

Historical Themes in Iron Maiden Songs (Part I): From the Cavemen to the Vikings

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Abstract: This paper intends to deepen some of the ideas put forward in a previous study of ours, “Historical Characters and Facts in Iron Maiden Songs: a journey from Pre-History to The Second World War” (MELLER, 2005). Our aim is to demonstrate that the lyrics to Maiden’s songs stand out in the Heavy Metal scenario (whose lyrics usually have as subject matters Satanism, sex, drinking, and drug abuse). Avoiding these commonplace topics, Steve Harris, the main songwriter in the group, invests in more elaborate lyrics, either inspired by literary works or about historical themes. In fact, there are so many songs in the band’s discography that deal with historical themes that it is even possible to draw a timeline that stems from Pre-History and reaches The Second World War. While our analytical approach tends to focus on the lyrics, it will not ignore some aspects that are crucial to a better understanding of songs, namely the strictly musical elements (melody, harmony, rhythm, arrangement, etc.), and performance.

Keywords: Iron Maiden; Heavy Metal; History; Popular Music Studies.

Resumo: Este trabalho pretende verticalizar algumas das ideias apresentadas em um estudo prévio de nossa autoria, “Personagens e Fatos Históricos nas Canções do Iron Maiden: uma jornada da Pré-História à Segunda Guerra Mundial” (MELLER, 2005). Nosso intuito é o de demonstrar que as letras das canções do Maiden se destacam no cenário do Heavy Metal (cujas letras normalmente versam sobre Satanismo, sexo, bebida e consumo de drogas). Fugindo a esse lugar-comum, Steve Harris, o principal compositor do grupo, investe em letras mais elaboradas, ora inspiradas em obras literárias, ora baseadas em temas históricos. Com efeito, há tantas canções, na discografia da banda, que versam sobre temas históricos que é mesmo possível traçar uma linha do tempo que parte da Pré-História e chega até a Segunda Guerra Mundial. Embora nossa abordagem de análise tenda a enfatizar as letras, ela não prescindirá de alguns aspectos que são cruciais para um melhor entendimento das canções, nomeadamente, os elementos estritamente musicais (melodia, harmonia, ritmo, arranjo etc.), e a performance.

Palavras-chave: Iron Maiden; Heavy Metal; História; Estudos de Música Popular.

Introduction

Iron Maiden is an English Heavy Metal band formed in London in the mid 1970s. It belongs to the so-called NWOBHM – New Wave of British Heavy Metal, a musical movement that was a response to the Punk Rock scene of the late 70s and which attempted at rescuing the hard rock aesthetics in the tradition of Led Zeppelin,

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Deep Purple and, above all, Black Sabbath. Although Iron Maiden has been having a successful career up to the present days, the 1980s saw the band at their creative peak. It was between 1982 and 1988 that they launched a string of “classic” albums that consolidated their unique compositional and playing style, an achievement that secured them a steady place in Heavy Metal’s pantheon.

Stylistically speaking, Iron Maiden followed the trend used by most hard rock / heavy metal acts and adopted trademarks of this genre, such as distorted guitars, thundering bass and drums, and loud vocals. Besides, one can identify a vague resemblance with progressive rock, a common trace made clear because of lengthy tracks with numerous changes in tempo, melody, harmonic structure, mood and so on. Examples of this in Maiden’s repertoire include songs like “Powerslave”, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, “Alexander the Great” and “Paschendale”, to name but a few.

Broadly speaking, there are two main trends when it comes to Heavy Metal lyrics: either they have morbid-satanic inspiration, or they advocate unlimited hedonism and debauchery (partying, drug taking, and sex). Black Sabbath, pointed by many as the forefathers of HM, come to mind when thinking of satanic themes (and they would be followed in this by subgenres such as Black Metal and Death Metal). The latter tendency is found in the works of pioneers like KISS and AC/DC, later on followed by the Los Angeles Sunset Strip hard rock scene from the 80s (Warrant, Mötley Crue, Ratt, Poison, Guns and Roses etc).

Although it is possible to align Maiden to Sabbath in morbid-satanic inclinations (e.g. *The Number of the Beast*, album launched by Iron Maiden in 1982), what really makes them stand out, as far as lyrics are concerned, are songs inspired either by historical facts or songs which are inter-semiotic versions of literary works. Examples of the former include “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”, based on the short-story by Edgar Allan Poe; “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, an adaptation of the eponymous poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge; “Stranger in a Strange Land”, based on a sci-fi novel launched by Robert A. Heinlein in 1961; and “To Tame a Land”, based on yet another sci-fi novel, *Dune*, written by Frank Herbert in 1965.

As for songs with historical themes, our focus in this paper, they are so common in the band’s repertoire that it is to draw a “historical timeline” of songs whose subject matters stretch from the pre-historic “quest for fire” by nomad tribes up to the aerial battles fought by Germans vs British in World War II. In spite of bassist Steve Harris

being the main songwriter in the group, vocalist Bruce Dickinson also contributed in this process, for he has a bachelor's degree in History from the Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London.

Incidentally, the term “Iron Maiden” also has a historical tinge, referring to an instrument of torture and execution used by the Ancient Regime, which consisted of a sarcophagus whose doors had sharp prongs on the inside. Once the victim had been placed into the device, its doors were shut, piercing his or her body – but not on lethal spots. It even had an opening to allow the torturer to interrogate the victim. Thus, the individual agonized for several hours, sometimes days, until he or she finally expired. Information about this instrument of torture is contradictory. According to one of the sources researched, there would have been only one real Iron Maiden, in Nuremberg, Germany, and the first person to be executed would have been a coin-forgery, on Aug. 14, 1515. Regardless of the historical accuracy of these data, what counts to our study is that, by adopting such a name to baptize the band, Harris hinted at a desire to associate it – and the music it made – to a somber image.

One important point to be made when discussing Maiden's so-to-say “historical” songs is that they highlight both the deeds of great heroes, as well as the lives of anonymous characters, whom are given a “voice”. One even has the impression that there is a certain intention to make justice to the so-called “victims” of History, in lyrics written, not unintentionally, in the first person. This is the narrative strategy used in several compositions, for instance, in “Hallowed Be Thy Name”, in which a man condemned by the Inquisition tells us his story as he marches towards the scaffold; in “Aces High”, in which a R.A.F. (Royal Air Force) pilot fights Hitler's *Luftwaffe*; and in “The Trooper”, in which a member of the English cavalry narrates all the tension experienced in the Battle of Balaclava, during the Crimean War (1853-56), in the perspective of an anonymous soldier, up to the moment when he is shot by the Russian enemy and dies.

It is not difficult to understand the plethora of songs dealing with historical themes in Iron Maiden's repertoire. After all, the aggressive and grandiose musical features of Heavy Metal have an undeniable epic element that lay the ground to treat war conflicts, in all of its configurations (from bodily fights to aerial battles), permeated by several kinds of technology (from stones in the Paleolithic to spears in the Middle Ages; from shotguns in the 19th Century to the bombs dropped by airplanes in the

Second Great War). Furthermore, when discussing popular music, one should not ignore the vital role played by visual identity; after all, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to state that the leather-and-metal outfits carry some resemblance with the medieval suits of armor, indicating a certain inclination to war themes, a tendency confirmed not only by Iron Maiden's discography, but also detectable in Black Sabbath's "War Pigs", or in Metallica's "One", amongst many examples.

As regards the "strictly musical elements" of Heavy Metal, these could be summed up as follows: i) loud volume – apparently one cannot fully experience HM, or for that matter, rock music, quietly, because there it is a kind of music that presupposes some sort of body engagement; ii) uptempo, a feature that is true to most Heavy Metal music, and certainly true to Maiden's repertoire, although one has to remember that most of Sabbath's songs were played relatively slowly, and some incredibly slowly, such as the track "Black Sabbath" (in other words, it is important to bear in mind that a sped up tempo is *not* the element that lends "heaviness" to the music – sometimes it is quite the other way round, i.e., the slower the more somber and heavier the song becomes); iii) an aggressive singing voice, in the case of Maiden's Bruce Dickinson's marked by an operatic style and by a wide range; iv) distorted, nervous guitars, whose "power chords" (i.e. chords formed by the 1st and 5th degrees of the scale) have a "chunky" sonic quality, sounding as a "block" (and not like the result of separate notes). It is important to highlight that the band's "classic period" (i.e. 1980-1988) was marked by the contributions of two guitarists (Dave Murray and Adrian Smith), with totally distinct styles, but who complemented one another's work efficiently, especially when playing parallel solos in harmonic intervals, or semiotically engaging in a battle, during the solos, as if they were two warriors, each one brandish his "axe"; v) guitar riffs, which stand out as one of the main features not only of Heavy Metal but of rock music as a whole. These are short, reiterative melodic leitmotifs played on the guitar (and / or on the bass), many times responsible for the song's identity (even more so than the melody). A quick scan through Maiden's repertoire confirms the importance of guitar riffs, such as those in "The Number of the Beast", "The Trooper", "Iron Maiden", "Hallowed be Thy Name" or "Wasted Years", to name but a few; vi) a pulsating bass guitar, usually building a steady, regular basis (alongside the drums) either replicated by the electric guitars or upon which they can create riffs and ornaments; once again, Steve Harris, Maiden's bassist, stands out for his creativity, through melodic basslines, chord

inversions, and “galloping” rhythm patterns. This “galloping” effect, one of Harris’s trademarks, is obtained by the sequence of one quaver and two semiquavers played at approximately 100 to 140 bpm; vi) “thunderous” drums, in a flamboyant, virtuoso playing style that stands somewhere between classic rock’n’roll (straight 4/4 beat) and jazz (off-beats, changes in time signature and unlimited fills).

Song Analysis

Having put forward some of the general features of the Heavy Metal genre, with a special focus on Iron Maiden’s own sonic characteristics, and after drawing the reader’s attention to how they stand out lyrically, let us now cast a glance, however briefly, on some of the songs that make up the aforementioned “historical timeline”. From the outset, it is important to make clear that our concern is not to check the lyrics historical accuracy, since we are dealing with an art form – in this particular case, popular song. It goes without saying that the artist, however based on a historical event, is free to create upon it.

Secondly, we believe it is relevant to explain that, although the criterion to song selection was thematic (i.e., songs that dealt with historical subjects), we decided to narrow down our scope and pick out songs from albums that are considered Iron Maiden’s “main sequence”, to use Bill Martin’s terminology. Martin, a social theorist and musician who specialized in the work of English Progressive Rock band Yes, borrows this term from Astronomy – “the main period in which a star is burning brightly”² – to justify his preference for a certain sequence of Yes’s albums, a period that represents the band at their very best.

Similarly, we believe that Maiden’s “main sequence” starts with their third LP *The Number of the Beast* (1982), which projected them to worldwide fame, followed by *Piece of Mind* (1983), *Powerslave* (1984), *Live after Death* (1985), *Somewhere in Time* (1986), and *Seventh Son of a Seventh Son* (1988). The inclusion of a live album is justified by the fact that it is an anthology of the band’s finest songs from their five first records in vibrant versions, some of which even surpass the studio recordings (e.g. “Hallowed be Thy Name”, which gains a lot more intensity in the live recording, or “Aces High”, whose live version is preceded by a recording of Winston Churchill

² MARTIN, Bill. *Music of Yes: structure and vision in progressive rock*. Chicago / La Salle: Open Court, 1997, p. xxv.

making a speech to the British, during the Second World War – and this extended version became, to many fans, the “official” one).

The albums that came *before* the “main sequence”, namely the LPs *Iron Maiden* (1980) and *Killers* (1981) represent a period when the band was still seeking their identity – still very much influenced by frontman Paul Di’Anno, whose image and singing style were very different from Bruce Dickinson’s. In that respect, Iron Maiden follows a trend detectable in other bands, whose first records are clearly attempts towards quintessential works (for instance, Queen’s first and second albums, followed by *Sheer Heart Attack*, all of which came *before* the platinum-awarded albums *A Night at the Opera* and *A Day at the Races*; the same holds true for Yes’s “main sequence” – *The Yes Album*, *Fragile*, *Close to the Edge*, *Tales from Topographic Oceans*, and *Going for the One* –, a string of masterpieces that only came to light after two arguably good, but in any way less inspired LPs, *Yes* and *Time and a Word*).

The last two albums in Iron Maiden’s “main sequence” see the band searching for new musical horizons, with the heavy use of keyboards and synthesized guitars, a formula that was not to the liking of their “old school” fans and which proved not to be unanimous within the group, triggering several changes in the line-up in later years. The first one to leave was guitarist Adrian Smith, who was a key element to the “classic” Iron Maiden sound, and whose replacement, Janick Gers, was not a unanimous choice among fans. In fact, the first album with this new line-up, *No Prayer for the Dying* (1990), was not very inspired, a problem that was partly compensated with *Fear of the Dark* (1992), which contains some better-crafted pieces, such as the homonymous song and “Be Quick or Be Dead”.

The situation only got worse in the years that followed, when Bruce Dickinson – whose stage persona and voice are synonymous with Iron Maiden – decided to quit, due to personal and musical reasons, being replaced by ex-Wolfsbane vocalist Blaze Bayley. Bayley only recorded two albums with the band (*The X Factor* (1995) and *Virtual XI* (1998)), not surprisingly considered by many two of the least inspired works in Maiden’s whole discography.

The group only recovered from this bad phase from 2000 onwards, with the return of Bruce and Adrian, and the recording of albums such as *Brave New World* and *Dance of Death* (2003). Even though this represented a triumphal comeback, some songs from these albums (as well as from those that came out later) many times sound

as attempts to repeat successful formulas from the “main sequence”. Such is the case of “Ghost of the Navigator” (2000), and “Dance of Death” (2003), works clearly inspired by their predecessors “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1984) and “The Number of the Beast” (1982), respectively.

All criteria having been defined, here are the songs that will be analyzed, in “historical”, i.e. chronological order (and not in the order they were launched): 1) “Quest for Fire”, from the *Piece of Mind* album (1983), about the search for fire by tribes from Pre-History; 2) “Alexander the Great”, from the *Somewhere in Time* (1986) album, a step-by-step biography of the Macedonian king; 3) “Invaders”, from the 1982 *The Number of the Beast* album, about the Nordic invasions to the British Isles; 4) “Hallowed Be Thy Name”, from the same album, about a man condemned by the Inquisition; 5) “Run to the Hills” – another piece from their 1982 record, on the conflicts between native Americans and the white pioneers heading to the West; 6) “The Trooper”, from *Piece of Mind*, inspired by Tennyson’s poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade” and depicting the Battle of Balaclava, during the Crimean War (1853-1856) –, involving Britain and Russia; and 7) “Aces High”, from the *Powerslave* album (1984), in which an aerial fight between the Royal Air Force and the German *Luftwaffe* is narrated by a British pilot.³

There are some other songs by Iron Maiden that deal with historical themes but which will not be covered here, either due to space constraints, or because they would not fit in the criteria we have established (i.e., belonging to the “main sequence”). Namely, they are: “Powerslave”, set in the Ancient Egypt and full of references to its mythology; “Genghis Khan” (about the Mongol warrior) – which, being an instrumental track, would be unsuitable for our analytical method, heavily based on lyrical content; “The Duelists” – whose lyrics strongly hint at a duel on horseback, somewhere in the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, because there aren’t any specific data about time, place, or characters, we preferred not to include it in our analysis; and “Paschendale”, about the battle involving German and British soldiers in the First World War.⁴

³ Due to space constraints, this proposal will be split into two parts. In this article, we will cover the first three songs; the remaining four will be analyzed in a forthcoming paper, to be published in the next issue of the RBEC (n.4, July-December 2013).

⁴ Although we did not include “Paschendale” in our investigation, it is undoubtedly a song worth knowing for all its musical and lyrical attributes. Hence we recommend reading the analysis written by researcher/guitarist Andrew Yan: “Tell the world of Paschendale: análise de uma canção de Guerra do Iron Maiden”. In: *Revista Brasileira de Estudos da Canção*, Natal, n.3, jan-jun 2013.

“Quest for Fire”

Written for the *Piece of Mind* album, from 1983, this song was based on the *Quest for Fire* 1982 film directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud (in turn, an adaptation of the 1911 book by Belgian novelist J. H. Rosny). It deals with the search for fire by pre-historic tribes, and how this source of light and heat was the pivot of bloody battles.

As we have pointed before, detecting historical inaccuracies is not one of our priorities; besides, these cannot be used as an evaluation criterion when it comes to books, films, or songs that were conceived as works of fiction. Nevertheless, there are some curious passages in this particular song that are worth mentioning. One of these so called inaccuracies happens right in the first verse – “In a time when dinosaurs walked the Earth” –, hinting that our ancestors would have lived side by side with those creatures. As a matter of fact, the first dinosaurs came to existence in the Triassic period, roughly 230 million years ago, disappearing at the end of the Cretaceous period, approximately 66 million years ago. That date is much further back in time than that of the appearance of the first hominids (*Australopithecus*, 3.6 million years ago; *Homo erectus*, 1.8 million years ago; *Neanderthals*, 600,000-350,000 years ago; *Homo sapiens*, 160,000 years ago⁵).

The remainder of the lyrics are true to the film *Quest for fire*, which in turn also contains historical imprecisions. These have been detected by several critics, and Annaud himself recognized the flaws; nevertheless, he justified them partly based on the state of paleoanthropology at the time those works were conceived (both the film, and especially the novel, which dates back to the beginning of the 20th century).

Anyway, the lyrics to Maiden’s “Quest for fire”, reproduced below, do not rely on metaphors nor is rich in interpretative innuendoes, being virtually self-explanatory. Notice that the subject-matter of the song is quickly unveiled – no later than the third verse – and that the story is told in the 3rd person, unlike other so-to-say “historical” songs (“Powerslave”, “Hallowed be thy Name”, “The Trooper”, “Run to the Hills”, “Paschendale” and “Aces High”, to give some examples, are all written in the 1st person). One possible reason for that is that human language was still at an early stage of development, and it might have been weird listening to the account of this “quest for fire” through the mouth of one of its *Homo neanderthalensis* protagonists, in British

⁵ These dates are approximate, and vary from source to source.

English (!). This would of course put the song's verisimilitude at risk, hence the much better strategy of using a 3rd person omniscient narrator:

In a time when dinosaurs walked the earth
When the land was swamp and caves were home
In an age when prize possession was fire
To search for landscapes men would roam

Then the tribes they came to steal their fire
And the wolves they howled into the night
As they fought a vicious angry battle
To save the power of warmth and light

Chorus:
Drawn by quest for fire
They searched all through the land
Drawn by quest for fire
Discovery of man

And they thought that when the embers died away
That the flame of life had burnt and died
Didn't know the sparks that made the fire
Were made by rubbing stick and stone

So they ploughed through the forest and swamps of danger
And they fought the cannibal tribes and beasts
In the search to find another fire
To regain the power of light and heat

Drawn by quest for fire
They searched across the land
Drawn by quest for fire
Discovery of man

(Chorus – Guitar Solo – Chorus)

Because of the language constraints explained above, the actors in the film do not speak, limiting themselves to uttering grunts. The movie presents three species (not distinguishable in the song), *Homo Erectus* (the most primitive, ape-like men), *Homo Neanderthalensis* (the protagonists who undertake the “quest for fire” from the title), and the *Homo Sapiens* (more culturally advanced, and who, by the way, had the notion of laughter).

As stated before, the story is told by a narrator who not only observes the battles between pre-historic tribes for this so-to-say “prized possession”, but who also reveals the ignorance of some of them relatively to others concerning the technique of “rubbing stick and stone” to obtain fire.

Even not being a faithful adaptation from the screen to the vinyl, “Quest for Fire”, the song, is an interesting inter-semiotic exercise, one that involves transforming a non-verbal medium – a movie with no dialogues whatsoever – to a narrative. Besides, and as stated before, the vigor of Heavy Metal music is a perfect sonic frame to treat belligerent themes, such as the search undertaken by these early men, who had to walk long distances in order to conquer, by means of the most primitive fight, the source of “light and heat”, in a vicious circle of fierce battles.

“Alexander the Great”

Let us take a long leap forward to the year 356 B.C., when Alexander Magnus was born in Macedonia. As stated before, an epic character of this stature fits in very well with HM’s grandiose style, even more so when his story is told through a song that lasts no less than 8’34” – time enough to include a “spoken” intro by Alexander’s father, King Philip II. This is delivered in a deep, solemn voice:

“My son, ask for thyself another kingdom,
For that which I leave is too small for thee.”

After this spoken intro, backed by the sound of blowing wind, as if the character was in a desert, comes a slow-tempo, clean-timbre guitar solo, accompanied by Nicko McBrain’s snare drum, played in military style, an element which also fits well with the character portrayed. A few more bars ahead and the tempo is sped up, the guitar distortion units are turned on, and Harris’s galloping bass enters, completing the harmony, which follows in an [Em / Em / C / Em / Bm] pattern. The mood is set for the entrance of Dickinson’s voice and hence, to the story of Alexander.

The lyrics to the song, unlike many in Iron Maiden’s repertoire, are less poetic than didactic. In fact, upon confronting them against Alexander’s biography, one has the impression that the song was built in such a way as to describe, step-by-step, the episodes of his life and main conquests, as if told by a History teacher to his pupils.

As we have seen, “Quest for Fire” uses a 3rd person narrator due to historical reasons, i.e. because it could not have been told by a pre-historic man, whose verbal language was still incipient. In “Alexander the Great”, once again we have a 3rd person narrator and, accordingly, most verbs are in the Simple Past, thus creating a detachment between the listener and the song’s subject matter, Alexander. This effect was also used

in “Quest for Fire”, to good effect: “In a time when dinosaurs walked the earth”. It is interesting to notice the opposite approach used in other songs, when the listener is “invited” to engage in the story, through verbs in the Present Tense, or because of a 1st person narrator – a privileged witness of a historical fact –, who shares his views with the listener.

Back to the analysis of “Alexander the Great” – After the introduction, in which King Philip II advises his son to look for a “greater kingdom for himself”, virtually all of his biography is told, beginning with the geographical location of Macedonia and Alexander’s birth:

Near to the East, in a part of ancient Greece,
In an ancient land called Macedonia,
Was born a son to Philip of Macedon,
The legend his name was Alexander.

From there on, the words are self-explanatory, demanding very little, if any, “reading between the lines”. The stanzas go as follows:

At the age of nineteen, he became the Macedon king,
And he swore to free all of Asia Minor,
By the Aegian Sea in 334 BC,
He utterly beat the armies of Persia.

(...)

King Darius the third, defeated fled Persia,
The Scythians fell by the river Jaxartes,
Then Egypt fell to the Macedon king as well,
And he founded the city called Alexandria.

By the Tigris river, he met King Darius again,
And crushed him again in the battle of Arbela,
Entering Babylon and Susa, treasures he found,
Took Persepolis, the capital of Persia.

(...)

A Phrygian King had bound a chariot yoke,
And Alexander cut the “Gordion knot”,
And legend said that who untied the knot,
He would become the master of Asia.

Hellenism he spread far and wide,
The Macedonian learned mind,
Their culture was a western way of life,
He paved the way for Christianity.

Marching on, Marching on.

The battle weary marching side by side,
 Alexander's army line by line,
 They wouldn't follow him to India,
 Tired of the combat, pain and the glory.

Since in this paper we are lending weigh to the role of the lyrics in songs, some remarks must be made. As Luiz Tatit, Brazilian specialist in Popular Music, argues, the songwriter is a kind of juggler, who tries to balance lyrical and musical elements. Thus, the linguistic stresses must, whenever possible, coincide with the melodic ones, which will render the singing voice more natural. Similarly, there must be some degree of concern about the intelligibility of the lyrics, without which the words become indecipherable and the singer's voice function as an instrument. Such is the case when we listen to songs in a foreign language and hum the melody without any lyrics (or make up a language we don't speak) although, even without understanding the words, we assume they convey some sort of meaning (unlike the musical instruments, to which we never attribute any sort of verbal content).

One of the problems in some of Iron Maiden's songs is that, in the search for more elaborate lyrics, sometimes there are too many words in a single verse. Because most of these songs are played fast, this forces the singer to speed up his enunciation, thus compromising both intelligibility and, worst of all, the sense of melody. Upon analyzing the stanzas to "Alexander the Great", one feels that the words get often jumbled, and that there is little concern for rhymes, arguably one of the distinguishing features in popular music. The only point in the song one feels a better sense of melody is in the chorus: there, with fewer words to be uttered, the singer can extend the vowels, as well as the melodic register, building a better-structured, more "singable" melodic line. This is better visualized in the diagram below, elaborated by the aforementioned researcher Luiz Tatit:⁶

C				fear		
B		the	struck	in-	the	of
A#						
A		-der	Great – His name			men
G#						

⁶ Tatit's diagram is intended for non-specialists in music, as a way of facilitating their understanding of a song's melody. Like in a traditional score, lower notes are at the bottom, and higher notes at the top, and the lyrics are written on the lines, each one them representing a semitone.

G	-an-	-to
F#	-lex-	
F		
E	A-	hearts

Diagram 1: “Alexander the Great”, chorus part 1.

C		God	
B	the	a	a- mor-
A#			
A	-der	Great – Became	-ta men
G#			
G	-an-		-mongst -al
F#	-lex-		
F			
E	A-		

Diagram 2: “Alexander the Great”, chorus part 2.

Indeed, the catchy melody of the chorus – unlikely the confusing melody of the stanzas – gives us the impression that it was written to be sung by a crowd, during a live performance, and may be seen as the redeeming element to “Alexander the Great”, melody-wise. This feature – a chorus that “invites” listeners to sing along – is by the way a common mechanism in the popular music territory in general, Heavy Metal included. Curiously enough, in rock music the “engaging element” (i.e., the “catchy element” that lends identity to a composition) is a role many times played not by the melody of the voice, or by the chorus, but by a guitar riff. Examples such as “Day Tripper” (Beatles), “Satisfaction” (Rolling Stones), “Sunshine of your love” (Cream), “Houses of the Holy” (Led Zeppelin), “Smoke on the Water” (Deep Purple), “Heaven and Hell” (Black Sabbath), “Back in Black” (AC/DC), “YYZ” (Rush), and “Enter Sandman” (Metallica) should suffice to prove this point.

Back to the analysis of “Alexander the Great”, the last time the chorus is sung, the lyrics are changed to indicate how the Macedonian sovereign encountered his fate:

Alexander the Great,
 His name struck fear into hearts of men,
 Alexander the Great,
 He died of fever in Babylon.

Again, one has the impression that the concern for telling the reader the Macedonian king’s life in a scholarly way took precedence over a poetic treatment of the words: note that even in the chorus there are no rhymes (except for “Great”-“Great”,

which does not count as a very clever solution), a problem that is even more dire in the stanzas. Surprisingly enough, while not very “singable”, “Alexander the Great” remains a highlight in Iron Maiden’s repertoire, which leaves us thinking to which extent lyrics are really important to Heavy Metal fans – or, for that matter, for rock fans in general, when, by contrast, we think of the central role played by the lyrics in other genres, such as folk music (represented by icons such as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez).

Perhaps – and at this point we are merely speculating –, there are other *musemes*, to use Philip Tagg’s expression, that contribute more importantly for the efficacy of Heavy Metal songs, namely, a powerful guitar riff (think of all the examples listed above), a vocalist’s anger and attitude / voice (with whom a teenage crowd might identify, e.g., Metallica’s James Hetfield or Motörhead’s Lemmy, a character that incarnates Rock’s lifestyle), stage performance (KISS, Alice Cooper, or more recently, Slipknot), a drummer’s technique (Rush’s Neil Peart), or the dexterity of a guitar virtuoso (think of Yngwie Malmsteen, Steve Vai, Edward van Halen or Joe Satriani).

Bringing this digression to a close, one has the impression that Heavy Metal is a genre ideally made to be played live (and loud), a type of music that calls for some sort of physical response (no surprise adolescents – and middle-aged men – all around the world play their air guitars and drums while listening to HM through their headphones), and that lyrics might play a secondary role in this process. However, this hypothesis, not being central in the present discussion, will be dealt with in further essays.

“Invaders”

This is a song about the Nordic invasions to the British Isles, which started in the 8th century. Beginning with an assault to Lindisfarne Abbey – at the time a famous learning centre across Europe –, the Vikings killed and enslaved the monks. Because of that, they were to have a very negative reputation for centuries, until in the late 19th century, when historians started to rescue their achievements, which included technological knowledge and artistic skills, not to mention their seamanship.

Nevertheless, in the song Iron Maiden replicates the image of the Norsemen as bloodthirsty, merciless conquerors. “Invaders” shares with “Alexander the Great” the same “enunciation problem” we have pointed out before, i.e., lyrics that are delivered so quickly that the song’s intelligibility is harmed, although with a crucial difference: the narrator is now a character that takes part in the story (i.e., in the 1st person), as if he was

the commander directing his soldiers (or, perhaps, some worried onlooker warning the Englishmen of the imminent danger). This perspective (reinforced by the use of pronouns such as “we” – the British –, vs “They” / “Them” – the Norsemen) justify the song’s frenetic pace, for now the narrator is implied in the middle of the battle – he is one of the contenders, who must fight or run for his life.

The song begins with a sequence of notes played simultaneously by the guitars, bass and drums, which functions as an attack; the listener is taken by surprise, just like the Saxons were being taken by assault, “invaded” by the Norsemen. Using the same narrative strategy seen in “Quest for Fire” and in “Alexander the Great”, the first verses introduce the listener to the scene where the actions will be developed. This strategy is very similar to that used in movies, when a camera comes from above, showing a vast landscape (such as in the beginning of *Quest for Fire*, the film), slowly narrowing down the focus to a village, then a house or character:

Longboats have been sighted,
the evidence of war has begun,
Many Nordic fighting men,
their swords and shields all gleam in the sun.

After the danger has been identified, the narrator, acting as a commander, summons his fellowmen to the fight:

Call to arms defend yourselves,
get ready to stand and fight for your lives,
Judgment day has come around,
so be prepared don’t run stand your ground.
(...)
Set ablaze the camp fires,
alert the other men from inland.
Warning must be given,
there's not enough men for a stand.
The Vikings are too many,
too powerful to take on our own.
We must have reinforcements,
we cannot fight this battle alone.

Unlike “Quest for Fire” or “Alexander the Great”, whose lyrics used verbs in the Simple Past, the narrator of “Invaders” adopts a different strategy, making use of verbs in the Simple Present and even in the Present Continuous, thus dragging the listener along with him, to the middle of the battlefield, a situation that is musically emphasized

by a frenzied tempo and by the ups and downs of the vocal melodic line, suggesting emotional instability:

They're coming in from the sea,
They've come the enemy.
Beneath the blazing sun,
The battle has to be won.
(...)
They're coming over the hill,
They've come to attack.
They're coming in for the kill,
There's no turning back.

Another interesting feature in several of Maiden's songs is a certain patriotic inclination, a characteristic that can be confirmed in their performances. Examples are songs like "The Trooper" and "Paschendale", both of which are about battles that actually happened, respectively the Battle of Balaclava, during the Crimean War, in the 19th Century, when Britain fought Russia, and the Battle of Paschendale, during World War I, when the Britons faced the Germans on Belgian ground. In live performances, Bruce Dickinson dresses up like a soldier, and even waves a Union Jack, thus clearly siding with the British (a gesture that was repelled by the Argentinian fans, due to the scars left by the Falkland Islands conflicts from the early 1980s). In this sense, the song lyrics are also biased, depicting the Britons (or, for that matter, the Saxons) as victims, and their war enemies – be them Russian, German, or Nordic – as villains, protagonists of hideous acts:

Invaders...Pillaging.
Invaders... Looting.
(...)
Invaders... Fighting.
Invaders... Marauding.
(...)
Invaders.....Raping.
Invaders.....Plundering.

As the song draws to a close, the victimization of the Saxons is confirmed, in a scenario marked by death and horror. The narrator recognizes the defeat, advising his fellowmen to "scatter and run", and to "fight another day", thus hinting that Saxons and Norsemen would confront again at some point in the future:

Axes grind and maces clash,
as wounded fighters fall to the ground.
Severed limbs and fatal woundings,
bloody corpses lay all around.
The smell of death and burning flesh,
the battle weary fight to the end.
The Saxons have been overpowered,
victims of the mighty Norsemen.
(...)
You'd better scatter and run.
The battle's lost and not won.
You'd better get away,
To fight another day.

Conclusion

As stated before, this paper only covers three out of the seven songs that we chose to build a “historical timeline” using Iron Maiden song’s from their best 1980s albums. For this reason alone, it would be unsuitable to write a conclusion at this point.

Nevertheless, we hope that what has been written so far is enough to raise a few issues concerning Heavy Metal music and its characteristics, and that the analysis of these songs by Iron Maiden have contributed to question a stereotype which states that HM lyrics are either about demonic or mundane subject matters. Besides, we wish to bring Iron Maiden’s work to the academic arena, in order to further examine the songs written by a band who cleverly noticed that historical themes, particularly those involving wars, would be a perfect match for Heavy Metal’s aggressive sonic identity.

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