

‘Not Folk Metal, but...’

Online intercultural musicking in ‘the Grove’

Introduction

The crackling of the fire fills the Grove, joining the melodies that the Grovers play, sing and share. The fire was lit for me, for you, for everyone. Come to the fire, grab a drink, take a seat and tell me how was your week. (*The Folk Metal Grove*, May 2020)

Folk Metal is often described as being a form of heavy metal that incorporates elements of folk culture. This entails metal music fused with traditional style melodies, instruments and vocal styles, lyrical themes of mythology or history and/or visual and thematic aspects of ‘real’ or imagined folk culture. *The Folk Metal Grove* is a Facebook group for fans and, to some extent, practitioners of this musical style. The aim of the article is to discuss aspects of Folk Metal, ideology, genre and online culture as it is lived and performed in this community. I will specifically explore the tension between two simultaneous ideological dispositions – expressions of ethnic or nationalistic pride on the one hand, and intercultural and universalistic ideals on the other, as well as how this tension is navigated and handled by members and moderators. Studying this tension in a delimited online community brings us closer to reconciling earlier researchers’ descriptions of Folk Metal as on the one hand ‘a space for the preservation and re-creation of hegemonic power structures’ (Spracklen, 2015, p. 361), and on the other hand as a genre that has ‘widened the musical and symbolic diversity of metal’ (Kahn-Harris, 2010, p. 98). The main research question is: how is Folk Metal constructed, negotiated and made meaningful through musicking in the Facebook group The Folk Metal Grove?

Histories of Folk Metal often start with the 1991 album *The Wayward Sons of Mother Earth* by British band Skyclad and specifically the song ‘The Widdershins Jig’ which featured tin whistle and fiddle alongside the heavy guitar riffs. Sometimes Bathory’s Viking-themed albums or Led Zeppelin’s hard-rock takes on blues tunes are mentioned as being precursors to the genre. Coinciding with the boom in the use of social media, the genre grew in popularity in the first years of the new millennium, especially in Finland with bands such as Finntroll, Ensiferum, Korpiklaani, Turisas and Moonsorrow (Neilson, 2015; Spracklen, 2015).

An analysis of the Folk Metal genre can reveal problematic ideological connotations. Several authors have characterized a celebration of heritage, be that regional, national, ethnic or racial, as fundamental to the genre (Mulvany, 2000; Neilson, 2015; Spracklen, 2015). In his article ‘To Helmgard and Beyond’ (2015), Karl Spracklen describes how Folk Metal, while considered to be something of a joke to the tastemakers of metal, recreates and is central to the construction of heavy metal stereotypes. For Spracklen, the bands of Folk Metal ‘perform racial purity and instrumental whiteness, and allow their white fans to identify with this imaginary pure white origin’ (Spracklen, 2015, p. 375). He acknowledges that there are Folk Metal bands from other parts of the world but maintains that ‘these bands are not celebrated in the same way as the white (northern) European bands in the European metal scene’ (Spracklen, 2015, p. 361). It is clear that for *some* fans of Folk Metal, the idea that race is central to the genre is not without merit. By way of example, Spracklen’s article was shared and commented on by the online magazine *Metalsucks* (Rhombus, 2015), and while the magazine piece was jokingly dismissive of his findings, the comment section seemed to reinforce them: several *Metalsucks* readers made comments stressing that Folk Metal is, and should be, a musical genre celebrating European (white) culture.

Here it becomes important to emphasize that a genre of music is not *one* thing, and this seems to be especially true when it comes to Folk Metal. My own personal experience as a long-time member of the Facebook group The Folk Metal Grove is in many ways diametrically opposite to the idea of race as an important component in Folk Metal fandom. As I will discuss, there are several concurrent ideological dispositions within the Folk Metal genre, and as part of the musicking experience they are explored, affirmed and celebrated in different ways in different contexts. Much of what goes on in the group could be considered a celebration of Folk Metal as a means of transgressing metal's boundaries, a way for metalheads to experience and practise *something else*: other sounds, voices, languages, emotions and cultures. Considering Spracklen's remark that the non-European bands are celebrated in a different fashion than the European ones, it seems natural to delve into *how* they are celebrated.

The Folk Metal Grove is a Facebook group that was established in October 2006. This may well make it one of the oldest active groups on Facebook since the platform itself became available to the public just one month earlier. The group is often referred to as just 'The Grove', and members often refer to themselves as 'Grover's'. I will use these terms interchangeably. In February 2020, the group had 11,387 members from 100 different countries. According to group statistics, approximately 25% of the members are female. These statistics were graciously made available to me by a moderator in the Grove; however, I have no information as to how they were gathered or how country and gender affiliation was measured, and they should thus be taken with a grain of salt. In any case, it is safe to say that this is a large community. It has social norms, traditions and a history of its own, and considering its size, history and geographical breadth, The Folk Metal Grove should be considered just as important to study as any local scene or large festival when it comes to negotiations of what Folk Metal *is*.

The article starts with a brief discussion on genre studies and musicking, followed by a description of the research design. I will then discuss typical posts and different modes of sharing, with a focus on memes. In the next section I argue for how the musical genre of Folk Metal for many of the group's members serves to transgress the sonic and cultural boundaries of metal music through what is considered to be unusual sounds and musical instruments. I will go on to discuss how members regard certain musical and extra-musical practices as *folky*, as well as the phrase 'not Folk Metal, but...', often used in genre discussions in the group. I will finally describe the Grove as a living space of intercultural musicking, where Folk Metal is made meaningful from the perspectives of the two main ideological dispositions in the Grove.

Genre, community and musicking

According to the seminal research of Fabbri (1982), we should study genre through a multitude of aspects such as its musical, visual, semiotic, economic, political and ideological expressions. But *what* should we analyse, which material? Should we peruse large corpora of works, or look to the actors who at the time are the best known or have the most far-reaching influence? Should a genre be defined by the pioneers who conceived it, or by the need of the music industry to categorize and commodify (Frith, 1996)? Or should we look to the musical worlds (Finnegan, 2007) of communities and scenes?

In this article the main focus is the latter, how a musical community makes sense of the ambiguous genre of Folk Metal. What constitutes a musical genre is always a matter of negotiation. Genre boundaries are, as Fermont and Della Faille (2016, p. 42) put it, constantly changing, constantly maintained and constantly contested. Genre is negotiated by music critics (Frith, 1996; Brennan, 2017), in record stores, by record labels, in music charts, in Spotify playlists (Siles, Segura-Castillo and Sancho, 2019), by musicians, audiences and organizers in

songs and videos, in concert halls and in local organization committees. And it is increasingly negotiated online, in different social media platforms such as Facebook groups and pages, and message boards. None of the abovementioned phenomena can represent an entire musical genre, but all may be said to represent important parts of it.

By studying affinity groups and communities, we can gain knowledge about some aspects of a genre, and, more importantly, we can gain valuable insight into its complexity. At the same time, it is important to note that while, as I will show, the Grove is built around ideas of community and togetherness, it is not a traditional community built on family ties or propinquity (Fernback, 2007). Online communities should be seen as mutable constructs made meaningful by the members as well as other actors (Fernback, 2007, p. 66), and it is the meaning-making practice which interests me here – how the musical genre of Folk Metal is made meaningful through online musicking. Musicking is defined by Christopher Small (1998) as an endeavour shared by musicians, audience and other parties who influence the music. Moreover, the musicking event itself is seen as a ritual where 'ideal relations' are manifested, explored, affirmed, and celebrated (Small, 1998, p. 50). According to Small, our experience of a concert, a shared piece of music or a recorded album reflects how we relate to and interpret these ideal relations. Musicking is thus in itself a highly political practice. With this perspective, it is relevant to study the way fans and audiences make sense of a musical genre that is as ideologically ambivalent as Folk Metal.

Research design

As Berg (2015, pp. 67, 84) points out, online ethnographies are characterized by a special 'messiness' with blurred lines between the personal and professional. I do have in-depth insight into the history and culture of the community, having been a member since I joined Facebook in 2007. My personal interest in Folk Metal is mainly as a fan of several bands considered to be within the genre, but also as a musician in the Folk Metal bands Otyg¹ and Solsaate. Prior to having any academic interest in the group, I began noticing posts connected to what I perceived to be ideals of interculturality and universalism. Much later I began archiving these posts using Facebook's native function 'collections', which is basically a private user-created list of posts and links on Facebook. Initially, I did not use any specific sampling strategy, but instead archived those posts that made their way into my daily Facebook newsfeed. I quickly realized the danger of bias due to Facebook algorithms (Berg, 2015, p. 83) and have thus complemented the material by studying the timeline of the group as well as searched for different topics, as a way of shifting and widening my perspective (Berg, 2015, p. 85). The article's scope does not allow me to list, discuss and argue for all keywords searched, but I used words that I considered to be related to the research focus such as 'nation', 'race', 'culture', 'instrument', 'acoustic', 'multiculture', 'interculture', 'Nordic', 'Arabic', 'oriental', as well as searches for specific bands and songs. My goal was not to gather quantitative data to analyse, for example, how often these words were used, but rather to find examples of posts where these topics were discussed, celebrated and/or challenged. The collection comprises 143 posts ranging from November 2018 to August 2020.

Thus, the research design entailed a 'netnographic' (Kozinets, 1996) approach, from the perspective of simultaneous insider and outsider (Barz and Cooley, 2008, p. 50; Berg, 2015, p. 47), where I considered my being in the group as an ongoing fieldwork. In February 2020, I made myself known as a researcher (Berg, 2015, p. 93) in several in-group posts where I described the background and observational nature of the study and asked for participants. As

¹ Otyg was discussed, and I was myself interviewed, by Mulvany (2000), in one of the first academic works on Folk Metal.

netnographies necessitate mixed methods (Campos Valverde, 2019, p. 30; Berg, 2015, p. 7), I invited members to share their thoughts by answering an online questionnaire, with open questions, on two separate occasions. I asked questions about how they related to Folk Metal as well as to the group, and about Folk Metal as a global or national phenomenon. In the second questionnaire, otherwise identical to the first, I added a question about what the specific term 'folky' meant to them generally and musically. While only ten Grovers responded, most of them provided lengthy free-text answers which became a solid ground both for further analyses of the group content and for further interviews. I also conducted interviews with two long-time members of the group, or *key informants* (Patton 2015, p. 406), which provided deep, important insight into many aspects of the group. The interviews were conducted using video-chat software. In the article, I will refer to the questionnaire results with numbers ('respondent 1' and so on) and will use fictitious first names of the two people I interviewed. The questionnaire respondents lived in the USA, Argentina, Romania, Norway and the Netherlands. The interviewees were 'Diogo' from Portugal and 'Niklas' from Sweden. One respondent and one interviewee have served as moderators/admins in the Grove.

Online studies come with their own set of ethical dilemmas. This is especially true regarding questions of consent, since attitudes to what is private in social media differ (Berg, 2015, p. 81). While full informed consent from all observed group members is impossible to achieve (Willis, 2019), the group was clearly considered to be a public, if informal, space by most members. That is, during the time of my research the group was public, and my view is that the members thought of it as such. Interactions can thus, according to at least some literature (Willis, 2019) be observed on similar ethical premises as 'real life' public spaces. One argument for the claim that members generally thought of the group as public is this: group admins were, due to changes in the Facebook platform², reluctantly forced to change group settings and make it 'private' in September 2021 (well after my study had been concluded). The thirty comments below the post that announced this change were unanimously regretting that this choice had to be made. Thus, the members knew about its previously public nature and were sad to see it changed. Still, I am aware that integrity is an important issue especially in online circumstances. To avoid revealing individuals' identities, interviewee names have been altered for anonymization purposes, I have not included permalink references to individual posts, and I have added slight changes to the quotes (without changing their meaning) to prevent them from being instantly searchable (Liliequist, 2020, p. 21). I have also asked all cited posters for permission before the publication of the article.

In the analysis of the material, I have viewed the group interactions as instances of musicking. That is, members use the group to constitute and maintain 'ideal relations' connected to Folk Metal, which they manifest, explore, affirm, or celebrate (Small, 1998, p. 50), and these relations are what makes Folk Metal make sense. The musicking practice in the Grove manifests in two interconnected ways: by the sending and circulating of posts, and by the way in which these posts are received by the members. That is – the content of what is posted communicates a specific set of ideas of how to make sense of the musical genre Folk Metal, but so does the way members interact with these posts.

Mememes and meaning

To discuss such meaning-making processes in a group like this, we need to discuss the modes of sharing and circulation. Postings follow the same pattern as in other online music communities. The bulk of the content involves the sharing of mememes, viral content, musical

² The changes to the Facebook platform, according to the group admin's post, would make it impossible to vet new members if the group was public. Facebook would also actively spread public group content to the group members friends' timelines, which was considered to be undesirable.

works or discussions and queries, such as requests for recommendations of a specific kind of Folk Metal or music by specific bands. Memes, as per their current definition, usually reference culture and come in the form of a text, image or video, which is reshaped and disseminated in online culture. The content has a mimetic function either by the way it changes meaning due to the context in which it is shared, or by the transformation of text. Memes often use so-called image macros, where text (which is subject to change) is layered on photos or other images. Memes are described and discussed in depth by Shifman (2013) and, in relation to music, by Hyltén-Cavallius (2020) and Campos Valverde (2019).

Memes are usually altered to reflect context. As the corona pandemic spread throughout the world in spring 2020, many memes posted in the Grove reflected this current event. In one post, a member shared a faux album playlist and cover art for an imaginary metal band called 'Corona', complete with a thrash metal style logotype. The cover art had been posted in other metal pages and groups before, but the attached playlist had been changed to reflect the Folk Metal environment. It featured song titles from well-known bands, such as 'Death Bringer from the Sky' (Ensiferum) and 'Curse of the Crystal Corona' (alluding to the Alestorm song 'Curse of the Crystal Coconut'), but it also featured a very Folk Metal Grove-specific title: 'I Know, This Is Not Folk Metal, But This Is Corona' (more on that phrasing later).

Some posts of viral images were not altered, yet they were natural fits in the community. One example is the post-apocalyptic take on the hoarding of toilet paper as displayed in a common image. The image shows a woman wearing a makeshift crown and holding a royal sceptre while sitting on a throne of cardboard boxes adorned with toilet paper rolls with the macro text: 'Outsider, welcome to the paper dome'. It alludes not only to old Mad Max movies and a specific sense of fantasy but also, more pertinently for the Grove, to the idea of dress-up and cosplay. Many posts show selfies of members dressing up before attending a Folk Metal gig in everything from meticulously crafted historical or fantastical costumes to the commonplace makeshift 'war paint' with horizontal lines under eyes (see Neilson, 2015, p. 141). The mode these posts are shared in is, setting aside the grave context, light-hearted and humorous, and they are simultaneously geared inwards and outwards. Through these posts, members celebrate the fact that they are a tight-knit group because they all have intrinsic knowledge as to why this particular version of the meme fits The Folk Metal Grove. At the same time, they show that they remain part of the outside world, that they are connected with what is going on.

Other memes have even more significance for the Grove. A modified comic strip pictures an argument between a couple, which in its original form - an online comic based on jokes posted on Twitter (@Ingmarbirdman and Vectorbelly, 2013) - reads: 'If you're literally asking me to choose between our relationship and my obsession with pointing out doors to people, well, there's the door'. The version posted in the Grove was modified to read: 'If you're literally asking me to choose between our relationship and my obsession with Mongolian throat singing, well...HAAAEUUAAA'. The capital letters are obviously intended to be taken as the sound of overtone throat singing (Figure 1). The character's outstretched arms look, with some imagination, similar to a singer flexing his abdominal muscles to produce the overtones of throat singing. We can interpret this as associated with the group's affinity to Folk Metal bands from Mongolia, especially Tengger Cavalry, The Hu and Nine Treasures, which often incorporate this vocal style in their music.



Figure 1. The modified comic strip posted in The Folk Metal Grove. The original comic is from @vectorbelly's 'Twitter: the comic' (<https://vectorbelly.com/>), based on a tweet by @ingmarbirdman. Used with permission.

In a discussion on classical music memes in online culture, Hyltén-Cavallius (2020) describes both how they are used performatively to show knowledge and specialization, and how they negotiate, reshape and complement the history of classical music. In the same way, Grovers display their knowledge about the Folk Metal genre in general, as well as the specific ways in which the genre is reshaped and made meaningful within the Grove. A meme celebrating Mongolian throat singing would probably not be as well received in many other metal-related groups on Facebook. In the Grove, however, it can be described as congenial with a specific longing among members to experience new sounds and expressions, to transgress *sonic and cultural boundaries*.

Sonic and cultural boundaries

It is about exploration of the unknown [...] The Grove is a tool to share your explorations and ask for new destinations. (respondent #1)

Most typically, posts in the Grove serve to circulate, celebrate and inquire into musical works. They usually share favourite songs from a specific band or circulate information about the band's upcoming album, concerts or tours. Many posts are queries about bands in a specific style or about other songs by a specific band, which is to be expected from a music subgenre fan community. However, two kinds of queries appear specific to the Grove: the search for Folk Metal from specific countries or cultures, and the search for unusual acoustic (folk) instruments and sounds. I will give a few examples of these kinds of posts.

In an example from my material, a member asks for Middle Eastern Folk Metal bands and receives many responses, among them suggestions for the bands Melechesh, Crescent, Al-Namrood, Narjahanam, Myrath and Rudra. What constitutes Middle Eastern Folk Metal is interpreted in a highly individual way, and often with reservations about genre. It is 'Middle Eastern, not folky' or 'more black than folk'. Most of the suggested bands do have a geographical connection to the Middle East. For example, Narjahanam³ is a black metal band from Bahrain and Al-Namrood hails from Saudi Arabia. However, the Singaporean 'vedic metal' band Rudra is also recommended with the reservation 'if you want to go further east'. The suggested Rudra song 'The Pathless Path to the Knowable Unknown' features a Hindu mantra to Shiva and a rhythmic cycle on tablas alongside thrashy vocals and blast beats. These kinds of posts show that while there is great interest, respect and love for music from around the world in the Grove, the outlook is clearly European. Just as world music can be summarized as 'the West versus the Rest' (Brusila, 2003, p. 223), The Folk Metal Grove's outlook is usually a western one, be it with some exceptions.

Regarding musical instruments, common posts are queries about members' favourite folk instruments and queries about songs that feature a specific instrument, as well as posts that celebrate and/or request information about instruments. In one post with over 60 comments, a member asks what the community's favourite Folk Metal instruments are, stating that her own are kantele, juhikko, mouth harp and shaman drum. In their comments, Grovers name instruments that are commonly used by the best-known Folk Metal bands, like hurdy gurdy, accordion, fiddle and nyckelharpa, but also throat singing, erhu, oud, morin khuur and many more from many traditions around the world. In other posts, images of pan flutes, bulbung tarangs (the Indian/Punjabi banjo), kalimbas and mouth harps are shared, often in a combination of celebration and query, summed up by the likes of: 'this instrument is awesome, where can I hear it in metal?'

Many posts in The Folk Metal Grove are queries about something unusual, something different - something that is sonically and culturally separated from the modern Western metal genre, while still being a part of it. When I asked my respondents what Folk Metal *is all about*, these were some of the answers:

The stunned faces which people give when they realise metal isn't just some guys screaming their lungs out. (respondent #6)

There are folk instruments, not only the usual guitar/bass/drums/vocals. Also, FLUTE SOLOS!!! (respondent #5)

You can learn something about other cultures, their legends and lore. (respondent #1)

³ The name, in Arabic letters جهنم نار, translates to hellfire.

Through its music and lyrics you can simply travel around many many cultures, mythologies, stories, landscapes, etc. (respondent #4)

It is clear that the respondents see Folk Metal not just as another style, but as something *more* than metal. It has other instruments, other lyrics, and you learn about other cultures. Also – flute solos! As Spracklen (2015) argues, imagery containing stereotypical fur-clad Vikings and other hyper-masculine warriors that are used by some well-known Folk Metal bands may be seen as tapping into ‘the worst excesses of the heavy-metal stereotype’. While the existence of these tropes are undeniable, other aspects of the genre are in my material equally often communicated, and they reveal a diametrically opposite aspect: that engaging with Folk Metal, rather than merely accentuating the core principles of heavy and/or extreme metal, can be understood as an effort to widen the cultural and sonic horizons of what metal music can be. Kahn-Harris (2010) touches on this in passing:

While it has historically been the case that the iconography of metal has drawn on signifiers of whiteness, such as vikings, the increasing popularity of ‘folk’ metal and of local metal syncretisms has considerably widened the musical and symbolic diversity of metal. (Kahn-Harris 2010, p. 98)

The lure of Folk Metal for some Grovers, then, seems to be the potential inherent in the genre to transgress the boundaries of metal itself. I am using the term ‘transgress’ here to allude to Keith Kahn-Harris’s (2007) characterization of extreme metal’s central themes of sonic, discursive and bodily transgressions. He describes extreme metal’s transgressive qualities as resulting in a drive to play music faster, louder, heavier, and to touch on abject subjects in lyrics and ideology (Kahn-Harris, 2007, p. 29). The Grovers’ will to transgress the boundaries of metal should not be understood to be of the same kind as that described by Kahn-Harris; however, it does have similar qualities in that it is about moving beyond, finding something new – perhaps even something other than metal.

‘Not Folk Metal, but...’

One of the most common types of posts contains the recurring formula ‘This is not Folk Metal, but...’. This can entail a member posting something that they believe to fall outside the genre of Folk Metal but which still might be relevant for the community. Such posts are often about metal genres considered to be close to Folk Metal, but just as often about different folk or world music genres. Members of the Grove often strive to be very exact in their discussions about genre and are careful not to mislabel music. This often results in *reservations*, where a recommendation will be followed by ‘it’s more black than folk’ or something similar. At the same time, there is no strict rule stating that only Folk Metal can be shared within the Grove. In fact, the group description states:

This group is also a haven for those who enjoy classical, symphonic and epic metal, dragons, international folk music, mythology, mysticism, forests and groves, classical music, fantasy novels and art, pagan religions, and such similar things! (The Folk Metal Grove, 2020)

While genre seems on the one hand to be irrelevant to the Grove, it is also extremely important. One common discussion is about whether a band can be considered Folk Metal, as exemplified by the band Amon Amarth, a Swedish death metal band whose lyrics and imagery are about vikings. Amon Amarth songs are often posted by new members in the group, and these posts are sometimes criticized by other members who hold that the band should not be considered Folk Metal. These debates seldom reach consensus, but this does not stop people from making up quite elaborate definitions and models for what Folk Metal is or should be. One commonly voiced model of categorization was explained by my interviewee Niklas:

There are three different criteria, and at least two need to be met. The first criterion is traditional melodies or inspiration from traditional melodies. The second is lyrical themes related to folklore or the like. And the third is the inclusion of traditional instruments, not just normal metal instruments. (Niklas)

According to this model, Amon Amarth would clearly not be considered Folk Metal. Although they use lyrical themes that could be considered 'folky' by most Grove members (even if some would consider vikings a theme that smacks too much of mainstream metal), the music is conventional melodic death metal, and the band features only standard metal instruments in its line-up. However, genre discussions tend to be lengthy and very seldom conclusive due to the polysemous nature of metal genres, as discussed by Hillier (2020). One of my interviewees' definitions of Folk Metal was much more affectively oriented: 'It's [folky] when your melodies and your elements are so strong that you get images from them'. Folk Metal is metal that *feels* folky and according to him often has to do with how the music resonates within, how it creates images and conjures up stories in his mind. This could probably be claimed of any kind of music, and it is as such related to another common stance: that the debate is mute, since there is no real way to say what is folky or not. Vocals, drums and guitars are clearly used in folk music as well as in metal; therefore, isn't all metal folk? This is akin to the quote attributed to the blues singer Big Bill Broonzy, who often comes up in discussions about folk music: 'All songs are folk songs; I've never heard a horse sing', as discussed by Bruno Nettl (1983, p. 304). Of course, it is not in my interest to make any sort of judgement here; the point is that The Folk Metal Grove is maintained and constructed in a way that makes discussions about genre possible and important, while allowing for posting more or less any kind of music.

Folkyness

The phrase 'not Folk Metal, but...' is also used in posts about non-music related topics. These posts could consist of general metal memes or posts that the poster thinks fall within what could be termed an ethos of *folkyness* (sometimes spelled 'folkiness'). Within the Grove, folky subjects include mythology and mythical creatures, majestic scenery and historical imagery, as mentioned in the group description, but they can also be something mundane, such as a traditional-style soup recipe or a picture of lit candles beside a laptop ('What can be more folk than candles?', as one poster wrote). Photos of alcoholic beverages and/or drinking utensils are also common, such as photos of mead, liquor or ale from drinking horns, clay jugs or similar.

Understood emically, folkyness seems to come down to a very specific, affective experience of authenticity, often combined with an unspoken sense that the facticity of this authenticity is negotiable. I am not hinting here at an 'invented tradition' in the sense of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983). Rather, as Neilson argues, 'The "authentic" experiences invoked by Folk Metal are predicated on the intersection of metal's affective overdrive and folk music's associations with an idealized past' (Neilson, 2015, p. 130). But there also seems to be an understanding within the community that this authenticity is not necessarily more than a feeling, and it doesn't have to be. Even if acoustic instruments are celebrated in abundance, there is no aversion to bands using keyboards, synth pads or multi-sampled instrument sounds. Grovers know that Folk Metal is not traditional folk music, and this lets them have fun with it. The folkyness of the Grove could be understood as an aspect of the 'authentic inauthenticity' of Grossberg (1992, p. 224) or connected to Kahn-Harris's discussion on reflexive anti-reflexivity (2007, p. 144). However, judging from the group interactions it does not generally seem to be cynical and it is not necessarily ironic, and thus it probably owes more to Bateson's (1972) concept of play frame: folkyness connotes a shared playful relationship with an idealized past, where it is unimportant whether it is rooted in a historically documented folk tradition or not. This could be said to allow the deadly serious 'ritualistic' music and theatre of bands such as Heilung or

Wardruna to be accepted in the group alongside the silly pirate metal of Alestorm or Rumahoy. Likewise, melodies do not always have to follow rhythmic or melodic styles of a specific folk tradition: they just have to *feel* folky. Uplifting melodies are often seen as folky, such as the melodies of songs by tongue-in-cheek bands like Svartby or Trollfest, the latter mixing black metal with saxophone-driven Balkan music and silly lyrics that are often visualized in cartoonishly animated videos. In fact, a large part of the attraction of Folk Metal for many Grovers is how the idealized past performed through the genre includes experiences of *cheerfulness*. Many posts ask members to share their happiest, most cheerful Folk Metal songs. Diogo, now one of the most active moderators of the Grove, described in our interview his first experience with Folk Metal. He was attending a gig with the band Sabaton on tour in 2014, but he was much more entertained by the sheer joy of the Folk Metal opening acts Týr and, especially, Korpiklaani.

Korpiklaani's concert was just so much fun. At the end of the day, that's what I find really important - that the music should at least be fun. We should have a good time, right? (Diogo)

Likewise, a survey of the folk metal audience in several different online spaces, of which The Folk Metal Grove was one, carried out as a part of a master thesis (Baronowski, 2016), concludes that 'happy' was one of the most common words to describe the genre. The idea of metal being something fun, happy and cheerful could be seen as yet another way in which Folk Metal playfully transgresses the boundaries of metal, especially in relation to the extreme metal genres. Humour is common in metal (Kahn-Harris, 2007, p. 148; Weinstein, 2019; Tompkins, 2015), but it is usually extra-musical. Sonic cheerfulness of silly, happy melodies and uplifting tunes is rarely celebrated in metal outside the Folk Metal genre.

A living space

Some of the 'not Folk Metal, but...' posts can be described as self-referential to the Grove. These are a sort of meta posts that discuss or celebrate the community as a whole. Other self-referential posts are photos that picture the Grove as a forest clearing, a grove of trees or a cosy cottage, again bringing to light the idea of community that the Grove is clearly built upon. My interviewees also all return to the idea of the Grove not just as a community for Folk Metal but also as a *place* to meet and share problems from everyday life. In his interview, Diogo revealed that he once wrote an (as-of-yet unreleased) song in which he pictured the Grove as a real-life community, a medieval village teeming with life. He explained how he felt the Grove to be a tangible place - a place he once welcomed at a time when he was experiencing personal problems relating to his landlord unfairly cancelling his contract.

I remember being very anxious [...] and the Grove always felt like a safe place. I wasn't really going there and saying, look, this is happening to me. It was just, I was looking at what people were saying and what was going on and just random conversations about music and drinking and concerts. And I was like, OK, this is what I need right now. It's...like a safe place for my brain to hang out. (Diogo)

True to this, Diogo, after becoming a group moderator, started a weekly 'Grove bonfire', a recurring post where members are encouraged to '[c]ome to the fire, grab a drink, take a seat' and chat about their lives and their past week. For many members, The Folk Metal Grove is clearly more than a place in which to share music: it is a 'living space', where norms, relationships and reciprocity can develop (Campos Valverde, 2019, p. 10).

But living together is not always easy. There seems to be a constant negotiation between different ideological positions within The Folk Metal Grove. My interviewee Niklas described this as two distinct groups:

There's the 'multicultural group', which I am a part of, which listens to pre-Hispanic [metal], Greek metal and...all kinds of shit and thinks it's fun that there's a mix. [...] Then there are those who are a bit more alt-right inspired, posting memes of cancel culture and so on. (Niklas)

A subgroup of Grovers will exclusively and unironically post about Viking or Nordic romanticism, celebrating themes such as warrior culture and explicitly Nordic nature, paganism, heritage and ethnicity. These posts are not presented as political or ideological, but it is clear that the 'ideal relations' that Folk Metal musicking conjures up for these individuals articulate ideas of specifically European or Nordic history, heritage and ethnicity. However, only a minority of Grove members seems to relate to the Folk Metal genre in this specific way, and most of my interviewees and respondents expressed the contrary opinion:

Every culture has folk music, instruments, and lore. It's ridiculous to think that Scandinavians have ownership of a genre like that. Look at bands like Cemican (Mexican) or Tennger Cavalry (Mongolian), for example. They're not Scandinavian, and they are great Folk Metal. The only people who think that it should be about Nordicness are the Swedaboos who like to call themselves 'Ragnar' online. (respondent #2)

There is a canon of musical works and bands celebrated in the Grove that are based in northern Europe and, most distinctly, in Finland. However, this abundance of Folk Metal bands from the Nordic countries seems to be viewed by many members from a position of fascination and self-irony. This can be illustrated by an often-posted version of the desert-man meme (sometimes called the 'lost in the desert' meme), here posted with the words 'Greetings from Finland, lol'. A man crawling through a desert, thirsty and sunburnt, sees two signs. The one to the right points to water, while the one pointing to the left features a number of logotypes for Finnish metal bands. Of course, the desert-man takes the path to the left. This somewhat ironic celebration of the primacy of Finland, and to some extent the other Nordic countries, in the Folk Metal scene can be seen as typical of the Grove. Members also occasionally celebrate these countries' progressive politics. When Finland's centre-left coalition government in 2020 funded the 'HousingFirst' project, which generated headlines that Finland had 'ended homelessness', several Grovers made celebratory posts about this. In their musicking activities, Grovers acknowledge that many successful Folk Metal bands come from the Nordic countries, and most celebrate this in a mode of loving fascination while still being open to and often actively looking for folkyness and Folk Metal from other parts of the world.

But a few individuals with outspoken ethno-nationalistic and/or chauvinistic world views also exist within the community. Efforts to politicize the obsession of 'Swedaboos' with Nordicness can be found among the posts within the group: for example, there are proclamations of national, racial and ethnic pride; rants and memes where the (perceived) feminized/left-wing Scandinavian present-day cultures are juxtaposed with the masculine warriors of the ancient Vikings; and postings of songs from NSBM-bands.⁴ However, these posts have historically been few, they seldom generate many likes, and they are usually called out and criticized by other members. Posts that can be interpreted as misogynist are just as readily criticized by the community. One example that has become rooted in the community's shared memory is the case of 'Flávio' (name altered for anonymization). Flávio was a 'Swedaboo' with a huge fascination for all things Nordic. His profile picture was Ragnar, the main character of the TV series *Vikings* (Renck, 2013). Flávio was apparently looking for love interests within the group as his first post contained nothing more than the sentence: 'Any girl can chat to me? Only girls.' The post spurred a lengthy discussion mostly containing ridicule and mockery. The main reason for this mockery was that he had simply not understood what the group was about. It was not supposed to be about pretending to be a Viking, and it is definitely not a place to pick

⁴ NSBM is the acronym for National Socialist Black Metal.

up girls. The phrasing of the post became embedded in the group's DNA as a mimetic phrase, often used when pointing out that someone is out of touch with the culture of the Grove. It has also been used to negotiate or subvert gender roles, where several posts have been published by female members with the same phrasing but with the word 'girls' replaced by, for example, the names of male lead singers in Folk Metal bands: for example, 'Any Mathias can chat to me? Only Mathias', which alludes to Mathias Nygård (Turisas) and/or Mathias 'Vreth' Lillmåns (Finntroll).

An apolitical space?

Serious discussions and arguments about politics have earlier been commonplace in the Grove; however, the situation seems to have changed somewhat from 2020 onwards. The earlier consensus was that short political discussions that have clear connections to Folk Metal are allowed, such as when the band Heilung posted a statement on its website about racist abuse from audience members at some of their concerts. Still, discussions that were deemed to be too often recurring and that were considered sensitive or very controversial were generally avoided. This was handled to some extent by the members themselves, as discussed, but also by way of moderation by admins and moderators. So, in some ways, Diogo's analogy of the Grove as a village is quite apt, but in other ways it is not. It becomes clear that boundaries do exist in an online community like this. It is not a democracy and not a community built on family ties or propinquity, but one built on musical taste. And there seems to be quite a lot of policing going on 'behind the scenes'. Another former moderator wrote in my questionnaire:

I became an admin in the Grove precisely because I do not tolerate racism, and I was more than happy to swing that ban hammer when needed. It seems like racism in there is dealt with swiftly, and members are definitely not afraid to call out racism and let admin know when there is a problem. (respondent #2)

Lately, that ban hammer has been swung somewhat more swiftly, at least when it comes to specific posts. As soon as a political discussion arises which the moderators deem potentially 'toxic', it has after warnings been shut down and usually deleted. The reason for this is, according to the moderators, that Facebook has permanently shut down other similar groups where intense heated discussions arise. Matei and Britt (2011, p. 5) have suggested that some amount of conflict in online communities works as a sort of 'social glue', defining and maintaining group boundaries while keeping it in a fluid state, which is necessary to maintain 'communitas'. What could be a result of this more intense mode of moderation is that the Grove is seen as an apolitical space, when it clearly is not. The group is held together by moderator and member actions such as recurring light-hearted discussion posts, giveaways and 'weekly bonfires', as well as by formal and informal rules, the deletion of posts and, occasionally, the banning of members. On the one hand, this order can be said to uphold an illusion of apoliticalness which potentially could affect the group's communitas in a negative way, if it leads to a stagnated, less fluid state. On the other hand, perhaps this intense moderation is precisely what makes this living space of intercultural connections possible. Through this the 'ideal relations' that constitute the Grove as a village, as a cosy clearing in the woods, or as a band of merry friends can be evoked and maintained. With Small, these relations can be understood not only as a constructed fantasy, but as a lived experience of 'how the world really is when all the dross is stripped away, and this is where we really belong in it' (Small, 1998, p. 142). These rules and regulations give the Grovers room to relate to 'the pattern which connects' (Small, 1998, p. 143) through acts of musicking.

Intercultural musicking

I would say that there is a great deal of curiosity and interest when someone posts something like precolonial Latin American Folk Metal. [...] Someone posted an African Folk Metal band, and everyone was just 'woohoo, now it's in Africa too!' (Niklas)

That many Grove members are constantly searching for metal and 'folky' sounds and other expressions from cultures around the globe is undeniable. The themes of nature, heritage, paganism and warrior cultures, which by some are fetishized in the Viking stereotypes, are also central to how many of the Grove's members make Folk Metal meaningful. But for most, these themes seem to be something that binds the world together rather than divides it.

I think Folk Metal stands out because it speaks to a shared past or collective memory. No matter where we come from, we all have folklore in our cultures. Folk Metal modernizes those sounds from the past and creates new stories for us to share. (respondent #2)

'Folkyness' and metal unite both music and people in The Folk Metal Grove. It can be seen as a universalism similar to the one found in discourses of world music (Brusila, 2003, p. 82). It is no coincidence that the group description features a quote from Turisas's song 'Battle Metal': 'Hear me, my warriors! Soldiers from all the edges of the world! Let us join our forces to an army - UNITED!' (Nygård, 2004). As Neilson notes, these lyrics 'draw on the desire to belong to an organic community which traverses national boundaries while retaining a sense of exclusivity' (Neilson, 2015, p. 142). This can be said to be equally true of Turisas fans as of the members of The Folk Metal Grove.

This drive to traverse national boundaries is not only expressed through music. The Grove as a living space is also viewed by the members as an arena for finding and maintaining personal intercultural connections. When a large explosion in Beirut, Lebanon, in early August 2020 claimed over one hundred lives, a Grove member from Saudi Arabia shared a song by the Lebanese metal band Blaakyum, while expressing his concern for Grove members in the area. In the comment section, a Lebanese Grover confirmed he was okay and gave his account of the situation. Another example is the post of gratitude to the Grove sent from a couple who had met through the group.

Not exactly Folk Metal related but I want to thank to the Folk Metal grove! Today I celebrate five year anniversary with my wife, who I met through this page. Even though she was living in Mexico and I was in Canada! She's the best thing Folk Metal ever gave me! (The Folk Metal Grove, 2018)

The post received a large number of positive comments and likes. In my interviews and questionnaire, several people highlighted the Grove's global and regional networks as an important function of the group, and there are occasionally so-called *Grove meetups*. This is when there is a concert or festival with many bands which seems to fit with the ethos of The Folk Metal Grove, and someone will suggest a time and place to meet up. Meetings usually involve drinking, partying, discussing and taking photos to post in the group. Grovers love to transgress boundaries, not only between genres and nationalities, but also between the virtual and the so-called real life.

Conclusion

In The Folk Metal Grove, members manifest, explore, affirm and celebrate (Small 1998) the musical genre called Folk Metal. While some do find in this music a celebration of European heritage (or even race), many Grovers seem to see an interconnected earth and a space in which to connect with different cultures, musics, languages and histories. Besides a shared love for certain canonized musical groups, the Grovers come together in a playful performance and celebration of an idealized past, labelled as folkyness.

Studying a community such as the Folk Metal Grove reveals an interesting paradox. Earlier research (Spracklen, 2015) has shown how Folk Metal in some ways can be seen as replicating and accentuating central aspects of heavy metal – a genre that arguably started as an arena for young white men (Walser, 1993). But some ways in which Folk Metal is made meaningful rather seem to connect to a will to transgress the sonic and cultural boundaries of metal. While the genre-widening potential of Folk Metal in general has been mentioned by earlier researchers (Kahn-Harris, 2010, p. 98), the contribution of this article has been to articulate and discuss the ways in which these paradoxical aspects are expressed, lived and coped with by fans and musicians within an (online) community. The Grove can be understood as a living space involving not only the circulation of music but also the development of meaning, collective memory and norms as well as real-life, often intercultural, connections resulting in friendships, marriages and band formations. Regardless of their ideological leanings, the Grove lets its members be included in an interconnected global village, held together by the shared bond of metal and folkyness. The idea of folkyness allows for inconsistencies and eclecticism within the community and can be seen as one of the mechanisms for the co-existence of the mentioned paradoxical interpretations of Folk Metal within the Grove. Another important factor is clearly the conscious ongoing efforts on the part of Grove moderators: to carefully direct discussion, keep sensitive and controversial topics to a minimum, and to ‘swing the banhammer’ when deemed necessary.

To conclude, Folk Metal does serve as a space to go beyond metal when it comes to which instruments to play, which languages to sing in, which stories to tell and which emotions to feel – regardless of what those stories and emotions symbolize. Many comments, both in the group and in my interviews, celebrate the bountifulness of Folk Metal: of expressions, of sounds and instruments, of language and culture, and of emotion. There is always something *new* to discover. It is about exploration of the unknown, and the Grove is a place ‘to share your explorations and ask for new destinations’, as one of my respondents wrote.

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Abstract

In the Facebook group The Folk Metal Grove, its members manifest, explore and celebrate the musical genre called Folk Metal. The 'Groovers' come together in a playful performance and celebration of an idealized past, emically labelled folkyness. In this article, a 'netnographic' approach is used to explore how Folk Metal is constructed, negotiated and made meaningful through musicking in this community with the aim to discuss aspects of Folk Metal, ideology, genre and online culture. The group can be understood as a living space involving not only the circulation of music but also the development of meaning, collective memory and norms as well as real-life, often intercultural, connections. Earlier research has shown how Folk Metal in some ways can be seen as accentuating central aspects of heavy metal, but some ways in which Folk Metal is made meaningful within the Grove seem rather to connect to a will to transgress the sonic and cultural boundaries of metal. For the group members the music seems to serve as a space to go beyond metal when it comes to which instruments to play, which languages to sing in, which stories to tell and which emotions to feel.

Keywords

Folk Metal; netnography; social media; interculturality; nationalism; musicking.

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