

Historical Themes in Iron Maiden Songs (Part II): From the Inquisition to the Second World War

Lauro Meller¹
lauromeller@ymail.com

Abstract: This paper intends to deepen some of the ideas put forward in a previous study of ours, “Historical Characters and Facts in Iron Maiden Songs: a journey from Pre-History to the Second World War” (MELLER, 2005), and is a follow-up to “Historical Themes in Iron Maiden Songs (Part I): From the Cavemen to the Vikings” (RBEC, n.3, jan-jul 2013). Our aim is to demonstrate that the lyrics of this English band are an exception to the rule when it comes to Heavy Metal songs, which usually have Satanism, sex, drinking, and drug abuse as recurrent subject matters. Instead of dealing with these themes, Steve Harris, the main songwriter in Iron Maiden, invests in lyrics either inspired by literary works or based on historical themes. In fact, there are so many songs in the band’s discography with a historical approach that it is even possible to draw a timeline that stems from Pre-History and reaches World War II. While our analytical approach tends to focus on the lyrics, it will not ignore some aspects that are crucial to a better understanding of songs, namely the strictly musical elements (melody, harmony, rhythm, arrangement, etc.), and performance.

Keywords: Iron Maiden; Heavy Metal; History; Popular Music Studies.

Resumo: Este trabalho pretende verticalizar algumas das ideias apresentadas em um estudo prévio de nossa autoria, “Personagens e Fatos Históricos nas Canções do Iron Maiden: uma jornada da Pré-História à Segunda Guerra Mundial” (MELLER, 2005), e é uma continuação do artigo “Historical Themes in Iron Maiden Songs (Part I): From the Cavemen to the Vikings” (RBEC, n.3, jan-jul 2013). Nosso intuito é o de demonstrar que as letras desse grupo inglês constituem um diferencial com relação a outras bandas do gênero, as quais normalmente versam sobre Satanismo, sexo, bebida e consumo de drogas. Em vez disso, Steve Harris, o principal compositor do grupo, investe em letras ora inspiradas em obras literárias, ora baseadas em temas históricos. Com efeito, há tantas canções, na discografia da banda, que versam sobre temas históricos que é mesmo possível traçar uma linha do tempo que parte da Pré-História e chega até a Segunda Guerra Mundial. Embora nossa abordagem de análise tenda a enfatizar as letras, ela não prescindirá de alguns aspectos que são cruciais para um melhor entendimento das canções, nomeadamente, os elementos estritamente musicais (melodia, harmonia, ritmo, arranjo etc.), e a performance.

Palavras-chave: Iron Maiden; Heavy Metal; História; Estudos de Música Popular.

¹ Professor of Reading and Writing Practices (Portuguese and English) at the School of Science and Technology, Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil. Coordinator of the research project “Group of Interdisciplinary Studies in Popular Music” (PROPESQ-UFRN).

Introduction

This is a follow-up to the article “Historical Themes in Iron Maiden Songs (Part I): From the Cavemen to the Vikings” (RBEC, n.3, jan-jul 2013). Alongside this paper, our aim is to show how Iron Maiden stands apart from other Heavy Metal bands especially as regards their lyrics. In fact, so many of them deal with historical themes (as opposed to the typical words in HM songs, which approach violence, sex, and drug abuse) that it is possible to draw a historical timeline using the bands’ songs, stemming from Pre-History and ending in the Second World War.

In the first paper, we analyzed the following songs: “Quest for Fire” (from the 1983 *Piece of Mind* album, on the battles over the conquest of fire fought by primitive humans); “Alexander the Great” (from the 1986 *Somewhere in time* album, truly a musical biography); and “Invadiers” (from the 1982 *The Number of the Beast* album, about the Nordic invasions to the British Isles). In this paper, we resume this historical timeline from the Middle Age (“Hallowed be Thy Name”, from the 1982 *The Number of the Beast* album, about a man sentenced to death by the Holy Inquisition), followed by “Run to the Hills” (from the same album, and approaching the battles between native Americans and the so-called pioneers heading to the West); “The Trooper”, from *Piece of Mind*, inspired by Tennyson’s poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade” and depicting the Battle of Balaclava, during the Crimean War (1853-1856); and “Aces High”, from the *Powerslave* album (1984), in which an aerial battle involving the Royal Air Force and the German *Luftwaffe* is narrated by a British pilot.

Without further ado, let us get down to the analysis of the songs.

Hallowed Be Thy Name

This title immediately evokes a religious / Catholic aura that will be confirmed in the lyrics. The song is set in the Middle Age, and in it, a criminal, possibly a heretic, will be executed by the Inquisition. Written in the first person, it is in fact a confession, as if we were close to this man, who tells us about his mixed feelings in the hours that anticipate his death. At the same time, it has a “filmic” quality that makes it very easy

for the listener to visualize the events exposed in the lyrics. As Bruce Dickinson puts it, “you’re just narrating a movie to the audience”.² The lyrics go like this:

I'm waiting in my cold cell, when the bell begins to chime.
Reflecting on my past life and it doesn't have much time.
'Cause at 5 o'clock they take me to the gallows pole,
The sands of time for me are running low.

When the priest comes to read me the last rites,
I take a look through the bars at the last sights,
Of a world that has gone very wrong for me.
Can it be that there's some sort of error.
Hard to stop the surmounting terror.
Is it really the end, not some crazy dream?

Somebody please tell me that I'm dreaming,
It's not so easy to stop from screaming,
But words escape me when I try to speak.
Tears flow but why am I crying,
After all I'm not afraid of dying.
Don't I believe that there never is an end.

As the guards march me out to the courtyard,
Somebody cries from a cell “God be with you”.
If there's a God then why has he let me go?
As I walk all my life drifts before me,
Though the end is near I'm still not sorry.

Catch my soul, it's willing to fly away.
Mark my words believe my soul lives on.
Don't worry now that I have gone.
I've gone beyond to see the truth.

When you know that your time is close at hand.
Maybe then you'll begin to understand,
Life down here is just a strange illusion.
Hallowed be Thy Name.

The intro is sung slowly, underlined by a descending scale played on the guitar and marked by the chiming of a bell that announces yet another execution: “I’m waiting in my cold cell / When a bell begins to chime / Reflecting on my past life / And it doesn’t have much time / ‘Cos at 5 o’clock / They take me to the Gallows Pole / The sands of time for me / Are running low”.

The resigned and moody tone of this first passage, accompanied by the quiet guitar solo referred to above is briskly interrupted by an explosion of sounds coming from the guitars, bass and drums (at exactly 01:00), as the vocals rise to a higher key while maintaining the same air emission. By the way, the procedure of starting a song

² IRON MAIDEN. *Classic albums: The Number of the Beast*. Eagle Vision, 2002. 1 DVD.

quietly and then introducing a change in arrangement, in tempo, or both, is a common strategy used in Heavy Metal, to boost the impact generated by the loud volume, a feature that marks this genre.

On the other hand, “Hallowed be Thy Name” is also illustrative of a characteristic – sometimes a problem – common in some of Iron Maiden’s songs: when lyrics that are too elaborate, written in long verses, are sung in an upbeat tempo, the result can be an intelligible jumble, something Bruce Dickinson himself once admitted in an interview. When discussing the adrenalin rush that often occurs in live concerts – one that can be clearly detected upon confronting the slower tempo of a song recorded in the studio *vis-à-vis* its live version – he mentions one particular rendition of this very song and the reaction the band themselves had when they listened to it afterwards:

It’s always hard because when you do get carried away (...) and you get used to playing things faster, and every night it trips a little bit faster, a little bit faster... it can get to the point sometimes when you’re listening and thinking “Oh my God, this is ridiculous” [mimes somebody speaking really fast, jumbling the words] You know, you sort of end up with bits of tongue and blood stuff flying out of your mouth!³

After a few verses in which we perceive a protagonist that is at the same time fearful and rebellious, the lyrics reveal an unexpected closing. Differently from most Heavy Metal songs, which treat death from a nihilist standpoint, the underlying theme to “Hallowed be Thy Name” is the belief in immortality, and the impression that life as we lead it in this world, is as Plato stated in his Allegory of the Cave, delusory: “As I walk all my life drifts before me / And though the end is near I’m not sorry / Catch my soul it’s willing to fly away / Mark my words please believe my soul lives on / Please don’t worry now that I have gone / I’ve gone beyond to see the truth / When you know that your time is close at hand / Maybe then you’ll begin to understand / Life down here is just a strange illusion”.

Although “Hallowed be Thy Name” figures as one of the mainstays in Iron Maiden’s repertoire, carrying some of the band’s fingerprint procedures, such as the chord sequence in E-C-D, galloping bass and guitar riffs played in harmony by Dave Murray and Adrian Smith, it is clear, in the passage transcribed above, that the adaptation of elaborated lyrics to a Heavy Metal musical frame is not always easy.

³IRON MAIDEN. *Classic albums: The Number of the Beast*. Eagle Vision, 2002. 1 DVD.

There are verses which have a strong poetic charge (one can easily imagine them being spoken slowly and solemnly) and which lose strength when sung uptempo: “When you know that your time is close at hand / Maybe then you’ll begin to understand / Life down here is just a strange illusion”.

Interestingly enough, we believe that many of the (good) lyrics to Iron Maiden’s songs would gain in expression if sung slowly. We are not implying that these lyrics should be adapted to a different genre, though; it is very much possible to write Heavy Metal songs in a slow tempo, Black Sabbath being the biggest proof of that. In effect, much of the “heaviness” in their songs is a result of the somber lyrics being sung slowly and intelligibly, framed by a powerful arrangement of distorted guitars, bass, and drums.

Run to the Hills

The North-American occupation policy (between 1791, the year the State of Vermont was founded, and 1853, the year of the Gadsden Convention) resulted in the extermination of thousands of native Americans. This is the theme of “Run to the Hills”, a song in which this story is told under two distinct perspectives: the white man’s and the redskin’s. As seen in other Iron Maiden songs, the emphasis here lies on heroism, in this case, the indians’, who bravely resist the white men’s attacks: “White man came across the sea / He brought us pain and misery / He killed our tribes, he killed our creed / He took our game for his own need / We fought him hard / We fought him well / Out on the plains we gave him hell / But many came / Too much for Cree / Oh will we ever be set free?”.

Contrary to what happens in “Hallowed be Thy Name”, this time the lyrics are perfectly intelligible; although the song’s tempo is fast, the way the words were set onto the melodic lines is not compressed (as in the song previously analyzed), but elongated. This allows the singer to further explore his interpretive talents and, indeed, in “Run to the Hills”, the words are delivered in a harsh voice permeated by a spirit of vengeance.

Although the natives are defeated in this confrontation with the white man, as the song will show later on, the native’s voice – which appears in the first stanza – is proud, a feature easily detectable from the high register and from the challenging tone in which Dickinson sings verses such as “We fought him hard / we fought him well / Out

on the plains / We gave him hell”. It is also noteworthy the fact that this last verse, the one that denotes the greatest anger on the part of the native character, is explored in the band’s live performances, when singer Bruce Dickinson asks the audience to sing it, pointing the microphone at the fans.

Opposed to the native’s standpoint, the white man is also given voice – and, despite their supposed cowardice, he – the white man – also regards himself as a hero: “Riding through dustclouds and barren wastes / Galloping hard on the plains / Chasing the redskins back to their holes / Fighting them at their own game”.

Naturally, upon exposing the invader’s arrogant position, who treats the natives derogatively as “redskins” and inhabitants of “holes”, as well as revealing not-so-heroic deeds (as the stabs in the back, the rapes, the enslaving of the prisoners, and the shady negotiations), the author seems to wish to make justice to the true heroes of this story: “Murder for freedom / The stab in the back / Women and children are cowards’ attack (...) Raping the women and wasting the men (...) Selling them whiskey and taking their gold / Enslaving the young and destroying the old”.

However, the chorus makes it evident that, no matter how coward the white men were in these confrontations, they win in the end, crying out to their defeated opponents, “Run to the hills, Run for your lives”.

At this point, it is appropriate to make some remarks about the “voices” in the song. Brazilian song scholar Luiz Tatit points out that, in any song, there are generally some elements involved as regards “voices” or “persons”. The first two are: the singer, whom he calls the “speaker”; and, in direct opposition to him/her, we have the “listener”, or “receiver” / “addressee”.

Nevertheless, in the game established by the song, the singer is not singing about himself, but is lending his voice to a character (whose story was written by himself or even by another songwriter, thus further complicating this tapestry of “voices”, here understood as “identities”, as Simon Frith advocates in *Performing rites*).

Even if the songwriter/interpreter were the same person, we would still have two “voices” on the “sender” side of the song – the singer’s physical voice and the identity of the character in the song –, and two voices, or rather, identities, on the “receiver’s” / “addressee’s” side: the listener’s and the character to whom the singer addresses his speech. Using an Iron Maiden song to illustrate these notions, we would have the following scheme:

Sender (i.e. the singer, e.g. Bruce Dickinson) → Receiver / Addressee (i.e. the listener, the physical person listening to the song, e.g. myself, Lauro)

(The sender and the listener are the physical mediums through which the psychological voices, or characters, can express themselves):

Lyrical subject (i.e. the character that speaks in the song, e.g. the man about to be executed in “Hallowed be Thy Name”) → Lyrical addressee (i.e. the psychological character to whom the message of the song is addressed)

Of course the degree of persuasion achieved by the singer will depend on how much he is able to incorporate this character, much in the same way as a theatrical actor will be more or less successful in his task depending on his or her capacity to delude the public into thinking that he is not the actor, but the character. In the case of popular music, we know of artists with superlative capacity to disguise their private identity in order to let the character shine, to the point where the listener mistakes one for another. Billie Holiday can be cited as an example of interpreter whose brilliance blurred the edges between the “singer” and the “lyrical subject”, and by doing so, she was many times capable of making the listener also blur the boundaries between his or her private identity and the “lyrical addressee’s”, making us feel that the song had been written “for us”. At this point one reaches a state of epiphany, of complete involvement with the song (or film, or play, or poem, or novel, or painting, for that matter).

Exemplifying this process with Iron Maiden songs, in “Hallowed be Thy Name” Bruce Dickinson (the sender) embodies a man imprisoned by the Inquisition (the lyrical subject); on the other end of this spectrum, us, physical listeners (receivers) fool ourselves into thinking that this prisoner is confiding his feelings to us (not individuals from the 21st Century, but a fellow prisoner in a medieval cell – i.e. the lyrical addressee).

What is interesting in the case of “Run to the Hills” is that the “sender” (one singer, Bruce Dickinson) “wears”, in principle, two different identities throughout the song, being the spokesperson firstly to the native Americans, then to the white men. These shifts can be identified in verses like “White men came across the sea / *He* brought *us* pain and misery / *He* killed *our* tribes / *He* killed *our* cree (...) We fought *him* hard / We fought *him* well (...)” (*us, our, we* being the indians), and then in “Riding through dustclouds and barren wastes / Galloping hard on the plains / Chasing *the*

redskins back to *their* holes / Fighting *them* at *their* own game”, i.e., the white invaders’ voice.

We claimed that there were *in principle* two voices in the lyrics because in fact it is possible to detect, on a discursive level, a third identity, that of the contemporary listener, who sees the attacks against the native Americans in a critical light. After all, it would be unlikely for the white man to disclose his own acts of cowardice in his speech, let alone sounding proud of that – as indicated by Dickinson’s bold, loud interpretation. This “third”, critical voice we are referring to can be identified in verses like “Murder for freedom, a stab in the back / Women and children are coward’s attack (...) Raping the women and wasting the men / Selling them whiskey and taking their gold / Enslaving the young and destroying the old”.

As we said, in spite of giving voice to the indians and of introducing a critical mediator, the song leaves no doubt as for who won this battle. The chorus, which is the song section to which all stanzas converge, as a sort of conclusion, is dedicated to the white man’s voice, in a sentence that gives name to the song. At the very end of the song (from 03:37 onwards), Dickinson – who was the band’s “new singer” in this 1982 album, replacing Paul D’Ianno) –, lends his vocal capabilities to the white man’s speech, crying out to the Indians – “Run for your lives!” – at the top of his lungs, in a single vocal emission that spans across several notes, as if it were a final roar against the defeated enemy.

The Trooper

This song describes the “Battle of Balaclava”, fought during the Crimean War (1853-1856), a conflict involving, on the one hand, Russia, and on the other an alliance formed by Britain, France, the Ottoman Empire, and Sardinia. Once again, and as a way to displace historical events from their altar and lend them a personal touch, the fight is narrated from a soldier’s point of view – not surprisingly, a British one.

The same logic concerning the “voices” in the song, as explained above, can be applied here: this time vocalist Bruce Dickinson incorporates a British soldier from the 19th century, describing the battle from his privileged perspective, i.e. from inside the battlefield, in a time when these fights were not mediated by advanced remote technology, but were fought in close and bloody proximity to the enemy.

The “lyrical addressee” is a Russian soldier, as we can infer from the first verses: “*You’ll take my life but I’ll take yours too / You’ll fire your musket but I’ll run you through / So when you’re waiting for the next attack / You’d better stand there’s no turning back*”.

In this case, still another comment about the “voices” in the song applies. Whereas Luiz Tatit points out that usually us, listeners, align ourselves with the lyrical addressee, in many songs – perhaps in most of them – we use another possibility, that of merely eavesdropping the “conversation” between the lyrical subject and the lyrical addressee. This is especially true when the lyrical addressee (the “person” to whom the lyrical subject speaks) is a villain.

For example, in the original lyrics to “Hound Dog”, written by Leiber and Stoller for blues singer Big Mama Thornton (words that have nothing to do with the softened version sung by Elvis Presley), the lyrical subject is a woman who is driving away his man, a gigolo, by saying: “*You ain’t nothing but a hound dog / Snooping round my door / You can wiggle you tail / But I ain’t gonna feed you no more / You told me you was high class / But I can see through that / And daddy I know you ain’t no cool cat*”.

It is unlikely to imagine that any listener would identify him or herself with such a character, being much easier to consider that he or she will sympathize with the lyrical subject. Thus, the listener will sing along the lyrics to “Hound Dog”, incorporating those words as their own – or rather just eavesdropping this husband-and-wife quarrel. By the way, the “eavesdropping” strategy can be detected in the final verses to “The Trooper”, when the British soldier refers to his Russian enemy not as “you”, but as “he”: “*He pulls the trigger and I feel the blow*”.

On the other hand, in songs whose lyrical addressee is a more favorable character it is easier for the listener to imagine him or herself as being the recipient of the message. One typical example are the Beatles’ early songs, in which they used the pronouns “you” and “your” in hopes of creating a certain intimacy with their female following – and, most certainly, each one of those millions of girls felt Paul McCartney was singing specifically for each one of them each time he wooed “*from me to you*” or “*I wanna hold your hand*”.

In Iron Maiden songs, though, many times the lyrical addressee is an enemy, so our behavior, as listeners, will normally be to align ourselves not with the lyrical

addressee, but with the lyrical subject. As put before, this seems clear by the fact that we learn to sing along with the lyrics, emulating the same expressions of love or rage, sympathizing with the lyrical subject and making his discourse our own. This is especially obvious in live performances, when the singer encourages the audience to take part in the singing.

On the musical level, there are elements in “The Trooper” that somehow corroborate, or comment, the scenario and the facts described in the lyrics. For example, the intro (00:00 to 00:12) uses the very common strategy, in Heavy Metal, to create an atmosphere of tension by delaying the entrance of the bass and the drums. In this case, the strategy used was slightly different, for the bass also accompanies the characteristic, descending guitar riff played in harmony by Dave Murray and Adrian Smith. Nevertheless, at this stage the drums merely punctuate the riff, entering at 00:13, after an elaborate drum roll (00:09 to 00:12).

After the intro, we hear yet another guitar riff (from 00:12 to 00:36), this time the one that really lends an identity to the song. Underlying the two guitars that play in harmony, we hear Steve Harris’s bass in a “galloping” pattern that has become his signature. The use of this “galloping bass” has, in this case, a two-fold consequence: not only it ties the guitars and drums in a tense, continuous bass flow, but also dialogues with the song’s lyrics, which depict a battle that was in fact fought on horseback. The harmonic structure is based in an E-C-D sequence, which is also one of the band’s trademarks.

At 00:36 the voice finally makes its entrance in a high-register pitch, sounding harsh and aggressive, just the way it would be suited for the soldier’s character, describing the horrors of war from the middle of the battlefield. As the battle advances, he makes it clear to the listener that he is fully aware of the pointlessness of war, although he doesn’t have a way to escape it:

The bugle sounds and the charge begins
But on this battlefield no one wins
The smell of acrid smoke and horses breath
As I plunge on into certain death.

The horse he sweats with fear we break to run
The mighty roar of the Russian guns
And as we race towards the human wall
The screams of pain as my comrades fall

We hurdle bodies that lay on the ground
And the Russians fire another round
We get so near yet so far away
We won't live to fight another day.

Interestingly enough, in “The Trooper” the lyrical subject’s description of the battle goes as far as narrating his own death, which makes us think that this character could be the soldier’s ghost (a strategy also used in “Paschendale”, a song released by the band 20 years later).⁴ The final verses to “The Trooper”, describing the soldier’s death, go like this: “We get so close near enough to fight / When a Russian gets me in his sights / He pulls the trigger and I feel the blow / A burst of rounds take my horse below. / And as I lay there gazing at the sky / My body’s numb and my throat is dry / And as I lay forgotten and alone / Without a tear I draw my parting groan”.

(Churchill’s Speech) Aces High

Churchill’s Speech: “We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France. We shall fight over the seas and oceans. We shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets. We shall fight on the hills. We shall never surrender.”

Iron Maiden’s journey through History finally lands in the 20th Century. In the intro to “Aces High”, we hear Winston Churchill’s voice, taken from a speech made on June 18th, 1940, exhorting his compatriots to fight. The song describes one of the many battles fought between the British Royal Air Force and Hitler’s *Luftwaffe*. The musical frame is appropriate to the situation described: as in “The Trooper”, there is an intro where bass and drums only punctuate the double-guitar riff before joining in (from 00:00 to 00:25 in the studio version, used for this analysis), representing the tension that anticipates the beginning of the fight. When the whole band enters, including the vocals (at 00:41 onwards), the listener is exposed, on a sonic level, to the urgency of an aerial

⁴ An interesting analysis of this song was published in the Brazilian Journal of Song Studies: YAN, Andrew. Tell the World of Paschendale: análise de uma canção de guerra do Iron Maiden. In: *Revista Brasileira de Estudos da Canção*, Natal, n.3, jan-jul 2013, p. 136-144.

battle, including guitar sounds that emulate the “dives” made by the airplanes (check, for example, 01:43 to 01:48).

The lyrics describe all of the pilots’ procedures in a war situation, and the way the words are put together have a visual quality that makes it easy for the listener to imagine all these scenes – in fact, a characteristic shared by all the songs analyzed in this paper. The first movement is the moment when the pilots hear the siren that warns them of an aerial attack, leading them to rush to the airplanes (known in the aeronautical-military jargon as “scrambling”). A series of commands follow, all of which intending to make the pilots be ready to fight as quickly as possible: “Jump in the cockpit”; “Start up the engines”; “Remove all the wheelblocks”; “Gathering speed as we head down the runway”; “Got to get airborne before it’s too late”.

On the melodic-harmonic level, there are interesting strategies in the song that are worth mentioning. For example, instead of playing the basic chords that would guarantee a harmonic “ground” to the song (in this case, E and D, then A and G – interestingly enough, played by the bass), the two guitars double the vocal melodic line using power chords, going up and down the fretboard at breakneck speed. Alongside the vocals, the melodic-harmonic strategy used by the guitars helps reinforce the main melody.

In the “bridge” (the group of verses that comes just before the chorus), the pirouettes made by the planes are described by means of verbs in the gerund, giving the listeners the impression that these moves are being performed before their very eyes: “Flying, rolling, turning, diving, going in again”. The nervous arrangement is coherent to the inescapable situation of fighting or dying, summed up in the chorus, “Run – live to fly / Fly to live / Do or die (...)”.

The level of detail in the lyrics go as far as naming the main planes used in these battles – the English *Spitfires* against the German ME-109 (actually, a modified version of the famous BF-109). The Britons of Iron Maiden let a certain favoritism show in verses such as “*Bandits* at 8 o’clock move in *behind* us”, qualifying their enemies as “bandits” that attack “from behind”, while the British would be more honored, attacking their enemies face-to-face: “Ascending and turning out Spitfires to *face* them / *Heading straight* for them I press down my guns”. This confirms the “voice” strategies we commented above, and in this case listeners would most probably

align themselves with the British lyrical subject, or else eavesdrop the whole situation, treating Brits and Germans both as “them”.

3. Conclusion

In the course of these two papers – “Historical Themes in Iron Maiden Songs (Part I): From the Cavemen to the Vikings” (RBEC, Natal, n.3, jan-jul 2013), and the current “Historical Themes in Iron Maiden Songs (Part II): From the Inquisition to the Second World War” we hoped to demonstrate how this British Heavy Metal band focus on historical subjects in their songs – to the point of tracing a timeline spanning from Pre-History to the 20th Century –, a characteristic that makes them stand apart from other metal acts.

Though our approach was mainly lyrical – after all, the songs’ historical themes were the criterion to select our object of analysis – we also tried to comment, however briefly, on musical aspects that in our understanding are vital to efficiently studying songs. In the case of Iron Maiden’s so-to-say “historical” compositions, we believe the fact that this is a Heavy Metal band had much to do with the choice for subjects such as battles and wars. After all, if songs are, by definition, the amalgam of lyrics, words and performance (as Simon Frith appropriately reminds us), it is suitable to use the roaring sound of distorted guitars, thundering bass and drums and ferocious, high-pitched voices to express feelings of rage, fear, and despair; to tell the story of the primitive cavemen fighting to control the “power of warmth and heat”; to lend voice to a heretic at the very moment he is stepping onto the scaffold; or to yell “Run for your lives” to your enemies, regardless of whom they may be.

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