

# SUICIDE, ROCK MUSIC AND MORAL PANICS

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Suicide is a complex issue, and the decision by somebody to take their own life cannot be reduced to a single cause. Still, we often try to make sense of the act by attaching blame to some social factor, especially when it comes to the tragic suicides of our young people. We have difficulty accepting the unknown of what could be driving such behaviours - something unnatural or maybe even something evil. Our fear and inability to comprehend suicide leads us to desperately search for a villain. We need someone or something we can point to and say "there is the culprit!" In modern history, rock and roll has been identified as this guilty party on more than one occasion.

From the Elvis era onward, rock and roll music has been identified as a corrupting influence on youth. It has been assigned the badge of delinquency, promiscuity, immorality and depravity, but it is its link to suicide that is of interest here.

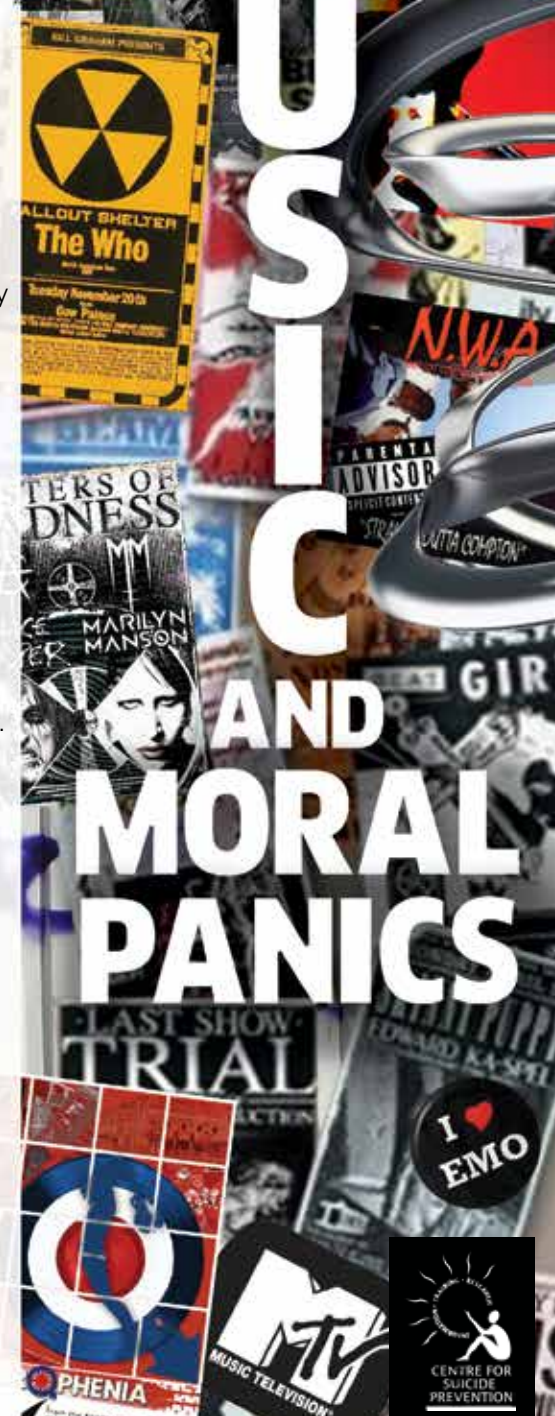
Is it possible that the members of youth subcultures that associate themselves with particular genres of music are more susceptible to suicide? Further, is there any validity to the assertion that the music a teenager listens to can be cited as the cause of why they choose to end their life?

## Moral Panics: Mods and Rockers

The concept of "moral panic" has been highly influential in the examination of the "forces of hyperbole and hysteria" (Garland, 2008) that erupt periodically in society. This theory was first proposed by Stanley Cohen in his 1972 book *Moral Panics and Folk Devils*, which is a seminal sociological analysis of the Mods and Rockers phenomenon in 1960s England. These were two of the first identified youth subcultures who shaped much of their respective identities from their musical allegiances.

The Mods were fashion-conscious, clean-cut, and "neat to the point of absurdity" (Hebdige, 1979). They were working class but aspired to entry-level white collar jobs. They placed a huge value on the "weekend", with its promise of music, sex, and amphetamine-induced revelry. They rode Italian scooters and were devotees of Jamaican Ska, American soul and rhythm and blues, and cutting-edge English beat groups such as The Who, The Small Faces, and The Creation. The Rockers, conversely, were motorcycle-riding leather-clad types, who looked back to the 1950s for inspiration. They identified with the biker persona of Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*, and worshipped the rock and roll of Elvis, Buddy Holly, and Eddie Cochran.

Both groups were largely unknown to the general public in England until an incident in 1964 in the seaside town of Margate thrust them onto the national - and later - the international stage. What occurred was an unremarkable series of acts of vandalism which were exaggerated in the press as a full-scale riot.





The first stories did not differentiate between the Mods and Rockers but, as the reports were re-told and further disturbances occurred, both groups assumed a distinct identity in the press as distinct threats to the social order. By 1965, the Mods and Rockers were firmly defined in the English mind as a true scourge (Cohen, 1972). **They were “folk devils”, figures who incite fear based on a lack of understanding; a moral panic had begun.**

Cohen believed that certain elements needed to be present for a moral panic to take hold. First, there has to be a latent societal anxiety triggered by a specific event or incident. This leads to general hostility toward those responsible, subsequently labeled as “folk devils.” A widespread negative social reaction is thus established, and is disseminated and perpetuated by the mass media with their use of distorted language which sensationalizes the actual threat. This type of reporting emerges suddenly and can dissipate - inexplicably - just as quickly (Cohen, 1972).

In this case, Cohen believed that the cause of panic was the middle-class’ resentment and jealousy of the increased spending power and sexual freedoms of the youth in post-war Britain (Cohen, 1972). The Mods and Rockers were thus demonized and became the scapegoats for this generational tension.

The panicked coverage of the Mods and Rockers continued between 1964 -1966, as both groups became increasingly polarized and antagonistic toward each other. The press helped define the groups’ emerging identities; their sensational media coverage created and perpetuated the evolving Mods and Rockers saga.

The national hysteria grew, and any type of delinquent behaviour was attributed to the Mods or Rockers. The public outcry was that “something should be done about it” (Cohen, 1972, p.126) and the authorities were expected to clamp down further on these young offenders. Draconian legislation such as restriction of access to the beaches and forced labor camps was proposed, but not successfully passed (Cohen, 1972). Nevertheless, a security precedent had been firmly established.

**The moral panic created during these years had repercussions for future youth subcultures.**

Then, in 1966, for no discernible reason, the panic subsided and the Mods and Rockers all but disappeared. They may have been reduced to curious cultural footnotes if the rock group The Who had not released *Quadrophenia* in 1973, a masterful concept album which used this

musical and political era for its storyline and inspiration. It was made into a successful film in 1979; the depiction of the frenzied but mentally unstable Jimmy the Mod and the accompanying mid-60s scene revitalized “Mod” as a fully-defined movement to celebrate and emulate. This, coupled with a Mod revival spearheaded by bands like The Jam during the first wave of punk rock in the late 70s, ensured that the musical associations of this subculture would survive and thrive.

### **Heavy Metal, the PMRC and Marilyn Manson**

By the 1980s, rock and roll music was as mainstream as network television and widely accepted as legitimate entertainment. But a brash new visual medium called MTV was guaranteed to offend the new moral guardians who were largely neo-conservatives. These provocative and increasingly influential “videos” magnified the impact of the music. Many Americans in this era saw their nation becoming increasingly immoral, decadent, and downright indecent.

Heavy metal, which did not fit into the rock and roll mainstream at the time, became the guardians’ major target of derision. Conservatives in the U.S. objected to what they regarded as the sexism, profanity, satanic influences, and drug glorification inherent in some heavy metal music. The sub-genre was also singled out for inciting various anti-social behaviours in teens, most serious on the list being **suicide** (Wright, 2000).

Heavy metal was characterized by violent, hedonistic, and sexist lyrics, as well as loud guitars, heavy bass, and overall excessive volume. It was a music that appealed to a certain faction of youths who identified with its aggressiveness and, at least on the surface, apparent rebelliousness. Of course, by the 1980s many of the tropes used by heavy metal bands - allusions to Satan, drinking and drug use, womanizing, the clichés go on - had well-worn but reliable shock appeal and were an essential part of the marketing apparatus. Fans lapped it up, but the vast majority did not seriously emulate the excesses that the bands endorsed. For these fans, the music was simply an escapist outlet or a way to upset their parents.

**For some disaffected and marginalized youth, however, the heavy metal subculture offered a sense of identity and purpose.** A book by Donna Gaines titled *Teenage Wasteland* investigated the metal scene of Bergenfeld, New Jersey in the late 80s.



Gaines described teens who eked out an often hopeless existence in a town that had seen much better days. Their music - heavy metal - represented a world-view that made some kind of sense when nothing else did (Gaines, 1990). There was no significant future to look toward, so a sense of belonging to a community that was about the music and that brought these youths together was meaningful. **Contrary to appearances, these bonds of connection are often strong protective factors.**

What brought Gaines to Bergenfeld in the first place was an investigation of a suicide pact that involved four of these metal fans, so-called "burnouts". In their case, the protective aspects of metal identity did not insulate them from their overwhelming feelings of desolation. Gaines did not investigate the individual causes which precipitated their suicides, but attributed their deaths to a collective acceptance that life in Bergenfeld was no longer worth living (Gaines, 1990).

Unfortunately, a social reality of 1980s America was a significant rise in teen suicides. Heavy metal was implicated in two separate incidents of suicide that occurred in 1984 and 1985. The first was the case of 19 year old John McCallum, who shot himself to death while listening to Ozzy Osbourne's song "Suicide Solution". His parents took Osbourne to court, claiming that his lyrics incited the youth to kill himself. Osbourne stated that the song was actually about avoiding alcohol and not an endorsement of suicide at all. The second case involved two young Nevada men who their families allege were influenced by subliminal messages contained in an album by Judas Priest called *Stained Class*. They insisted that there were hidden messages that urged them to kill themselves. The judges in both court cases sided with the musicians, but the ensuing press coverage ensured that **a new moral panic was born** in both the media and the political realm. Thus, the general public received the distorted message that there was a certain link between heavy metal music and suicide.

A well-connected cabal of Washington political and business wives came together in 1985 to form the **Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC)**. Strongly supported by the Religious Right, they sought controls on the recording industry which they believed was irresponsibly damaging America's youth. Heavy metal was especially targeted as abhorrent with its anti-social, "satanic," and alleged pro-suicide lyrics. In fact, it is the latter which the PMRC emphasized as the main reason for the desired industry constraints - that these lyrics caused

teen suicide and should not be exposed to impressionable youth (Adams, 2009). The PMRC had enough social power and clout to influence the media and set an agenda. **Heavy metal bands, and other "obscene" acts, became that decade's "folk devils".**

Ultimately, as happened in England in the 60s, no formal legislation was passed, but an agreement with the industry to self-censor was reached. Record companies were asked to label albums containing "explicit lyrics" with "parental advisory" stickers, with the ultimate intent of saving the country's youth from being irreversibly harmed by that devil "rock and roll".

But were the youth ever really at risk of harm at the hands of their musical preferences?

To be fair, a minority may have been susceptible. Studies by Baker and Bor (2008), as well as by Stack (1998), Lacourse (2001) and Martin (1993) indicate that listeners of heavy metal may indulge in riskier lifestyles (e.g. drunk-driving, unprotected sex, drug use, shoplifting and vandalism) than those with a preference for other types of music. They may also have a greater acceptability of suicide and have less religiosity. These traits combined with other risk factors such as depression and other mental illnesses, might certainly put someone at greater risk for suicide. However, none of these studies found direct causal links between musical preference or identification with a particular subculture and suicidality. **The clear conclusion is that social factors alone will not induce suicidal behaviour.**

The furor over heavy metal eventually subsided, but a similar eruption occurred a decade later - this time involving industrial metal band/singer and media show-boater Marilyn Manson.

Manson had become a "favored whipping boy" of North American moral guardians, who were convinced that the man and his band were specifically responsible for all of society's ills. Manson became the "most abominable pop cultural villain imaginable to the Moral Majority" (Wright, 2000, p. 378). Raymond Kuntz, the father of a suicidal son, told a U.S. Senate subcommittee hearing on Music Violence, "I would say that the music (Manson's) caused him to kill himself" (Wright, 2000, p.376). Talk shows and news programs in the late 1990s were inundated with stories involving bereaved parents claiming explicit linkages between Manson's music and their children's self-inflicted deaths (Wright, 2000). These devastated



parents were looking for answers. Marilyn Manson, a self-proclaimed “anti-christ superstar” and shock-rock figurehead, fit the bill as a possible cause. His lyrics were provocative, and his persona as androgynous, anti-religion, anti-mainstream bogey-man was anathema to middle-America. He has never advocated suicide, or been a proponent of other controversial topics, but has sung about these issues to critique how America deals with such taboos.

The panic over Manson was soon superseded by a mass media fixation on rap music and its association with violence, which became the primary “folk devil” of the late 90s and early 2000s.

## “EMO”

**A more recent panic involving a music subculture has been the emergence of emo.** Originally, emo was shorthand for “emotional hardcore” or “emocore”, an offshoot of the mid-80s hardcore punk scene. These were mostly Washington, DC bands, such as Rites of Spring (and other bands on Dischord Records), who adopted more complex musical structures and a more personal introspective lyrical approach. This was in opposition to the orthodox hardcore approach of high velocity, abrasive music and political lyrics.

However, by the early 21st century, emo evolved from simply a style of music, exemplified by groups such as Dashboard Confessional and My Chemical Romance, to a full-fledged subculture, “commemorating moody emotion through dark dress, melancholic behaviour and angsty music” (Davies, 2008, p.55). It was a unique cultural movement, however, in that it was created entirely on the Internet (Zdanow, 2012). As in many subcultures, it provided a platform for people to assert an individual sense of self, and emo online groups provided spaces for marginalized youth to come together and bond.

The internet and social media have changed everything. The hegemony of traditional mainstream media has been eroded. How people consume and share music has been forever altered. And the way like-minded people come together to form sub-cultures has evolved. These are all shaped by the online experience.

Some commentators claimed that certain emo groups promoted negative behaviours such as cutting, self-harm, and even anorexia. There was a growing fear that positive perceptions of suicidal behaviour were rising, and that this new media was helping to spread its message at alarming rates (Overell, 2011).

The “double suicide” of two teenage emo fans, Jodie Gater and Stephanie Gestier, in Australia in 2007, and the suicide of an English teenager, Hannah Boyd, and her apparent obsession with the emo band My Chemical Romance (and their 2006 album, *The Black Parade*, purported to be pro-suicide) helped to establish the mainstream perception of emo as glamourizing and encouraging of suicidal behaviours. There was widespread coverage of these events in both Australia and the UK. However, unlike previous media panics, there was unprecedented backlash by My Chemical Romance fans - no doubt mobilized through social media - and a protest was arranged outside

the offices of the Daily Mail criticizing the allegations against the band and their treatment as “folk devils.” For this reason and because of the diminished dominance of traditional media and the rise of social media, writers like Brown (2011) felt that in this instance a moral panic failed to take hold.

Yet emo has not disappeared entirely both as an Internet subcultural phenomenon and as a target for inciting suicidal behaviours. Suicides associated with emo culture have occurred more recently in Italy, Kazakhstan, and South Africa, to name a few (Seganti, 2011; Zdanow, 2012). Whether renewed focus on emo as a negative cultural influence is renewed in a massive way remains to be seen.

So what can be learned from these sporadic but visceral societal responses to the issue of suicide?

**First and foremost, we have to acknowledge and reinforce the fact that suicide cannot be attributed to one single cause.**

Listening to a particular type of music or belonging to a group associated with it is no more blameworthy than the influence of books, television, movies, or video games. Although each of these can be risk factors for a vulnerable person, a multi-dimensional approach that takes into account all individual psychological elements is necessary to ascertain with certainty if an individual is at risk for suicide.

**As a society, we also must not react irrationally to phenomena like suicide that we do not fully comprehend.** Yet because suicide is so enigmatic and hard to fathom, it can be tempting to isolate a single factor, especially a social one such as rock music, to make sense of it. In some rare cases, societal influences like suggestive lyrics in rock music could be the precipitating cause that sends an extremely at-risk individual over the edge. However, we could never say that rock music or participation in a sub-culture associated with a particular style of music directly caused an individual’s suicide.

**What causes an individual to entertain suicide is multi-dimensional.** Through education, and by having constructive conversation about what the common risk factors for suicide actually are, we can de-fang it, have a greater understanding of it, and no longer fear it.

**Do you think there is a significant relationship between music or other social influences and suicidality?  
Visit [www.suicideinfo.ca](http://www.suicideinfo.ca) to leave your comment**

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