Chapter 8
Black Metal Soul Music: Stone Vengeance and the Aesthetics of Race in Heavy Metal

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"Some people refer to us as a Christian metal band! Christian! You know, I told the guy, that's not what we are. I can understand, they hear the Bible references —but that's the blues! That's from the blues. I'm just carrying on [the black musical] tradition in rock'n'roll. It's a code, you know, and a part of who I am. "It's ignorance [by blacks to the fact] that black people [have always been involved in rock'n'roll]. Then on through the '60s, you don't see [black people] — they're re-categorized. It's based on the ignorance of our own people – letting something that they built, that they were at the foundation of — it wasn't just them, you had other people involved but they definitely played a large part of the invention of [rock music]."

— Mike Coffey, leader of Stone Vengeance[1]

Near the beginning of his incisive study of heavy metal, Robert Walser asserts, "A heavy metal genealogy ought to trace the music back to African-American blues, but this is seldom done. Just as histories of North America begin with the European invasion, the histories of musical genres such as rock and heavy metal commonly begin at the point of white dominance. But to emphasize Black Sabbath's contribution of occult concerns to rock is to forget Robert Johnson's struggles with the Devil and Howlin' Wolf's meditations on the problem of evil" (1993, 8). African American guitarist and Stone Vengeance founder Mike Coffey does not hesitate to trace rock music and by extension, heavy metal, from the blues

> I listen to stuff from the '20s. Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Blake, Robert Johnson from the '30s. Lonnie Johnson, who's just as good, probably a little better than Robert Johnson. Robert Johnson just got popular because Eric Clapton put his stamp [of approval] on him. But you ask BB King and all those guys, [they'll tell you that] Lonnie Johnson's bad as hell, man.

> Skip James. That's what happens when you put the drums and the bass behind the guitar, it's rockin' now! *You can't get heavy metal — if you don't have that guitar, it'll be something else.* You can have a loud bass and drums but without that guitar, it's another music. *The guitar is primary because of the blues.*

While Walser allows the blues to shimmer behind the remainder of his book without further comment, I want to note the ways in which black (African American) heavy metal musicians confront the reality that, as Walser and other heavy metal scholars such as Deena Weinstein readily acknowledge, heavy metal is a genre with an audience that is "mostly young, white, male, and working class" (Walser 1993, 3).

Moreover, black heavy metal musicians must also confront the practices of a music industry that bases its decisions about marketing, artist development, and genre configuration on that reality. These assumptions cum practices inadvertently silence black rock musicians by reinforcing tautological links between genre and race that ensure audiences, critics and music industry personnel identify certain musical sounds and gestures with particular types of bodies. While the global reach of contemporary metal complicates Walser and Weinstein's assertions about the core constituency for heavy metal, the overarching racialization of rock as a "white" genre remains, particularly in the United States, black African metal bands notwithstanding.[2]

Stone Vengeance is a heavy metal band comprised of entirely African American musicians and, while enjoying a primarily white male audience, formed their aesthetic in recognition, even celebration, of their blackness. Initially formed in 1978, Stone Vengeance have remained a cult favorite for a small yet dedicated core audience who can be found "on every continent but Antarctica," as Coffey boasts. Their fans have named them the Lords of Heavy Metal Soul, a moniker, while clearly meant to praise, speaks to Stone Vengeance's racialized positioning outside the inner sanctum of "metaldom," pointing as it does to a long history of primitivist tropes concerning black Americans' "soul," a nonintellectual, body-oriented essence that opposes the figuration of thrash metal as a complex musical form. As John Sheinbaum warns rock scholars, while rock's increasingly canonical historical narrative presents white rock musicians as artists and black soul musicians as craftspeople, "race-based constructions of difference we may hear should not lead us, unthinkingly, to assert that [music produced by white or black musicians] somehow possesses different levels of value" (2002, 127). Sheinbaum's point — that an unspoken and therefore often unacknowledged idea lurking behind critical judgment holds that exemplary black musicians are unschooled "soulful performers" while ideal white musicians are highly trained "skillful artists" — reveals the predetermined ways in which black cultural production enters critical discourse in an already-subordinate position.

My interest in Stone Vengeance lies in this very predicament: the relationship between race and value as experienced by musicians who challenge con-

ventional genre boundaries through an embodied difference to assumed genre expectations.[3] In fact, my initial interest was in studying the 1980s San Francisco thrash metal scene that had served as Metallica's formative ground. However, as I began researching, I became increasingly interested in Stone Vengeance because of their longevity — most of the other bands from the original scene have long since disappeared.[4] More important, as the sole representatives of African American musicians in the scene, Stone Vengeance provide a uniquely productive vehicle for reflecting on the relationships among processes of racialization, critical appraisals of aesthetic and historical value and music industry assessments of commercial interest precisely because Stone Vengeance makes visible the underlying tenets for recognition by other metal musicians, critics, fans, and music industry personnel — all of whom begin their appraisal of bands and musicians on presumptive notions of genre, including the bodies deemed appropriate for a particular genre. As Fabian Holt argues in his insightful study of popular music genre, a "*genre can be viewed as a culture* with the characteristics of a system or systemic functions [and] are identified not only with music, but also *with certain cultural values, rituals, practices, territories, traditions, and groups of people*."[5] It is reasonable to assume that the "cultural values, rituals, practices, territories, traditions, and groups of people" associated with thrash metal do not normally call to mind African American musicians or black musical traditions. Yet as Stone Vengeance effectively posits despite working within a genre discursively constructed as a space for the expression of white masculinity, thrash metal can be thought of as part of a black American musical tradition.

Before allowing Coffey's narrative to center my discussion, I want to be explicit about not taking his comments at face value. However, throughout all my work (and not exclusively for this chapter), I aim to highlight musicians' voices in order that we might gain knowledge from their perspective. Too often musicians' voices are muted or muffled by scholars, critics, and fans with a real loss in the ways in which historical narratives, aesthetic choices, and music industry practices are framed. By giving ample space to Coffey, I hope to serve as an interested interlocutor of Stone Vengeance's working aesthetic in heavy metal as an articulation of a black aesthetic. In this way, I mean to foreground Coffey's role as musician — both agentive and reactive, both expressive and constitutive — in negotiating musical discourse, audience desire and critical hermeneutics.

For example, at one point in a conversation with Coffey and drummer/vocalist Darren Tompkins, I referred to Jimi Hendrix and his role in shaping psychedelic hard rock and, consequently, heavy metal through his technical mastery of the blues combined with the sonic assault of hard rock and his creative use of distortion.[6] But the mention of Hendrix elicited a heated reply from Coffey. After quickly assuring me that he loves Hendrix's music, Coffey became decidedly less appreciative of the aims to which Hendrix's representation has been mobilized by rock critics and fans, particularly after his death. I quote Coffey's response at length

> I always think about it. People act like they really love Hendrix. But, you know what? If that is the case, it wouldn't be so hard for black people to get *in* to [i.e., make it in] this music. So I feel like, well, Hendrix is gone and he's no longer an obstacle or a threat or something — so it's easy, [he's] safe to like. That's what I feel about Hendrix because people like me, and you . . . we're children of Hendrix through the discipline of rock'n'roll.
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> But there's no apparatus to help us *at all*. So, I think it's bullshit. I think it's a fake love affair with Hendrix. It's just he's gone, and money can be made off of him, you know what I mean?
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> Think about it. He didn't make it here in the States. We have to *look* at that. He was *struggling* in the States, just like us. Just like Living Colour wouldn't have made it if it wasn't for Mick Jagger, you know what I mean? So it's bullshit, dude.[7]

Noting how a fetishized Hendrixian presence allows white rock fans to proclaim their admiration for a dead black musician while disenfranchising living black rock musicians, Coffey insists that despite the adulation Hendrix receives within rock culture, the real status of black rock musicians is evident in the racialized conditions that remain within the music industry and within rock discourse writ large that keep black musicians from full participation within rock even, as Coffey points out, for an artist as revered as Hendrix.[8] Coffey's view that the figure of Hendrix has allowed an obscuring of the lack of apparatus lack of structure, of legitimization, of support, of authority — for other black rock musicians in the commercial music market provides the chance to briefly address the underlying issue of musicking, thrash metal or otherwise, as labor.

Something Else

Stone Vengeance was not successful in turning home court to their advantage in the burgeoning San Francisco Bay Area metal scene of the 1980s. Despite moderately large sales of a homemade cassette recording at the Record Vault, an important heavy metal music store in San Francisco at the time, Stone Vengeance remained a club band unable to secure a recording contract with heavy metal labels such as Megaforce, Roadrunner, or Combat or touring opportunities as an opening act for better - known bands.[9]

The musicians of Stone Vengeance provide a perspective that is important *precisely because of* their positions as working-class black musicians, whose professional music careers confront the intertwining pincers of race and class as articulated in musical discourse, including practices and norms within the music industry. Born and raised in the black working-class neighborhood of the Bayview–Hunter's Point area of San Francisco, California, Coffey, Tompkins and Starks see their creative efforts as both art and commerce.

Indeed, the fact that Stone Vengeance performances are self-conscious acts of labor formed a large part of our discussions. Coffey and Tompkins recognize that their musical labor is harnessed to racialized conceptions of professional musicking that are reinforced structurally through music business organization norms and practices (not to mention institutes of music education). Coffey points to racialist thinking as impacting his professional efforts: "[Record] labels are set up for white groups. I learned that a long time ago. I didn't go into this with my eyes closed. I knew we were black and I knew about racism. But I just didn't think it would be this hard. I really didn't. *I was willing to work hard and prove myself and put in the work*."

In fact, Coffey is quick to note, "Black people like money just like anybody else. [Black musicians] didn't just walk away from rock'n'roll. We had no apparatus; the white folks owned the distribution, they owned the record labels, they owned the publishing. What the fuck did black people know? They just wanted to make some money. And, they [would have been interested in] whatever [type of music that was popular in the way that] rock'n'roll became. We would've been *in* it — *if we weren't pushed out*. But you know they were pushed out just by looking at what was going on with a Little Richard and then a Pat Boone." Coffey's point about the way in which Pat Boone's anodyne covers of Little Richard and others' more raucous rock'n'roll hits went on to greater sales among mainstream audiences also points to the ways in which the racialization of genre have left black musicians

Similar to Coffey's reminder about the way in which Robert Johnson was legitimated through Clapton's imprimatur, Maureen Mahon notes the troubled entry of another African American rock band, Living Colour, into the mainstream rock market: "Whether one reads Living Colour's alliance with [Mick] Jagger as the calling in of a debt, the ultimate sellout, or a savvy manipulation of resources, it exemplifies the race and power dynamics of the music industry. Most disturbing for Black Rock Coalition members was the fact that a white star had to validate a black band before it could gain recognition" (2004, 156). While race is not the only element in play, it is difficult to deny that racialized conceptions of musical genre form a significant part of the larger context in assessing a particular band's perceived mainstream marketability. Further, these assessments usually carry negative repercussions for black musicians engaged in genres not typically identified as "black music" genres (e.g., rhythm and blues, rap).

In defending his choice to pursue an interest in heavy metal, Coffey maintains that black American music has always dealt with the themes identified with heavy metal: individualism, antiauthoritarianism, antibourgeois sentiments connected to working-class alienation and a morbid fascination with death and apocalyptic imagery that is often drawn from anti- or, perhaps more accurately, pre- or non-Christian beliefs. Stone Vengeance treats these themes *as a fundamentally black aesthetic,* thereby presenting thrash metal as part of a larger black music tradition.[10]

Stone Vengeance articulates their heavy "metalness" in explicit dialogue with ideas about, for instance, black masculinity. But their performances repudiate popular culture stereotypes of blackness. Coffey describes the band's outlier position in heavy metal by recalling a scene in the film, *Blade* in which the black "half-vampire daywalker" played by Wesley Snipes is helped by a black woman, who asks him, "You're one of them [a vampire], aren't you?" Blade replies, "No, I'm something else."[11]

Coffey continues, "That's what we are. We're not what the white guys are [i.e., conventional rock groups]. We're not what the black guys are [i.e., conventional funk or hip hop groups]. So, to manage a band like us, you have to think about that because we don't fit. Because there are no record labels looking for black rock bands. You have some [black rock bands] that are out there [now] but we were the first black *heavy metal* band. Stone Vengeance is notable for being the first black *thrash heavy metal* band. More and more people now are starting to see that."[12] The continued silence around Stone Vengeance in the increasing catalog of heavy metal texts, however, belies Coffey's assertion.[13] What might Stone Vengeance's invisibility reveal?

Black Thrash Roots

Coffey is adamant that rock is based on the blues. While he admires guitarists such as Randy Rhoads, Ulrich Roth, Ritchie Blackmore, and Yngwie Malmsteen for their efforts to combine elements of European art music with hard rock, he insists, "If you don't like the blues, I guarantee you, your heroes like the blues [he is specifically discussing Rhoads, et al.]. Black Sabbath, you know they were called Earth at first, a blues band. Van Halen was into [Eric] Clapton. AC/DC — they *crazy* about the blues. KISS — listen to Ace Frehley, that's the blues. *All* of those guys who established heavy metal were into the blues."

Coffey points out that the relationship between the blues and rock extends beyond the "merely musical," noting,

> You can't take the blues out of it. People ask, why do you sing about Satan? That's the same thing in the blues, it was the devil's music. It's the same shit today. We sing about god, the devil, sex — it's the same thing. You can't really get away from it. They can only pull that on people who don't know the history of the music.
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> But I studied the music. When I got into it, I would go to the library and read the history of [rock music]. So, I know where it came from – it came from what they called "race music" or "that nigger bop" music. It was [initially perceived as a] strictly black [music] and then it became rock'n'roll, which was [a] strictly white [music]. I remember some guy tried to come with some bullshit, trying to say that Elvis Presley had his rockabilly, his country style — trying to take away from the black influence. But that's not what [Sam Phillips] said. He said, "If I can find a white man that sings like a black man, I'll make a million

dollars." *He wasn't looking at Elvis's country roots, he was looking for Elvis to sound like a black man.*

This is no small point for Coffey. Phillips, whose Sun label had primarily recorded African American rhythm and blues musicians, was looking for a white singer who could sing with an authentic black feeling in order to leave the secondary race record market and move into the mainstream popular music market. While Elvis Presley might have given Phillips what he wanted, the singer's career with Sun Records was brief (1953–1956). By 1960 Elvis was charting with ballads such as "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" and "It's Now or Never" for RCA rather than reproducing the energetic rock'n'roll sound of his earlier Sun recordings "Hound Dog" or "Baby, Let's Play House." As Elvis's recordings indicated, the rapid transformation of rhythm and blues into rock and roll in the late 1950s eventually advanced rock to the center of American popular music culture in a process captured by Reebee Garofalo's apt description as a movement from "black roots to white fruits."[14]

However, Coffey's early music listening experiences pierced through rock's whitewashed veneer. His involvement with heavy metal was a natural outcome of being exposed to a wide variety of music despite growing up in a working-class African American neighborhood. Coffey: "I was exposed to a lot of music [through] the radio. And I remember hearing 'A Day in the Life' on the radio. That was one of the songs, the Beatles' 'A Day in the Life,' that *stuck* with me. I was like, there's something about that music — just *magical*." Coffey is unequivocal about the Beatles as source and inspiration for making music central in his life, displaying his continuing reverence for the band by the Beatles posters that hang in his band's rehearsal space and his frequent references to them in interviews.

In fact, *The Beatles at the Hollywood Bowl* (Capitol 1977), a live recording compiled primarily from two performances at the Hollywood Bowl in 1964 and 1965, was the first recording Coffey purchased. While his claims to having listened to the record over one thousand times may be hyperbolic, it indicates the central place the recording occupies in his musical development. He was initially disappointed as the sounds of a noisy, screaming audience first greeted him. However, his buyer's remorse soon turned to appreciation as his room filled with the sound of electric guitars. He recalls, "They start off with 'Twist and Shout.' And, dude, it was the *sound* of it. So, [the reason] I got into wanting to play music [was through a] fascination with the electronic side of it. The sound of *amplified* blues, man. *The sound of the equipment*. The *power* of just a few instruments on a stage being amplified and the *power* rolling off that stage." Like many rock fans, Coffey was attracted to two elements in rock that partially define its aesthetic: loud volume and complexity in the service of expressing power.

Coffey's attraction to rock's volume as an instantiation of power indicates the resistive, even rebellious, potential rock music holds out for him. Coffey's

immersion in the forceful "sound of amplified blues" allows him to wield power through rock's volume and use of distortion against unspoken "genre rules," a term I borrow from Simon Frith to describe the formal and (mostly) informal set of evolving rules – prohibitions, restrictions, qualifications — that determine the ordering of sounds, and the bodies who produce them, into specific genres.[15]

Returning to Coffey's musical roots, he points to the influence of the free-form FM radio of the late 1960s and 1970s, whose DJs introduced him to classical music by Igor Stravinsky, jazz by Sun Ra and, most important, the metal of the New Wave of British Heavy Metal (NWOBHM). As noted, Coffey idealized the music of the Beatles but it was the wide spectrum of music that was played on San Francisco Bay Area stations during the 1970s that freed him from the music of his neighborhood. As he put it, "I felt so liberated" by the radio.[16]

Two isolated instances in 1977 constitute Coffey's entire formal instruction on guitar. He had learned "Day Tripper" by ear. However, he still hadn't learned how to tune a guitar in standard tuning and would "de-tune" guitars at music stores to sound like the one he had at home. One day, perhaps intrigued by his detuning, an employee at Angelo's House of Music asked Coffey to perform a song. After performing "Day Tripper" with a single finger, the employee informed him that he was playing incorrectly and taught him not only how to perform "Day Tripper" more easily but taught him standard tuning, as well. Around the same time, Joseph Smiel, a German American music teacher at Woodrow Wilson High School, gave Coffey a single lesson, which consisted of showing the beginning guitarist some basic skills such as proper hand positioning and giving him a ripped-out chord chart from a Mel Bay guitar instruction book.

Music stores also provided a way to learn about developments in hard rock and heavy metal. Coffey remembers, "I'd see a white guy [who] looked like he rocked and ask him, 'Which band do you like?' because I wanted to find out about new bands. Now, I knew about the big bands like Judas Priest and Iron Maiden." Tellingly, Coffey searched for "white guys" rather than black musicians for recommendations about rock bands. While Judas Priest and Iron Maiden formed the foundation for his music, Coffey also began taking cues from the punk scene:

> When I heard Iron Maiden, that band really made me feel pretty good about what we were doing because I liked their music so much that it let me know that we were on the right track. I mean, we were already playing hard shit then but bands like them inspired me further. We were just like Metallica and others. We were taking our influences from the New Wave of British Heavy Metal and the hardcore punk. *That's* what made thrash — it was a mixture of those two. The speed and aggression of the hardcore punk mixed with the NWOBHM. Man, we just made a hybrid of it.

Keeping in mind that Coffey was captivated by "A Day in the Life" because of its compositional intricacies, his attraction to thrash metal exemplifies Glenn

Pillsbury's assertion that thrash metal's musical complexity serves to promote masculinist values such as musical virtuosity that are deeply embedded within Eurocentric models and taste hierarchies. In accepting Pillsbury's contention that Metallica's "production of identity through complexity" (2006, 60) rests on ideas about whiteness and masculinity, however, I mean to point out that Stone Vengeance's articulation of musical complexity in thrash metal rests on *opposing* stereotypes about blackness and masculinity in which black masculinity is equated entirely with the body rather than the mind. Importantly, Stone Vengeance uses thrash metal's musical complexity to demonstrate their musical abilities *beyond* those normally equated with black musicians, namely rhythmic complexity and emotional expression, *without abandoning* them as anyone familiar with thrash's speed and visceral appeal can appreciate.

Coffey continues,

> Motorhead — you gotta give them credit, too. Songs like "Iron Fist" and some of that early stuff – that was an influence. Even Loudness from Japan — we listened to all that shit. Venom was one of my favorites, Iron Maiden. Judas Priest before all of them 'cause I was into the Priest, all their '70s stuff. The early stuff like "Sad Wings of Destiny" and "Sin After Sin" and "Stained Class," all of that. Great shit. That's where we got our scream from — Rob Halford was the man. Raven, John Gallagher. Those were the two guys, we started going [screams]. Also, a small part, Robert Plant.

Coffey and his band mates drew from the same pool of artists as their white counterparts despite their relative isolation in a working-class black neighborhood. In an ironic reversal of white teens who accessed black R&B and early rock and roll through radio broadcasts in the 1950s, the members of Stone Vengeance gained entrance into the hard rock world of the 1970s through the countercultural mediation provided by predominantly white DJs on independent FM radio stations. The ironies would not end there.

Black Thrash Routes

Similar to burgeoning teen-aged rock guitarists everywhere, Coffey decided to start a band, recalling, "It was a rock band from the beginning. I wanted to *rock*. Boston [and Ted] Nugent were already in my head." However, as a largely self-taught guitarist who was attending a predominantly African American high school, Coffey had little of the conventional connections to other heavy metal musicians that white suburban schools in the United States offered to most heavy metal fans. Instead, Coffey tried to meet likely band members through music stores. Coffey recalls, "[Bassist] Anthony [Starks] and I were hanging out at Guitar Center,[17] trying to get another guitar player. We'd meet different white guys because [by the mid-1970s], I [had given] up on meeting another brother

[African American] who wanted to [perform rock music]. So, I'd try to meet these white guys. They'd talk good but they wouldn't show up to rehearsal, they wouldn't even call back." Still, a white musician briefly held the drum chair in Stone Vengeance: "Arthur would hang with us at the house and at school. He was kind of a loner because there weren't that many white people at Woodrow Wilson [high school] at that time." But soon, Arthur quit, telling Coffey, "I just can't see a black rock band making it."[18] Eventually giving up on finding another guitarist, Coffey began to envision a guitar-based power trio.

Coffey initially named his band the Dreamers, but after about a year, he wanted a more appropriate name for a heavy metal group. He recalls it was in 1978 when

> It took me a couple of weeks to come up with [Stone Vengeance] because I knew a name meant everything. There was a spiritual base of what I wanted to say but not [as] a "religious" band. It's not that. I just know that people use religion to control people in certain ways so I'm not into following [any religion] under [those conditions].
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> So, the "stone" is from the Bible. The stone that the builders rejected — that's us. That stone is a people, an ancient people. The builders are the 'civilized' nations of the world. Black people are rejected.
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> That's what the stone represented to me — the despised, the rejected, the hated. The builders – those that build civilizations — scorned [us], looked down upon us. That has been our experience in this music.
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> You see the star and all that in our [band logo] and [people] don't know what that means. But it's heavy symbolism. You have six points, each one is sixty degrees, 6 times 60 equals 360 degrees, that's a circle, a circle of knowledge with 6 points of light. You have the skull, which everyone knows represents death. So, it's a balance. Knowledge is power, knowledge is life — if you have knowledge, you can survive.

As Walser cogently argues, "Heavy metal's fascination with the dark side of life gives evidence of both dissatisfaction with dominant identities and institutions and an intense yearning for reconciliation with something more credible" (1993, xvi–xvii). Clearly, Coffey sees Stone Vengeance as part of a long history of enduring African American cultural resistance, embodying the "rejected" legacy and rhetorically prevailing over death. Stone Vengeance's preoccupation with heavy metal iconography and a shared ideological resonance with its dark themes are derived from a legacy of black American biblical "readings against the grain," echoes from the spirituals of black slaves as well as the secular and often sacrilegious concerns of the blues — musical anchors distinct from, for example, the Norse mythology ascribed by Norwegian black metal groups.

In addition to Pillsbury's description that thrash emerged from "reworkings of British metal groups such as Diamond Head, Iron Maiden and Motorhead," Coffey includes the blues as a means to recognize heavy metal as a black American musical practice (2006, 3). Moreover, Stone Vengeance's rebuffs by the

music industry echo the marginalized position from which Coffey announces an African American thrash metal band named to invoke the long history of black repudiation of "the builders of civilization." Coffey is unambiguous on this point

> Stone Vengeance has existed and survived by my iron will. I would not give up. I knew Stone Vengeance was a square peg but I have enough pride as a black man that I wasn't going to force myself into a round hole. I was never going to do that. We're nice guys and people will tell you that we're one of the easiest bands to work with in the business. But we're not what you would call Uncle Toms. And that is part of the reason that freezes a lot of people, because in this country, the black man is made to look a certain way and if you can't be used or ridiculed — some people just don't like that. They feel more comfortable if you're in a position where you're not taken seriously. So you can be a joke, know what I mean?

Black Outlaws

Coffey identifies Stone Vengeance as a San Francisco thrash band that emerged from the same early 1980s scene in which Metallica and Exodus cut their teeth:

> Back then, when [the] heavy metal [scene] was starting [to form in San Francisco], the bands that were playing sounded like either [Judas] Priest, Iron Maiden or they were more commercial sounding. But there [weren't] that many bands. There was us, Metallica coming up [from Los Angeles], Slayer, Exodus. And from what I remember, honestly, we were probably the first to come out of San Francisco. Because Metallica was not from here. Slayer wasn't from here. Exodus was from the East Bay somewhere.

Yet, even in an underground metal scene in which they were literal "home boys," Stone Vengeance remained external to much of the social aspects of a scene through which musicians interact in competitive as well as collaborative ways. Coffey admits,

> We were already [blending NWOBHM and punk influences] and I didn't even know we had any peers. *Because I didn't really hang with rockers*. I found out about Metallica through the Record Vault [a well-known San Francisco metal music store in the 1980s]. They said, "You gotta check these guys out." This was when Dave Mustaine was still in the band. And Kirk [Hammett] was with Exodus. When I first saw those bands, I was like, "Oh! This is where *we* belong!" Because, to me, the only people that were doing what I was diggin' was Iron Maiden, Venom, Raven and all those [type of] bands.

Coffey disclosed that while Stone Vengeance never hung out with many other rock bands except when playing shows together, a number of them were fans:

> You know, you talk to 'em, you meet 'em [backstage]. [Deceased Metallica bassist] Cliff Burton liked our music a lot. The guys in Laaz Rockit, they liked us. Suicidal Tendencies, they liked us. So many people. [Charged] GBH was *crazy* about us! All the guys in Metallica were cool with us, hanging out with us backstage at the Stone [a San Francisco rock club] when we were playing with Trouble and Slayer. This was when [Metallica] had just gotten signed with Elektra.

Yet despite well-intentioned music industry insiders who offered to manage the band, they all eventually came "up against forces that they didn't anticipate." When asked to describe those forces, Coffey was straightforward:

> Well, just the racism. For instance, when we tried to book ourselves into certain clubs. People tell me that it's a shame that Stone Vengeance hasn't been in the Fillmore, hasn't been at the Warfield. There were just a few clubs [that would book us]. We never had a shot like [the other San Francisco] bands. I would see bands in a club like at Ruthie's Inn in '84, and they're getting signed a year later. And I'm hearing some of our influence on them. But we're just getting left in the underground. Exodus got signed, all of those bands were on major labels. Testament, Exodus, Heathen — all these bands benefited from a scene that we helped build. They came along later and we got the least out of it.

Additionally, when asked whether he endured any provocation from African American neighbors, Coffey admitted that he faced "all kind of insults. Yeah, I remember the insults, man. The pressure of that made me more determined." It is not only white audiences who, tacitly or explicitly, exclude black participation in rock music. Black audiences have been "taught" to uphold musical segregation, as well. Indeed, Coffey admits that while "there were always some black people in the 'hood that could dig [our music], but of course we didn't fit in, we were outcasts, man. Definitely Stone Vengeance is outlaws" (Joseffer 2010, 165).

It is more than a matter of increasing Stone Vengeance's audience, however. As Coffey states, it is a matter of personal connection to his own community

> The same thing that Hendrix wanted, is what I would really want. [Our audience has] always been predominantly white. [But] I've really always wanted to get black people that like rock — and there's a lot of 'em out there — to come. We already have a good amount of Latinos. But more — I would just like to have everybody, you know, because I'm black. You know, that's still my people and Latinos, that's my people, so you want them to be able to be proud of you. And not to take anything away from the white audiences because a lot of those people have supported us but not as much as they've supported others. I'm aware of that. We [Stone Vengeance] have a few friends. I don't need a bunch of friends, I know who they are. I know who our friends are, I'm very careful about that. But I'm going to tell you, Kevin, all the pain, all the disap-

> pointment, I took it the hardest because this is my band. I don't think I've forgotten any of the disappointments, the frustrations.

Under those circumstances, Coffey went about setting up his own DIY (do it yourself) network, recalling,

> You know how it was in those days. The network was the tape, the cassette tape. I would always take a cassette, put it in an envelope and send it to fans, whoever wanted it. All over the world, man. I was sending shit behind the Iron Curtain when it was still the Soviet Union. So we had fans there, then. So you can imagine what was happening when a person would get his hands [on it] because it was illegal. And I would get these letters from all over the world. Sometimes I would get money. It would've cost more [to change into U.S. currency] but I would send it to them anyway. And that's how I did it, man.

In 1985, Coffey used his contacts with the Record Vault to promote Stone Vengeance in a similar DIY fashion

> I'd take a cassette tape — it wasn't even a demo! I took a boombox, set it in the studio, rehearsed with the guys. So I took it to the Record Vault, they listened to it and they asked me, "Can we sell this?" [Laughs] "Yeah, if you think so." And, apparently, man, they *knew* so. So they gave a copy to Ron Quintana and he played it on KUSF, which is good for us because that was exposure.[19]

Besides being a radio disc jockey, Quintana was an avid heavy metal collector who produced the fanzine *Metal Mania* and whose influence would be crucial in the development of the San Francisco metal scene. But Coffey's attempts to grow beyond contacts with individual fans or the market of a local, if influential, heavy metal retail store were disheartening and revealed the ways in which the world of independent-label thrash metal reproduced the larger music industry's racialized sensibilities. Steve Waksman's important study of the cross-genre impact of punk and heavy metal includes a chapter on the role of the independent, or indie, label in developing the heavy metal scene in the 1980s. Focusing on SST, Metal Blade, and Sub Pop, Waksman notes how each label "did not forsake genre as a tool to achieve their ends." Importantly, however, "Once these labels were established, they did not merely reproduce the already defined aesthetics of the genres with which they were associated [but] updated and redefined in line with changing local conditions and the importation of new sounds from afar" (2009, 255).

Yet Coffey, in describing his own interactions with indie labels, reveals the limits "updating and redefining already defined genre aesthetics" held in Stone Vengeance's particular case

> I remember we would get record companies back in those early days that would be interested. So nobody can tell me, "No, it's not racism." OK, in the '80s —

> this happened numerous times — I would get a letter from a record label and they would be interested in signing the band. A record company doesn't write you unless they're already familiar with your music and they're interested.
>
> But they didn't know what we looked like. They would just hear the music — "Oh, I'm interested." [They knew we were an] American metal band. They'd ask me for a press kit, wanting to see what we looked like. Then I would send them a picture and they would just back up. Or, this is what they would say – and it's a trip because initially they would be totally enthusiastic — "we're totally interested, send us a bio, send us a picture." Then all of a sudden, they freeze: "You don't have the right look."
>
> It happened so much that when I would get interest [later], I wouldn't send them shit. I'd go make a Xerox copy of [our photo] because I didn't want to waste the time or the postage sending them my music for nothing. I'd rather keep my music and give it to a fan instead of sending it to them when they aren't going to do anything with it. So, I started to just send them a picture and that would end that.

A final example: Stone Vengeance was remastering their first compact disc recording, *To Kill Evil*, and the mixing engineer, Jeff Risdon, knew a casting director who was looking for a heavy metal group for a movie that was being shot in the San Francisco Bay Area. But Coffey told Risdon, "Look, man, I appreciate what you're saying but when they say they're looking for heavy metal, they're not looking for us." But Risdon insisted and, as a favor to him, Coffey called the casting director, telling her that Stone Vengeance is an African American heavy metal band. After talking with the producers, the casting director informed Coffey that the producers felt that having a black metal group in the film would be "presenting a whole other type of statement."

Conclusion

Coffey notes,

> See, when I tell people this stuff, I'm talking from what white people said, not from what *I'm* saying. *We never intended to make a statement. We just wanted to rock.* But to white people, [Stone Vengeance is] "another statement." I don't know what kind of statement exactly — I can *guess* — but think about it, a black band trying to play [heavy metal]. We just happen to be black but we have to be making a statement now. *We can't just rock. So, it shows that we are perceived [through race]*.

My central interest has been to trace the roots and routes Stone Vengeance mobilizes in order to tease out the band's claims for thrash metal authenticity and authority based on foundational black American blues traditions. But as the quote above suggests, while Coffey foregrounds Stone Vengeance's interpreting

of rock as a black musical expression, he also desires to be known simply as a "thrash metal musician" rather than as a "black thrash metal musician." Yet Coffey's positionality — embedded in a narrative of aural trespassing and sonic acculturation that complicates the links between phenotype and audiotype by seeking to redefine the look and sound of embodied difference in thrash metal — is caught within the complications such desires entail. On one hand, regardless of how Stone Vengeance may simply "want to rock," Coffey is unable to dislodge the racialized terms of engagement set in motion by the band's performances and recordings.

On the other hand, Stone Vengeance makes a strong case for considering thrash metal as a black musical tradition by remembering the links between the blues and rock. The argument not only legitimizes the band's position within rock but also forces a reconsideration of commonplace notions of the links between musical genres and performing bodies. The band's professional experiences underscore the ubiquity of these ideas and highlight the difficulties black musicians face in their attempts to expand conceptions of heavy metal from a space of white working-class masculinity into a more inclusive genre.

Stone Vengeance may be finally receiving overdue recognition. Remarkably, after over thirty years, there is a renewed interest globally for Stone Vengeance's recordings and live performances. The access to worldwide audiences through new media outlets such as YouTube and Facebook has opened up fresh possibilities for the band. Continuing festival appearances and favorable critical reviews speak to Coffey's disciplined work ethic and steadfast determination to keep Stone Vengeance relevant. In fact, Stone Vengeance has been reinvited to the Metal Assault Festival in Würzburg, Germany, along with an offer to tour South America in 2011.

In a largely instrumental Black Sabbath–inspired song, "Wrath Cometh," Coffey sings a single line, "And in the end, we are justified by revenge." The stone, in other words, will someday prevail over the forces that reject and despise it. Indeed, Stone Vengeance's music persists as a vital testament to metal's core principle of individual empowerment rallied against larger structural and discursive forces while allowing the band to demonstrate that thrash metal's roots run deep within the enduring legacy of black American blues traditions.

Notes

1. Interview with author, 10 Dec 2009. All Coffey quotes are from author interview unless otherwise credited.

2.Indeed, the articles that deal with African metal carry titles such as "'White music' in the black continent?" (from http://newschoolthoughtsonafrica.wordpress.com /2010/10/05/white-music-in-the-black-continent/>). While many African heavy metal bands are composed of white Africans, the hypermasculinist orientation of heavy metal

remains wherever it has taken root as a quick investigation of the Myspace pages for black African heavy metal bands such as Crackdust or Wrust attest.

3. In fact, this chapter is part of a longer project in which I will investigate various non-white heavy metal bands including the Filipino American thrash band Death Angel and others.

4. For a view of the rise of a resurgent thrash metal scene in the San Francisco Bay Area, including a brief mention of Stone Vengeance, see Ben Richardson's "Headbanging History," *SF Bay Guardian* (Dec. 14, 2010). Available at: http://www. sfbg.com /2010/12/14/headbanging-history (accessed 2010/12/18). However, of the many bands that came out of the 1980s San Francisco Bay Area metal scene — Exodus, Heathen, Megadeth — it is only Metallica that enjoys a truly international audience, in terms of critical value, musical influence and commercial presence.

5. Holt, 23, 19, added emphasis.

6. See Weinstein, *Heavy Metal*, in which she traces the link between psychedelic rock and heavy metal, beginning with Hendrix; see, in particular, pages 16-18. See also Waksman, *This Ain't the Summer of Love*, for a broader look at the various ways in which heavy metal was influenced by psychedelic, or acid, rock.

7. In an expanded version of this article, I spend some time thinking about Coffey's comment that "people like me and you . . . we're children of Hendrix through the discipline of rock'n'roll." He is discussing people of color here ("people like me and you") and the notion of being a "child of Hendrix" evokes a shared sense of alterity to cultural norms. His ideas about the constituent elements for a "discipline of rock'n'roll" provide interesting avenues for thinking through his workingman's ethos dedicated to a regular schedule of individual practice sessions and band rehearsals.

8. See Kevin J. H. Dettmar, "Racism, Experienced: Listening to Jimi Hendrix — then and now" (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2 Apr 2010: B13–B14) for a lucid account of Dettmar's personal interaction with the discourse around Hendrix and the racial implications of that interaction. Coffey also notes that the critical reception for Band of Gypsys — Hendrix's band with drummer Buddy Miles and bassist Billy Cox — was cool at best, suggesting that race played a part in the ways the Hendrix Experience and Band of Gypsys were evaluated.

9. The importance of music stores in the development of the heavy metal scene of the 1980s is an understudied phenomenon. However, Steve Waksman mentions Johnny and Marsha Zazula's record store, Rock'N'Roll Heaven, as a major source of underground metal recordings as well as being "*the* place to hang out for specialist Heavy Metal music on the East Coast" (2009, 235, original emphasis) and emphasizes the role music stores played in shaping local heavy metal scenes throughout the US.

10. As detailed later in the text, Coffey renamed his rock band the Dreamers to Stone Vengeance in San Francisco in 1978. The Black Rock Coalition formed in New York City in 1985. Stone Vengeance was isolated for the most part from other black rock fans and musicians. Unaware of the Black Rock Coalition (BRC) until Living Colour's success gave BRC national exposure, Stone Vengeance has remained outside the BRC orbit to this day due in large part to Stone Vengeance's genesis prior to the formation of the BRC as well as the band's thrash metal orientation.

11. Coincidentally, a Stone Vengeance composition, "I Vampyre," almost made it onto the *Blade* soundtrack.

12. There were a handful of other African American heavy metal groups in the 1980s who formed in the wake of Stone Vengeance, most notably Znowhite, Black Death, Sound Barrier, and Death.

13. The lack of an African American presence in the following books (not meant to be exhaustive but merely indicative of a larger trend) illustrate my point about Stone Vengeance's literal silencing in an increasingly "official narrative" of heavy metal historiography and scholarship: Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Metalheads: Heavy Metal Music and Adolescent Alienation* (Boulder CO: Westview, 1996); Ian Christie, *Sound of the Beast: The Complete Headbanging History of Heavy Metal* (New York: It-Harper Collins, 2004); and Natalie J. Purcell, *Death Metal Music: The Passion and Politics of a Subculture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003). To be fair to Coffey, he may be referring to the growing acknowledgment of Stone Vengeance in fan discourse.

14. Reebee Garofalo, "Crossing Over: From Black Rhythm and Blues to White Rock'n'Roll," in *Rhythm and Business: The Political Economy of Black Music*. Edited by Norman Kelley. (New York: Akashic, 2002). Additionally, similar to Coffey's complicated view of Hendrix, while he is clearly critical of some of the uses "Presley" has served within rock discourse, he was also frank about his admiration for Presley's music.

15. See the chapter "Genre Rules" from *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

16. For more on the underground FM phenomenon of the 1970s, see Richard Neer, *FM: The Rise and Fall of Rock Radio* (NY: Random House, 2001).

17. A national United States retail music instrument chain store.

18. Coffey only recalls the drummer's first name, Arthur.

19. The "Wrath Cometh" Rehearsal Demo, as it was later titled, included the songs, "Stone Vengeance," "Time is at Hand," "The Great Controversy," and "The Persecution."

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