Music for the apocalypse

Growing up, I never understood the book of Revelation. Then I started listening to Black Sabbath.

by Jack Holloway in the December 2024 issue
Published on November 27, 2024

(Illustration by Eric Nyquist)

Growing up in an evangelical Christian household, I was not allowed to listen to secular music—or to any music that did not explicitly point to Jesus Christ and reflect "biblical values." Heavy metal, in particular, was considered evil, food for the flesh that would destroy my Christian spirit.

Then, when I was ten years old, my uncle shared a DVD of music videos, *This Is Solid State, Volume 4*, from the Christian metal label Solid State Records. As I watched it and the other volumes in the series, I discovered bands like Norma Jean, mewithoutYou, and Blindside. I was awestruck. Soon after that I picked up the electric guitar—I wanted to learn how to play what I was hearing. In high school, I was the lead vocalist in a Christian metal band called With Unveiled Faces. We even recorded an EP.

I went to college at Regent University in Virginia Beach, founded by televangelist Pat Robertson. As a biblical studies major, I read Abraham Joshua Heschel's monumental text on the biblical prophets—my gateway to liberation theology. That led me to Union Theological Seminary, where I discovered Black Sabbath, widely regarded as the original heavy metal band. What drew me to the group was the antiwar song "War Pigs." When I first heard it I was taken aback by its explicitly apocalyptic nature.

I was studying biblical apocalyptic literature at the time, and Black Sabbath's approach seemed to reflect its character more closely than did the apocalyptic theologies with which I was familiar. In class I was learning how the book of Revelation was written under occupation and offered a vision of the destruction of the Roman Empire. To read it only as a prophecy of the future destruction of the earth is to miss the anti-imperial message of its original context. Black Sabbath, on the other hand, prophesied an end to war, an end to the reign of the politicians and generals who make war. Was it possible this evil band was reading the Bible more faithfully than the preachers I'd heard growing up?

In 1983, Billy Graham published *Approaching Hoofbeats: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, in which he uses the threat of nuclear war and total annihilation to warn readers to repent and follow Jesus. After defending the US bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II, Graham warns that "in our contemplation of the horror of a nuclear war" we must not forget "the infinitely greater horror of an eternity apart from God."

Meanwhile metal bands were using the apocalyptic material of the religious right for moral invectives of their own. The same year Graham's book was published, Metallica released its song "The Four Horsemen," which is rife with apocalyptic imagery: "The sound of hooves knock at your door . . . / The horsemen are drawing nearer." Metalheads' morbid proclivities and indulgent behavior may have corresponded in Graham's mind—and my parents' minds—to the excessive wickedness and unbelief characteristic of the end times prophesied in the Bible. But it was the hypocrisy and opportunism of ministers wedded to the American empire that inspired metal bands' critiques of organized religion.

Instead of accepting the way things are as the way they have always been and must be, the apocalyptic imagination envisions the destruction of the status quo to make way for the dawn of justice and peace. That imagination is shot through with a revolutionary spirit. After Black Sabbath's "War Pigs" alerted me to the apocalyptic potential of metal music, I started to pay closer attention to what metal bands were saying with their music. When I did, I found that metal has consistently captured that revolutionary spirit in a way that the end-times prophecies of the conservative Christian preachers of my youth did not.

Apocalypticism is often dismissed for being too extreme, for failing to reckon with the complexities and middle grounds of real life. But what about the times when nothing is mundane or middle-of-the-road? When things are cataclysmic and horrifying—a global pandemic, sky-eclipsing wildfires, war, genocide—we cannot accept the status quo. We need daring, world-changing consciousness. We need apocalyptic imagination for apocalyptic circumstances.

Heavy metal is no savior, but the genre's apocalypticism helped shake me out of complacency. It estranged me from the meager half-measures offered by the powers that be and radicalized my sense of what is possible.

I first heard "War Pigs" in 2015, 45 years after its release. When it hit the airwaves in 1970, the United States had been bombing Vietnam relentlessly for years, seeking a breaking point when the destruction would become so extreme that the North Vietnamese could no longer sustain resistance. After taking office in 1969, Richard Nixon initiated Operation Menu, the first of many carpet bombings of Cambodia. Nixon had the support of his friend Graham, whose galvanization of evangelicals toward the Republican Party was essential to the Nixon campaign's success.

Across the Atlantic in Birmingham, England, Geezer Butler—Black Sabbath's bassist and chief lyricist—took the theological material of the religious right and turned it on its head. Butler was familiar with biblical apocalyptic literature from his Catholic upbringing, and he drew on those themes when he wrote "War Pigs." The song announces divine judgment on a military-industrial complex that sacrifices human life on an altar of ideology:

> Generals gathered in their masses,
> Just like witches at black masses.
> Evil minds that plot destruction,
> Sorcerers of death's construction.

The work of the empire is likened to that of witches and sorcerers—as in Revelation, where mythical images of evil beasts are deployed to condemn the injustice and violence that established Rome. The radical message of "War Pigs" earned it a mention in *Broadside*, an American folk music magazine that largely eschewed rock music. *Classic Rock* magazine ranked it number one on its list of the greatest Black Sabbath songs. It has been covered by multitudes of bands, including Faith No More and Sacred Reich. And its influence endures and crosses genres. Rapper T-Pain recorded a version for his 2023 album *On Top of the Covers*.

The members of Black Sabbath—Butler, Ozzy Osbourne, Tony Iommi, and Bill Ward—were all born just a few years after the US bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They were teenagers during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, when the US and the Soviet Union came frighteningly close to nuclear war. They grew up with a dread of the weapons that make it humanly possible to instantly obliterate millions of lives, destroy whole civilizations, and create immeasurable misery and suffering. While mainstream political discourse made appeals to deterrence or repeated the justification that atomic weapons were a necessary evil to end the Second World War, Black Sabbath wrote "Electric Funeral," depicting the real-life mayhem of nuclear explosions and highlighting the horror of such weapons' capacity to totally annihilate life on earth:

> Reflex in the sky
> Warn you you're gonna die.
> Storm coming, you better hide
> From the atomic tide. . . .

Dying world of radiation,
Victims of man's frustration.
Burning globe of obscene fire,
Like electric funeral pyre.

Sabbath's emphasis on nuclear war was influential, especially in the 1980s, when the threat of nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the US was at an all-time high. While Graham and Ronald Reagan openly wondered whether nuclear war would fulfill biblical prophecy, metal bands depicted the horrific scenes of worldwide destruction and bloodshed in their lyrics, album art, and merchandise. Songs sounding the prophetic alarm included Discharge's "Doomsday" (1984), Nuclear Assault's "Nuclear War" (1986), Death Angel's "Final Death" (1987), Onslaught's "Thermonuclear Devastation" (1983), and Terrorizer's "After World Obliteration" (1989).

The trendsetter here was Discharge. The band's debut single was "Realities of War" (1980), and for years the band focused on little else. With songs like "War's No Fairytale," "Visions of War," "Massacre of Innocents (Air Attack)," and "Two Monstrous Nuclear Stockpiles," Discharge made its antiwar message loud and clear. In a song called "The End," it even lifted a line from "War Pigs" to help illustrate the consequences of nuclear war: "Now in darkness world stops turning."

But unlike Black Sabbath, Discharge played their instruments exceptionally fast and with ferocious energy. The band's unique approach to the drums in particular, dribbling the snare on and off the beat, came to be called "D-beat." D-beat influenced the sounds of popular thrash metal bands like Anthrax, Slayer, and Exodus. "There was a level of intensity, aggression and brutality that was unlike anything we'd ever heard," Scott Ian of Anthrax told *Metal Hammer* in 2023. "It sounded like the apocalypse."

My parents thought metal music celebrated violence. In fact it reflects the violence of world superpowers. Earlier generations of metal bands focused on the violence of nuclear war. Now younger generations of musicians are witnessing violence in the form of climate change. Black Sabbath's lyric "burning globe of obscene fire" carries a whole new resonance today.

In 1992, 14 years before the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* brought global warming to the popular discourse, the metal band Neurosis released *Souls at Zero*.

The test pressing for the album advertised it as “an embodied soundtrack for the apocalypse.” In the song “Takeahnase,” which warns of consequences for overexploiting the earth, a shaman-like voice says, “We are facing a dangerous period ahead. If we do not stop, correct and change some of these wrongdoings, now, we are all going to suffer.” The voice specifies that what is in store are earthquakes, floods, droughts, lightning, and great winds. “These things will warn us that we are not following the law of the great spirit.” Then the band crashes in, chanting “Takeahnase”—a neologism the band uses as a synonym for apocalypse. The song ends its forecast of doom with a bleak lyric: “Burn down.”

This bleakness matches what the book of Revelation prophesies as the fate of the Roman Empire. Babylon (a code word for Rome) has committed sins “heaped high as heaven” and has “glorified herself and lived luxuriously.” Therefore, “her plagues will come in a single day—pestilence and mourning and famine—and she will be burned with fire” (Rev. 18:5–8). Such is the fate of empires built on injustice and stubborn in their self-indulgent folly.

Many metal bands harbor a similar conviction that our world of global capitalism is so broken and corrupt as to be past help, and this conviction rings loud and clear in their heavy, bombastic, screaming music. Napalm Death is an especially vivid example. The band’s 1990 song “Unfit Earth” is an indictment of exploitative human activity that leads to destruction, while “Polluted Minds” calls out polluters for “destroying the earth” and refusing to care “[as] long as their profits are high.”

Part of what makes metal music compelling and revolutionary is the way it expresses both dread and disdain for the way things are. Napalm Death’s music is even more brutal and punishing than its lyrics. The vocals are monstrous, and the rhythm takes thrash metal to an unnaturally fast extreme. Back in 1969, Black Sabbath set out to create the horror genre of music. Following in Sabbath’s footsteps, Napalm Death upped the ante. With uncompromising ferocity and gloom, the band made—and still makes—music that sounds like the end of the world. These are musicians who take the anguish and horror of the world so seriously that they simply have to muster as evil a sound as possible. In all its darkness, Napalm Death understands the world we live in, and its lyrics drive the point home. Ezekiel begs, “Turn, turn from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?” (33:11). Napalm Death, in its 2009 song “On the Brink of Extinction,” prophetically calls on humanity to appreciate “all that lives and breathes” and asks, “Will we awake from this negligent narcosis?”

Pessimism is part of the power of apocalyptic imagination. Its working knowledge is that this world is doomed. The proclamations of apocalyptic prophets are then occasions for lament, for weeping and wailing—like what you might hear in metal music. “The prophet’s angry words cry,” says Heschel. The experience of pain is terribly strong, and in a lament the poet commits to expressing that pain. Lament sacrifices positivity in favor of blunt truth. “This is your doom!” Jeremiah laments. “How bitter it is!” (4:18).

But the message is not merely negative. Paradoxically, apocalyptic literature is the most positive when it is the most negative. The more relentlessly we criticize the world as it is, the more clearly we can articulate the world as it should be. The book of Revelation does not just prophesy that Rome will be burned down; it proclaims that there will be a new world. And in celebration of the new world God inaugurates, those who inherit the earth will “sing a new song,” which will be “like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder” (Rev. 14:2–3). Likewise, “War Pigs” announces not just impending doom but also world-changing possibility: “No more war pigs have the power. / Hand of God has struck the hour.” Things cannot stay the same. The world as it is must end. Then something different and new must come to be.

My parents didn’t understand how metal music could be such a positive experience for me, providing an outlet for my frustrations and sadness and offering a cathartic space of relief. I feel as if I am constantly being pressed for compromise and capitulation to the status quo, forced to choose between evils. But when I listen to and play metal, I draw on the world-changing apocalyptic consciousness of the biblical prophets with a soundtrack to match. When the song ends, I might be a little more free from the attachment to the way things are, a little more open to what might be possible.

Visit christiancentury.org/metal for Jack Holloway’s Spotify playlist of apocalyptic metal music.