorical absolute,” something that carries a strong automatic meaning. That is, it isn't good because we can think of an argument why it is good. Instead, it is good because it fits with at least one common worldview that our audience holds about what is good. (Broda-Bahm)

So, what are some Devil terms associated with hard rock music? The biggest devil term for the genre is, perhaps fittingly, Satan. Hard rock bands have long been associated with satanic worship and practices and while some bands, such as Five Finger Death Punch or Disturbed, have somewhat embraced the concept by featuring demonic beings on their album cover, other bands break that stereotype. A popular example is Skillet, a Christian hard rock band. Despite not using explicit language, their songs deal with the same themes as other bands in the genre, such as self-harm and depression, which leads into another devil term, Suicide. A popular stereotype is that the genre glamorizes and encourages suicide among its listeners. The obvious counter argument to that is that, if these bands encouraged their listeners to commit suicide, how are any of

their fans still alive? But beyond that, most of the songs from the genre that deal with self-harm and suicide actually have lyrics that urge the listener *not* to kill themselves and to keep fighting. An example of this is the song “Get Through This” by the band Art of Dying, the chorus of which is:

If I can get through this
 I can get through anything.
 If I can make it through this
 I can get through anything.
 If I can get through this
 I can get through anything.
 If I can make it through this
 I can get through anything.

These lyrics appear to be meant to psych up the listener and to encourage them to keep going, while also reassuring the listener that they will get through everything. Another common devil term associated with the genre is Violence, more specifically that this genre of music encourages its readers to commit acts of violence and that the genre generally increases aggression. The stereotype is somewhat correct. Many songs in the hard rock subgenre have violent lyrics. However, the lyrics aren’t encouraging random acts of violence. Rather, the suggested violence is merely a metaphor for the battles we go through in life. For example, the lyrics to the song “Got Your Six” by the band Five Finger Death Punch on face value are about two men in a type of gladiatorial arena, with one encouraging the other that they “have his six,” a military term meaning that they will guard his back. Analyzing it another way, the song is a metaphor about being there for one’s friends and one’s friends being there in return.

A metaphor is a valuable writing tool in both prose and poetry. However, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson write, “metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (3). Lakoff

and Johnson talk about the conceptual metaphor of “argument is war” and how our culture tends to view arguments similar to war. That same use of war as a metaphor for other activities is prevalent in the hard rock genre and might add to the generally public’s view of hard rock music being violent. Rock and its subgenres frequently use war metaphors in their lyrics. However, this should be to the genre’s favor. As Lakoff and Johnson say, “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (5). While someone who doesn’t have a mental illness or self-harmful thoughts might not understand the feelings of someone going through those in plain, face-value words, they might understand the metaphors that a band might use to convey those thoughts, especially since war metaphors are so ingrained in American culture. For example, the song “Bullet in My Hand” by the band Redlight King has the lyrics:

There’s someone lookin’ out for me.
I came out of the darkness
With a bullet in my hand.
I got one more shot at livin’.
I’m lucky that I can.

These lyrics appear to be a metaphor for coming out of a deep depression thanks to the aid of someone, possibly a therapist, and now having the tools necessary for a second chance at a normal life. Hard rock doesn’t just use war metaphors when talking about mental health or suicide, though. Some bands sing simply about being stressed out, yet they still use war metaphors. For example, the song “State of My Head” by the band Shinedown has lyrics like: “We’ve been shot up, beat up by the fallin’ of the arrows,” and, “Yeah, I’m full of deep cuts right down to the marrow.” While these lyrics at face value are about an unnamed narrator getting severely wounded, metaphorically they are about being stressed out by multiple problems and being worn out and tired. A similar example is the song

“Bulletproof” by the band Godsmack. While the title and lyrics talk about a man being bulletproof, they are a metaphor for someone being emotionally hardened by situations in their life and not being able to be hurt the same way again. Both songs have lyrics about being worn down by life but still overcoming obstacles, whether by actively fighting back in Shinedown’s case or by becoming used to the stress until it loses its effect in Godsmack’s case.

Another rhetorical tool to use is ethos, or a person’s character. Ethos has long been used in rhetoric: “As early as the fourth century BCE, Greek teachers of rhetoric gave suggestions about how a person’s character could be put to persuasive uses, and rhetorical theorists continued to discuss the uses of ethical proofs throughout the history of ancient rhetoric” (Crowley and Hawhee 146). These proofs are still used today. However, our definition of character has changed over time. Nowadays, character is synonymous with personality. However, according to the ancient Greeks, “character was constructed not by what happened to people but by the moral practices in which they habitually engaged” (Crowley and Hawhee 149). Two kinds of ethical proof exist and each one has its own place. One is invented ethos, which is ethos the rhetor invents for the occasion where it is needed. The other is situated ethos, which is ethos that the rhetor is known for in the community. An important note is that invented ethos is not false ethos. Invented ethos is for situations where the community or audience isn’t aware of the speaker’s situated ethos, and therefore the speaker must create an ethos for themselves on the spot. However, it is the situated ethos of hard rock bands that doesn’t get mentioned often. One example of the situated ethos of hard rock bands happened in 2018 when hard rock bands Five Finger Death Punch and Breaking Benjamin each donated \$95,000 to two different charities (Erickson). Breaking Benjamin donated their money to the charity Prevent Child Abuse America, while Five Finger Death Punch donated their money to C.O.P.S., Concerns of Police Survivors. Another example also occurred in 2018 when Five Finger Death Punch frontman Ivan Moody donated

fifty sleeping bags to Pillars, an organization that helps the homeless (Meinert). He also made similar donations in Colorado Springs and Minneapolis. Judging from of this situated ethos, both bands have broken the popular stereotype of hard rock bands blowing all of their money on drugs and alcohol. Another hard rock band, Disturbed, breaks the perceived ethos of hard rock bands only singing about violence with their song “Another Way to Die.” While the title makes it sound like a song dedicated to killing an opponent creatively, the song itself is actually about the environment and how the human race is polluting the planet at an alarming rate, with verses like:

Glaciers melt as we pollute the sky,
 A sign of devastation coming.
 We don't need another way to die.
 Will we repent in time?

The title is in reference to the human race creating yet another way to die, only this time it is one we can control and, hopefully, fix before it becomes irreversible.

A rhetorical approach that applies to this topic is Roland Barthes’s “Rhetoric of the Image.” Barthes talks about two things that apply well to the hard rock discussion: the connotative image, and the denotative image. The denotative image, according to Barthes, “is both evictive and sufficient[;] it will be understood that from an aesthetic point of view the denoted image can appear as a kind of Edenic state of the image; cleared utopianically of its connotations, the image would become radically objective, or in the last analysis, innocent” (158). From this description, it is easy to gather that the denotative image is an image that is taken literally. The connotative image resembles the denoted image, but with added associations meant to evoke a response from the viewer. Examples of this from the world of music are album covers. For example, the cover to the Five Finger Death Punch album *Got Your Six* features a giant, muscular, demonic figure warding off other demonic figures

with a baseball bat in one hand and a serrated sword with a knuckleduster handle in the other (fig. 1). Based on the amount of blood on the cover and on the main entity, the viewer can discern that the main entity has been fighting off the horde of other demons. By viewing it purely as a denoted image, it is simply another hard rock band with a



Fig. 1. Album cover for Five Finger Death Punch's Got Your Six.

piece of violent and bloody cover art. However, viewing connotations derived from the songs on the album, the viewer can see the metaphor in the image of fighting one's own demons. Then, through that lens, the weapons the main demon carries can be seen as metaphors for aids such as therapy or medication. The horde of demons are now seen as metaphors for depression, anxiety, stress, and self-harm. And finally, the main demon becomes the viewer themselves.

Finally, the last rhetorical device to be applied is pathos. According to Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee, "In the fifth century BCE Plato and Aristotle began to use the term Pathos to discuss emotions in general" (170). The most common pathos appeal associated with the hard rock genre is anger, and that's not a baseless claim. Several songs in the genre are sung angrily or have angry-sounding lyrics. However, anger is usually the only emotion associated with the genre and that is untrue. In fact, the band Five Finger Death Punch uses the emotions of compassion, pity, and shame in several of their

music videos. For example, in their music video for their song “Wrong Side of Heaven,” they use all three of these emotions, as well as fear and despair, in order to tell the story of four veterans, three of whom become homeless when they return to the United States. However, rather than just show a simple before and after, the video shows each veteran’s individual struggles with PTSD, all the while showing the statistics for homeless veterans, veterans with untreated mental illnesses caused by combat, and veteran divorce rates. The video also ends with a list of charities that their fans can donate to. Another example is their music video for their cover of “Gone Away.” This video is also about a veteran, although one who suffers not only from PTSD, but from survivor’s guilt as well. Both videos show the horrors of war while calling on their fans to donate to charities to help veterans, showing both an anti-war and pro-veteran message. Finally, their music video for their song “When the Seasons Change” follows two police officers who are ambushed upon answering a call. Both are shot, though one gets hit in their vest. The other one is rushed to the hospital after being hit in the neck. The band uses pathos to make their viewers anxious over the fate of the wounded officer (spoiler alert: he lives), while also using flashbacks showing the two officers growing up together to evoke a sense of empathy and compassion for the other officer as her best friend and partner fights for his life. At the end, it shows that the video “is dedicated to the memory of the Las Vegas cop Charleston Hartfield, who lost his life in the 2017 Route 91 mass shooting. The police officer and Army veteran used his body to shield and protect others from a hail of bullets.”

These examples of rhetorical proof show that hard rock music is more than the stereotype the public has of it. The songs of this genre are not about encouraging their listeners to commit random acts of violence or to kill themselves; rather, they are about encouraging their listeners to live on despite whatever troubles they might face. Their pathos is not about inspiring anger in itself but about inspiring strength in their listeners to keep on fighting against life’s hardships.

Their ethos is not of the Satanic worshipper, but of people who give to charity, make music that incorporates social issues into the lyrics, and make music videos that encourage their fans to donate to charity and raise awareness to issues that most would rather forget. Above all though, these rhetorical tools and techniques show that the hard rock genre isn't as one-dimensional as the general public believes it is. ►►

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