



BLACK METAL

BY METAL JEW

PHOTOS MAGNUS NILSSON

THE CLAW OF HEAVY ROCK REACHES OUT TO THE MOST METAL-HOSTILE PLACE ON EARTH: SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA. METAL JEW, OUR FAVOURITE BLOGGER, ACADEMIC AND GLOBAL METAL AUTHORITY TRACKS DOWN A NOISY METAL SCENE IN THE LAST PLACE YOU'D LOOK

Metal, one of the most flamboyant music genres, forged by Black Sabbath in the foundries of post-industrial West Midlands, seems to have an appeal that transcends cultural and national differences. Even if metal's heartlands lie in the USA and Northern Europe, there are vibrant scenes everywhere, from Indonesia to Iran. The films *Heavy Metal in Baghdad* and Sam Dunn's *Global Metal* showed how, in oppressive societies and warzones, metallers struggle heroically against the odds to find liberation through riffage.

But, in the global metal empire, there remain patches of unconquered territory. You can easily point on a map to where the biggest metal-free zone starts – the Sahara desert – and where it ends: (white) South Africa. North African countries have vibrant metal scenes, but sub-Saharan Africa has resisted the onward march of the blast beat. The irony is palpable: the darkest of musical forms, born out of a dystopian mangling of the blues, lacks black people. This isn't just the case in sub-Saharan Africa, the black Caribbean is also metal-free, with only Hispanic islands like Cuba and Puerto Rico having fallen to the metal forces.

But a few small corners of black Africa have failed to resist the global metal onslaught. Take Botswana. Magnus Nilsson an assistant professor at Malmö University, Sweden, 'discovered' the metal scene while teaching at the University of Botswana in 2007. The scene wasn't like the other metal scenes he knew.

"The metal scene seemed to be somewhat anachronistic. One example of this was that metal fans at the festival I went to played air guitar on an inflatable toy guitar. Another thing I found interesting was that there seemed to be some sort of unholy alliance between metalheads and Country and Western fans. Some metalheads had integrated cowboy attributes (such as sheriff badges, cowboy hats and even toy revolvers) into their outfits."

The most intriguing thing about the Botswana scene was its attitude toward race: "In Botswana all the metalheads (at least the ones I encountered) are black. And as if this was not enough, all the metal fans I talked to thought that it was strange that I, a white man, liked heavy metal..."

At least one Botswanan metal band is making inroads into the global metal scene. Wrust, who play orthodox but accomplished death metal, have released an album on a South African label and supported Brazilian metal juggernauts Sepultura in Durban in 2003. Botswana appears to have the only substantial black African metal scene. Of course neighbouring South Africa has a large metal scene, with bands such as Groinchurch touring in Europe and releasing albums internationally. Nonetheless, in the 'rainbow nation' aka South Africa, the vast majority of the scene is white. The scene in Namibia, which manages to support the annual Windhoek Metal Fest, is also mostly white.

It's a thrill to find metal bands beaver away in isolated locations. It's fun to speculate on how Angola's Neblina or Congo's sicker-than-sick gore metallers Infertile Surrogacy manage to function so far from the metal motherlode. Let's not make the mistake though of thinking that sub-Saharan black Africa is somehow an oppressive environment that requires saving by the valiant (white) knights of metal. No: African music is diverse and creative as it is. Poverty and isolation definitely play a part in the lack of metal in black Africa, but perhaps they simply don't 'need' metal in that part of the world. Still, I salivate at the prospect of hearing what would happen if black African artists were to try and produce their own local variant of metal. What would a collision between metal and Senegalese mbalax or Zimbabwean chimurenga sound like? Maybe the tiny metal scenes of black Africa could blow the minds of those who complacency view metal as white music....

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