



NWOBHM
RIP

NEVER

NWOBHM
NEW WAVE OF BRITISH HEAVY METAL

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- Basildon History
- Classic Rock Magazine Online
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- Wikipedia



While bands like Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple, emerging in the late 1960s, certainly played a crucial role in developing a heavier, louder, and more riff-oriented sound than their blues rock and psychedelic contemporaries, the argument for Black Sabbath as the first true heavy metal band is compelling and widely supported by many fans and critics.

Formed in Birmingham, a city steeped in industrial grit, **Black Sabbath** – originally comprising Tony Iommi, Ozzy Osbourne, Geezer Butler, and Bill Ward – took the heavier elements of blues rock and amplified them to an unprecedented degree. Their self-titled debut album, released in 1970, is often cited as the birth of heavy metal.



There are several reasons why Black Sabbath's early sound distinguished them and laid the groundwork for the genre:

- **Darker Themes and Lyrics:** Unlike the more overtly bluesy or fantastical themes of some of their contemporaries, Black Sabbath delved into darker subject matter, often exploring themes of the occult, war, social alienation, and mental instability. This thematic shift resonated with a different kind of angst and provided a new lyrical direction for heavy music.
- **Heavier and More Distorted Sound:** Tony Iommi's guitar work was characterised by downtuned riffs, heavy distortion, and a generally more ominous and crushing sonic palette. This was partly a result of an industrial accident that shortened his fingers, leading him to experiment with lower tunings and thicker gauge strings.
- **Slower Tempos and Grooves:** While they could play fast, many of Black Sabbath's most iconic early tracks employed slower, more deliberate tempos and heavier, grinding grooves that created a sense of foreboding and power.
- **Ozzy Osbourne's Distinctive Vocals:** Osbourne's often wailing and slightly unsettling vocal delivery perfectly complemented the band's dark and heavy sound.
- **The Overall Sonic Shift:** Black Sabbath's music wasn't just louder; it had a fundamentally different feel – heavier, darker, and more intense – than much of the hard rock that preceded it.

The fact that Black Sabbath and Judas Priest, another hugely influential early metal band, both emerged from the Midlands region of England – particularly Birmingham – lends credence to the idea of this industrial heartland being a key birthplace for heavy metal. The environment of heavy industry, with its noise, grit, and often bleak social realities, may have inadvertently fostered a sound that reflected these surroundings.

While Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple were undoubtedly crucial in the evolution towards heavier music, Black Sabbath's self-titled debut and subsequent early albums like *Paranoid* (1970) and *Master of Reality* (1971) presented a sonic and thematic blueprint that many consider the true genesis of heavy metal as a distinct genre.

The established giants continued to evolve and achieve massive commercial success. Led Zeppelin explored more diverse musical territories, Deep Purple went through lineup changes but maintained their hard-rocking edge, and Black Sabbath, despite internal turmoil, continued to release influential albums.

However, the mid-1970s also saw the rise of other significant hard rock and proto-metal acts who contributed to the broader soundscape:

- **Queen:** Their powerful music had a heavy edge. Notably, their track "Stone Cold Crazy" (1974) is often cited by many as a strong contender for the first thrash metal song, with its incredibly fast tempo and aggressive energy, predating the emergence of thrash as a distinct genre by several years.
- **Aerosmith and KISS:** These American bands brought a raw hard rock and theatricality.
- **Thin Lizzy:** Phil Lynott's lyrical prowess and the band's twin-guitar harmonies added a melodic and often Celtic-tinged dimension to hard rock.
- **Judas Priest:** Emerging from the Midlands, Judas Priest were instrumental in solidifying the identity of heavy metal as a distinct genre. While Black Sabbath are often credited with creating the sound, Judas Priest were arguably the first band to fully embrace the "heavy metal" tag and consciously forge a sound that was unequivocally metal. Their image, characterised by leather and studs, also became synonymous with the genre. Albums like **Sad Wings of Destiny** (1976) and **Sin After Sin** (1977) showcased their increasingly heavy and technically proficient sound.



Despite the continued output of these bands, within the British rock scene, particularly amongst younger musicians and fans, there was a growing feeling that things had become somewhat complacent or even bloated. Some perceived the established bands as becoming too focused on elaborate productions, lengthy tours, and a certain rock star excess.



The rise of punk rock in the mid-to-late 1970s provided a stark contrast to this perceived stagnation. Punk's raw energy, stripped-down aesthetic, DIY ethos, and rebellious attitude offered a direct and visceral alternative to the more polished and often grandiose sounds of mainstream rock. Bands like the **Sex Pistols**, The Clash, and The Damned injected a new sense

of urgency and accessibility into the music scene.

This punk explosion, while seemingly at odds with heavy rock, inadvertently created a fertile ground for something new within heavy music. It shook up the established order, challenged conventions, and inspired a new generation of musicians to pick up their instruments and create something raw and energetic, albeit with a heavier and more metallic edge than punk.

It was in this environment of established hard rock evolving, the emergence of proto-metal bands like Judas Priest, and the disruptive energy of punk rock that the New Wave of British Heavy Metal began to take shape.

The term 'proto-' is a prefix of Greek origin that generally means 'first', 'earliest form of', 'original', or 'primitive'. When used in the context of music, particularly "proto-metal," it refers to bands and music that contained elements and characteristics that would later become defining features of heavy metal, but existed *before* the genre was fully established as its own distinct style.

These "proto-metal" bands were experimenting with sounds and ideas that would later become core to heavy metal.

The late 1970s in Britain were marked by economic hardship, social unrest, and a vibrant and rebellious music scene. Punk rock, as we discussed, had exploded onto the scene, challenging the status quo and inspiring a generation to pick up instruments, regardless of technical proficiency.

While seemingly different on the surface, punk rock had an unexpected and crucial influence on the emergence of the NWOBHM. Young musicians who were drawn to the energy and DIY (Do It Yourself) ethic of punk also had an affinity for the heavier sounds of earlier metal bands. They took the raw aggression and independent spirit of punk and fused it with the more traditional elements of heavy metal, often resulting in a sound that was faster, rawer, and more energetic than much of the established metal of the time.

The NWOBHM was largely an underground phenomenon in its early days. It thrived in small clubs and pubs across the UK. Key to its growth were:

- **Independent Labels:** Frustrated with the perceived lack of interest from major record labels, many NWOBHM bands released their music on small, independent labels. This DIY approach mirrored the punk ethos and allowed bands to maintain creative control. Examples include Neat Records (home to Venom and Raven), Bronze Records (early Motörhead and Girlschool), and Carrere Records (**Saxon**).
- **Fanzines:** Enthusiastic fans created their own amateur magazines (fanzines) to spread the word about these new bands. These fanzines were crucial in building a sense of community and disseminating information in the pre-internet era.
- **Dedicated DJs and Radio:** Figures like Neal Kay at the Bandwagon Heavy Metal Soundhouse in London played a pivotal role in the live scene. Crucially, national radio also played a significant part through **Tony Vance's** Friday Rock Show on BBC Radio 1, which began in November 1978. This became a vital outlet for these new bands, providing the only nationally available radio programme dedicated to rock and heavy metal at the time. Vance was a passionate supporter of the NWOBHM, regularly playing tracks from unsigned and independent bands, featuring live sessions, and building a national community of metal fans.
- **The Music Press:** Journalists at influential music magazines like Sounds, particularly Geoff Barton, recognised the energy and potential of this burgeoning scene and



gave it a name – the New Wave of British Heavy Metal – which helped to solidify its identity and gain wider attention.

Key Musical Characteristics of the NWOBHM:

- **Faster Tempos:** Often faster and more aggressive than the blues-based tempos of early heavy metal.
- **Raw Energy:** A more stripped-down and less polished production sound, reflecting the punk influence.
- **Melodic Hooks:** Despite the aggression, many NWOBHM bands retained a strong sense of melody in their riffs and vocal lines.
- **Powerful Vocals:** Often high-pitched and soaring, but with a raw and energetic delivery.
- **Lyrical Themes:** Varied, often encompassing fantastical tales, mythology, rebellion, social commentary, and the darker aspects of life.

The NWOBHM was a vibrant and diverse movement that revitalised heavy metal and paved the way for many of the subgenres that would follow. The support from figures like Tony Vance on national radio was instrumental in its rise to prominence.

This era produced a wealth of talented and influential bands, many of whom went on to achieve international success and leave a lasting mark on the heavy metal genre.

Here are some of the pioneers and most significant bands of the NWOBHM.

Iron Maiden: Arguably the most successful band to emerge from the NWOBHM. Their energetic live performances, intricate songwriting, galloping rhythms, and the distinctive vocals of Bruce Dickinson (who joined in 1981) propelled them to global stardom. Albums like **The Number of the Beast** (1982) are considered classics.



Saxon: Another hugely influential band with a powerful and anthemic sound. Their early albums like *Wheels of Steel* (1980) and *Denim and Leather* (1981) captured the spirit of the NWOBHM with their driving riffs and strong vocals.

Angel Witch: Known for their darker, more occult-influenced lyrics and a sound that blended heavy riffs with melodic passages. Their self-titled debut album (1980) is highly regarded.



Venom: A more extreme and raw band that pushed the boundaries of heavy metal, incorporating elements that would later be influential in the development of black metal and thrash metal. Their early albums like **Welcome to Hell** (1981) were deliberately abrasive and controversial.

Tygers of Pan Tang: A band with a more melodic and hard rock-infused take on the NWOBHM sound, showcasing strong musicianship and catchy riffs. Albums like *Spellbound* (1981) are highlights.

Girlschool: An all-female band who proved they could rock just as hard as their male counterparts, delivering raw and energetic heavy metal. They gained significant popularity and toured with major bands.

Diamond Head: Hugely influential, particularly on the burgeoning thrash metal scene in the United States. Metallica famously covered several of their songs, bringing their powerful riffs to a wider audience. Their debut album *Lightning to the Nations* (1980) is a landmark release.

Motörhead: While not strictly part of the NWOBHM sound, Motörhead's raw, loud, and aggressive blend of punk energy and heavy metal was undeniably influential on the

movement and helped bridge the gap between the two genres. Their relentless touring and distinctive sound made them a force to be reckoned with.

Def Leppard: Emerging with a sound rooted in the NWOBHM's energy and melodicism, Def Leppard would later evolve towards a more polished and commercially oriented hard rock sound with significant pop sensibilities, achieving massive mainstream success in the mid-1980s with albums like *Pyromania* and *Hysteria*. While their early work is associated with the NWOBHM, their later sound often places them outside the traditional heavy metal category for many.

Raven: Known for their incredibly energetic and almost frantic live performances, often described as "athletic rock." Their fast tempos, intricate musicianship, and the charismatic stage presence of brothers John and Mark Gallagher made them a memorable and influential part of the NWOBHM. Albums like **Rock Until You Drop** (1981) and *Wiped Out* (1982) are prime examples of their frenetic style. They also had a significant impact on the burgeoning thrash metal scene in the US.



This is just a selection of the many bands that contributed to the NWOBHM scene. There were countless other notable acts, each with their own distinct flavour and contribution to this exciting era of heavy metal. The movement wasn't monolithic; it encompassed a range of sounds and styles united by a shared energy and a desire to push the boundaries of heavy music.

This movement, though relatively short-lived as a distinct entity, had a profound and lasting impact on the landscape of heavy metal and beyond:

- **Revitalisation of Heavy Metal:** The NWOBHM injected a much-needed shot of energy and excitement into the heavy metal scene in the late 1970s. It proved that the genre was far from stagnant and could evolve with new sounds and attitudes, drawing inspiration from the punk explosion.
- **Global Influence on Subsequent Metal Genres:** The impact of the NWOBHM reverberated around the world. Its faster tempos, more aggressive edge, and DIY ethic were hugely influential on the development of later metal subgenres, most notably thrash metal in the United States (bands like Metallica, Slayer, Megadeth, and Anthrax all cite NWOBHM bands as key influences, particularly **Diamond Head** and **Venom**). Elements of speed metal and even early power metal also owe a debt to the NWOBHM.
- **Commercial Success for Some Bands:** While many NWOBHM bands remained underground heroes, some, like Iron Maiden and Def Leppard (in their early years), achieved significant commercial success and mainstream recognition. This helped to bring heavy metal back into the public consciousness and paved the way for future generations of metal bands to reach wider audiences.
- **The DIY Ethic and Independent Scene:** The NWOBHM's reliance on independent labels, fanzines, and grassroots promotion demonstrated the power of a strong underground scene. This DIY spirit continued to be important in the development of various subgenres of metal and other forms of alternative music.
- **Shaping the Sound of Future Metal:** The musical characteristics of the NWOBHM – the galloping rhythms, twin-guitar harmonies (popularised by Iron Maiden), soaring vocals, and more aggressive riffing – became staples of heavy metal and continue to be heard in various forms today.
- **Breaking Down Barriers:** The emergence of bands like Girlschool helped to challenge the male dominance of the heavy metal scene and inspire more women to participate as musicians and fans.
- **Enduring Nostalgia and Influence:** The NWOBHM era is still fondly remembered by many metal fans as a golden age of raw energy and innovation. The early records of these bands are highly sought after, and their influence can still be heard in contemporary metal.
- **The Rise of NWOTHM:** In the mid-2000s and beyond, a new generation of bands emerged, often referred to as the New Wave of Traditional Heavy Metal (NWOTHM). This movement was, in many ways, a direct response to a perceived shift in the sound of mainstream and newer metal genres, which some felt had moved away



from the core elements of classic heavy metal established in the late 1970s and early 1980s by the NWOBHM bands.

- **Disillusionment with "New Metal":** Some fans and musicians felt that genres like nu-metal and metalcore, while popular, lacked the traditional elements they cherished in the NWOBHM era: strong emphasis on melody, soaring vocals, twin-guitar harmonies, and often fantastical or historical lyrical themes. There was a yearning for a return to the classic sounds of Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, Saxon, and the energy of the NWOBHM.
- **Characteristics of NWOTHM:** Bands within the NWOTHM movement consciously emulate the sounds and styles of the late 70s and early 80s. They often feature:
 - Twin-guitar harmonies and melodic lead work.
 - Powerful, often soaring vocals.
 - Driving rhythms and galloping bass lines.
 - Lyrical themes encompassing fantasy, mythology, history, and traditional metal tropes.
 - A strong emphasis on live performance and energetic stage presence.
 - Examples of NWOTHM Bands: There are numerous bands around the world contributing to this movement, including acts like Enforcer, Skull Fist, Night Demon, Haunt, Traveler, Riot City, and many others. These bands actively keep the spirit and sound of the NWOBHM alive for a new generation of fans.
- **A Cycle of Influence:** The emergence of NWOTHM demonstrates the enduring legacy of the NWOBHM and how influential movements can inspire new generations who feel a connection to the foundational sounds of a genre. It highlights a cyclical nature in music where a return to classic sounds can be a reaction to contemporary trends.

In essence, the NWOBHM was a crucial bridge between the early pioneers of heavy metal and the diverse range of subgenres that emerged in the 1980s and beyond. It revitalised the genre, inspired countless musicians, and left an indelible mark on the history of rock music.

Over the decades, heavy metal in general, and the NWOBHM in particular, have been subject to various stereotypes and misunderstandings:

Myth: All heavy metal is the same loud, aggressive noise.

Reality: Heavy metal is an incredibly diverse genre with numerous subgenres, each with its own distinct sound, lyrical themes, and visual aesthetics. From the melodic grandeur of power metal to the extreme aggression of death and black metal, the sonic landscape is vast and varied. The NWOBHM itself showcased a range of styles, from the raw energy of Venom to the melodicism of **Iron Maiden**.



Myth: Heavy metal is inherently negative, violent, or Satanic.

Reality: While some subgenres and bands explore darker themes, the vast majority of heavy metal lyrics deal with a wide range of subjects, including fantasy, mythology, history, social commentary, personal struggles, and even humour. The "Satanic Panic" of the 1980s unfairly stigmatised the genre, often based on misinterpretations of lyrics and imagery. The NWOBHM, while sometimes rebellious, was not primarily focused on Satanic themes (with the notable exception of Venom, who often adopted a deliberately controversial image).

Myth: Heavy metal musicians are unskilled and just make noise.

Reality: Heavy metal often requires a high degree of musical skill and technical proficiency. Many metal musicians are highly accomplished instrumentalists, and the genre features complex song structures, intricate guitar solos, and demanding vocal performances. The NWOBHM era produced many incredibly talented musicians who honed their craft through relentless practice and live performances.

Myth: The NWOBHM was a purely unified sound.

Reality: While the NWOBHM bands shared a certain energy and spirit, they were far from sonically identical. As we've discussed, the movement encompassed a range of styles, from the more traditional metal of Saxon and Iron Maiden to the punk-infused aggression of Motörhead and the darker sounds of Angel Witch and Venom. The "New Wave" tag primarily denoted a shared time period and geographical origin, rather than a strict musical formula.

Myth: The NWOBHM was an overnight success.

Reality: The NWOBHM was largely built from the ground up through hard work, dedication, and a strong underground scene. Bands toured tirelessly, released music on independent labels, and relied on fanzines and word-of-mouth to build a following. While some bands eventually achieved mainstream success, it was often after years of relentless effort.



Myth: Heavy metal is a predominantly male genre.

Reality: While historically male-dominated, heavy metal has always had a strong female fanbase and has seen increasing numbers of talented female musicians. Bands like **Girlschool** were pioneers in the NWOBHM era, and many influential female artists have emerged in various metal subgenres since then.

By addressing these common myths and misconceptions, we can gain a more accurate and nuanced understanding of heavy metal and the vital role the New Wave of British Heavy Metal played in its history and evolution.

A number of NWOBHM bands from Essex made a small impact at the time.

Bastille

While the name might be more famously associated with a later indie-pop band, this earlier Bastille from Ingatestone were indeed part of the NWOBHM movement. They released a few singles and were known for their energetic live performances. They represent the grassroots level of the scene, often playing local venues and contributing to the overall energy of the era.

Crucifixion

Crucifixion, hailing from Southend-on-Sea, were another band that emerged during the NWOBHM. They are known for a heavier, more raw sound that aligned with some of the grittier aspects of the movement. They released singles and perhaps demos that captured their contribution to the scene.



Prowler

Formed in Basildon during 1975, Prowler were a well-known live act in the area for several years and are considered to be part of the New Wave of British Heavy Metal.



They played at The Double Six, which had previously hosted Iron Maiden.

Their song, 'Gotta Get Back To You', appeared on the 1980 compilation album 'Brute Force'. They recorded several tracks and demos prior to changing their name to Samurai in 1981. Essex Radio broadcast 'Bad Child Running', 'Lost With Your Love' and 'Prisoner', which were all recorded prior to the name change.

Around 1982 they changed back to Prowler and released 'Heartbreaker' in 1985, around the time the band split up. Founding members, Trev and John Pattenden reformed the band in 1991. They toured the UK for a short time before being based in Dubai for several months before disbanding again in 1992.



Random Black

Despite not releasing a full album, Essex band Random Black formed in 1979 during the NWOBHM's prominent period. They are remembered for their demo tapes and their inclusion on the Metal Warriors compilation (1983) with the song "Ophelia."

Trial by Fire

Trial by Fire were a short-lived Essex band, forming in 1979 and calling it quits by 1982. In that time, they managed to record seven tracks across two demo tapes, with their live activity seemingly focused within the Essex area.

Warrior

One of many bands called Warrior, this one from Essex released a single, Don't Let It Show, in 1980.

A compilation album of their recordings was released in 2005.

