Militaristic Desire and Latent Aggression: The Rise of Nu Metal and Butt Rock in 1990s American Culture

A Dissertation in Cultural Musicology

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how the emergence of *nu metal* and so-called *butt rock* in the 1990s reflected a latent cultural aggression and militaristic desire within the American populace. It argues that these musical movements functioned as surrogate outlets for unresolved martial impulses following the anticlimactic end of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, and that the angst and belligerence they embodied foreshadowed the post-9/11 national mood of patriotism and mobilization. Adopting an interdisciplinary framework that integrates cultural studies, musicology, media studies, political psychology, and sociology, the study situates the nu metal and butt rock phenomena in their historical context and analyzes their musical content, lyrical themes, and reception. Primary sources examined include song lyrics, album imagery, music videos, contemporary media coverage, and advertisements, alongside secondary sources such as scholarly analyses of popular music and cultural trends.

The dissertation finds that the aggressive sound and combative imagery of late-90s mainstream rock were not merely stylistic fads but were symptomatic of deeper sociopolitical undercurrents: a generation's unrequited appetite for conflict and assertion of power during a decade of relative peace. The *Introduction* outlines the central thesis and its significance. The *Literature Review* surveys existing research on heavy metal, popular culture, and militarism, revealing a gap in connecting 1990s music trends with post-war psychosocial dynamics. The *Theoretical Framework* develops concepts of sublimated aggression and "militainment" to interpret musical expressions as culturally cathartic or preparatory for real-world conflict. Chapters on *Historical and Cultural Context* detail the post-Gulf War milieu, while *Musical and Lyrical Analysis* dissects genre characteristics and lyrics to unveil themes of violence, catharsis, and masculinity. A chapter on *Sociopolitical Implications* discusses how these genres influenced and reflected audience attitudes, and a *Post-9/11 Re-*

contextualization examines the fate of nu metal and butt rock after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, including their role in military recruiting and wartime morale. The dissertation concludes that nu metal and butt rock played a significant role in channeling and shaping American martial desires in the late 20th century, essentially serving as a cultural pressure-valve and a portent of the fervent war culture that arose in the early 2000s.

Keywords: nu metal, butt rock, militarism, Gulf War, 1990s culture, popular music, aggression, post-9/11

Chapter 1

Introduction

In the final decade of the twentieth century, a new wave of aggressive rock music dominated American popular culture. On the radio and MTV, the airwaves resounded with downtuned guitars, thunderous drums, and angry vocals. Bands like *Korn*, *Limp Bizkit*, *Slipknot*, and *Disturbed* brought **nu metal** from the fringes into the mainstream, while groups such as *Creed*, *Nickelback*, and *Godsmack* (often derided as **"butt rock"**) filled stadiums and rock charts with their bombastic post-grunge anthems. By the late 1990s, these hard-edged styles had achieved remarkable commercial dominance, even topping the charts and defining the zeitgeist for many young Americans. This dissertation explores a provocative interpretation of this musical phenomenon: that the rise of nu metal and butt rock in 1990s America was not an isolated cultural trend, but rather a reflection of latent aggression and militaristic desire coursing through the American public psyche. It posits that these musical movements emerged as surrogate outlets for martial impulses left unresolved after the swift and anti-climactic victory of the 1991 Gulf War – a war that ended so quickly and decisively that it provided little catharsis or lasting satisfaction to a nation primed for heroism and conflict. In this view, the seething anger and combative energy of late-90s rock were the cultural echoes of a war spirit seeking expression in peacetime, a prelude to the fervent patriotism and mobilization that would erupt after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

The core argument is that nu metal and butt rock provided a vicarious form of warfare for their audience: a means to experience the adrenaline, aggression, and solidarity of combat through music, in an era when actual combat was distant or brief. The Persian Gulf War of

1990–1991 had been a paradoxical event. It was, from the American perspective, a resounding military and technological success achieved with minimal U.S. casualties and was celebrated with patriotic fervor. Yet, its abrupt end – leaving Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein in power – created a sense of "unfinished business" in the minds of many Americans and policymakers. French theorist Jean Baudrillard famously argued that the Gulf War was more spectacle than struggle, "not really a war" but an atrocity masquerading as war. For the American public, the conflict's short duration and mediated, video-game quality meant there was little opportunity for the prolonged emotional investment or dramatic resolution that traditionally accompany war. In cultural terms, the victory was almost too easy; it lacked the narrative of sacrifice and triumph that might quench a society's deeper martial appetite. Instead, the war's end left a vacuum – a yearning for a grander conflict or a reassertion of American might that remained unsatisfied throughout the 1990s.

During this same period of relative geopolitical calm, American popular culture saw an unexpected surge in aggressive, martial aesthetics across various media. Scholars have noted that even in the absence of real war, the 1990s were rife with "militainment," as war and combat were increasingly packaged as entertainment. Hollywood blockbusters revisited World War II heroics (*Saving Private Ryan*, 1998), and new video games allowed youth to simulate battle scenarios on their home computers. In music, the trend was especially pronounced. The anger that grunge music had introverted in the early '90s was by the end of the decade explosively externalized in the form of bands that glorified aggression, both sonically and lyrically. The Woodstock '99 festival – a chaotic event headlined by nu metal acts – ended in riots, fires, and violence, as if to symbolically act out the decade's pent-up hostilities. As the HBO documentary *Woodstock 99: Peace, Love, and Rage* argued, the festival became a notorious showcase of the "aggressive white male" culture associated with nu metal. Critics in the media and academia alike observed how this music, and the behavior of its predominantly young, male fans, seemed to channel a broad undercurrent of anger, misogyny, and frustrated masculinity in late-90s America.

Why did such an aggressive musical culture flourish at this particular historical moment? This dissertation suggests a unifying explanation: that nu metal and butt rock acted as *symbolic battlegrounds* on which a generation fought its "spiritual war" in the absence of a

real one. Tyler Durden, the anarchic anti-hero of the 1999 film *Fight Club*, encapsulated the zeitgeist when he proclaimed: "We're the middle children of history... No Great War. No Great Depression. Our Great War's a spiritual war... our Great Depression is our lives.". This oft-cited line voiced the predicament of late Gen-X and early millennial youth: they had inherited a world of peace and prosperity, yet felt ennui, purposelessness, and a craving for the kind of existential challenge that their parents or grandparents had found in World War II or Vietnam. In *Fight Club*, this yearning for conflict manifests in underground fighting matches and domestic terrorism – visceral outlets for disaffected men to feel alive and "explode" against a society perceived as emasculating and shallow. In the real world, this longing was arguably met by the rise of a musical subculture that encouraged its audience to let out their "negative energy" through headbanging, mosh pits, and anthems of rage. Nu metal concerts, with their swirling mosh pits and cathartic fury, became a form of ritual combat by proxy: a place where (mostly) young men could experience a taste of danger, camaraderie, and release that the peacetime consumer society did not otherwise offer. Simultaneously, the more mainstream butt rock acts provided easily digestible, anthemic expressions of defiance and power that could resonate even with listeners beyond the subculture – including, notably, members of the military and law enforcement, who often adopted these songs as personal pump-up soundtracks.

The interdisciplinary approach of this dissertation is essential to unpacking these complex cultural dynamics. From a **cultural studies** perspective, nu metal and butt rock can be read as sites of ideological expression where issues of race, class, gender, and national identity collided. For example, nu metal's fusion of traditionally white-dominated heavy metal with African American-originated hip-hop elements brought questions of cultural "otherness" and appropriation to the fore. This hybrid genre was often dismissed by critics as a vulgar, commercialized exploitation of Black music by white suburban youth, laden with undertones of racial and gendered anxiety. Meanwhile, from a **musicological** angle, we must examine the musical structures and performance practices that give these genres their visceral impact: the downtuned "crunch" of seven-string guitars, the pounding, groove-laden riffs, the use of DJs and samples (in nu metal) to create a chaotic sonic texture, and vocal styles that range from guttural screams to melodramatic, emotive crooning. These musical features

were not arbitrary; they were carefully calibrated to evoke intensity, anger, and sometimes a militaristic atmosphere (for instance, the machine-gun-like double bass drumming or the drill-sergeant cadences of rap-infused vocals). A **media studies** approach further helps analyze how these genres were marketed and framed in discourse. Music videos, magazines, and MTV coverage often emphasized a combative narrative – Limp Bizkit's Fred Durst appearing as a foul-mouthed *agent provocateur* on *Total Request Live*, or Godsmack licensing its music to Navy recruitment ads that depict military life as an extreme adventure. These media representations reinforced the link between aggressive music and militaristic values, whether implicitly (through imagery of conflict in videos) or explicitly (through direct partnerships with the armed forces).

The theoretical basis of this study draws on **political psychology** and **sociology** to interpret nu metal and butt rock as phenomena of collective psychology. One useful concept is the idea of *sublimation* – the process by which socially unacceptable impulses (like the desire for violence or dominance) are transformed into acceptable or symbolic activities. Listening to or performing in an aggressive band can be seen as a form of sublimation of aggressive instincts. Classical theories of aggression, from Freud's notion of the death drive to Konrad Lorenz's hydraulic model of aggression, suggest that in the absence of legitimate outlets (such as a defensive war might provide), aggressive energy will seek alternative channels. Moreover, a related concept is the *authoritarian predisposition* identified by Adorno et al. in the mid-20th century: a personality type attracted to clear power hierarchies, toughness, and aggression. While nu metal's anti-authority lyrical stance might seem opposed to authoritarianism, the subculture's glorification of strength, and the way many fans embraced quasi-militaristic posturing (e.g. wearing military-style clothing, or engaging in regimented "wall of death" moshing techniques), suggest that there was an appeal to those craving order and power in an uncertain time. The **sociological** dimension also involves demographics and class: nu metal and butt rock skewed heavily towards working-class and middle-class white youth, often from suburban areas. As cultural historian Brent Malin observed, the late 1990s were a "conflicted moment for traditional white masculinity" in America. White, working-class men were increasingly feeling culturally dethroned and nostalgic for a time when their identities were valorized. The popularity of bands that projected a "white working-class male

as anti-authority rebel" image fits into a larger backlash against the multicultural, politically correct currents of the 1990s. In this light, the martial ethos in the music – the constant talk of "breaking" things, fighting back, never backing down – resonated as a reclamation of a heroic masculine identity under threat. It is no coincidence that many fans of these genres later swelled the ranks of the U.S. military in the War on Terror era; the values of toughness, loyalty to one's crew, and violent retribution in the music dovetailed with the warrior ethos cultivated after 9/11.

The significance of linking nu metal and butt rock with post-Gulf War militaristic desire extends beyond musicology and into understanding American society's trajectory at the turn of the millennium. By reading popular music as a social text, we can detect warning signs of the coming post-9/11 fervor. Indeed, in hindsight, the explosion of hyper-masculine, warlike imagery and emotion in late-90s rock anthems appears almost prophetic of the early 2000s, when America would respond to actual attacks with a near-unanimous surge of patriotism and a willingness to wage open-ended war. This dissertation contends that the cultural groundwork for that response was laid in the preceding decade, within seemingly apolitical arenas like music and entertainment. When the tragic events of September 11, 2001 occurred, the aggressive energy that had been brewing found a concrete target and purpose. As will be discussed in later chapters, songs from the nu metal era were repurposed in the new wartime context (for example, Drowning Pool's *Bodies* – with its chorus "Let the bodies hit the floor" – became an unofficial war anthem among U.S. soldiers and was even used in psy-ops and interrogations). Meanwhile, several leading artists of the 90s rock movement openly aligned themselves with the military effort, performing for troops or licensing music to recruiting ads. The "anticlimactic" war of 1991 had given way to the all-too-real wars of 2001 onwards, and the transition was arguably smoothed by a pop culture that had kept the nation's fighting spirit on simmer in the interim.

To explore these ideas, the dissertation is structured as follows. The next chapter provides a **Literature Review**, examining scholarly work on heavy metal, rap-rock, and 1990s cultural politics. It shows how previous studies have touched on issues of music and aggression, music and politics, and the ethos of nu metal, but have not explicitly connected these to the Gulf War and 9/11 context – a gap this study aims to fill. Following that, a

Theoretical Framework chapter outlines the interdisciplinary theories (such as the concept of "militainment," the psychosocial role of music as catharsis, and theories of cultural hegemony and resistance) that will be used to analyze the evidence.

The **Historical and Cultural Context** chapter then situates the discussion in concrete history: it narrates the end of the Cold War and Gulf War, the domestic climate of the 1990s, and key cultural developments (from the rise of extremist militia movements to mainstream media's preoccupation with violence) that set the stage for nu metal's emergence. The heart of the dissertation lies in the **Musical and Lyrical Analysis** chapter, which delves deeply into the content of nu metal and butt rock. Here, close readings of lyrics and imagery are combined with musical analysis to demonstrate how themes of warfare, power, and aggression pervade these works (for instance, an analysis of how the song "Boom" by P.O.D. uses militaristic onomatopoeia and was embraced as a sports/war hype track, or how the stage personas of bands like Slipknot adopt quasi-military uniforms and ranks). This chapter is subdivided into sections focusing on nu metal and butt rock respectively, acknowledging their differences but also highlighting their overlaps in cultural function. Next, a chapter on **Sociopolitical Implications** discusses how these musical trends interacted with society – including their reception by critics, their adoption by fans as identity markers, and their potential influence on attitudes towards violence and authority. Finally, the **Post-9/11 Recontextualization** chapter examines the period from 2001 onward: how the national mood shift after 9/11 affected the popularity and perception of nu metal and butt rock, and how elements of these genres were integrated into the wartime cultural landscape (through things like military recruiting, patriotic concerts, and the sonic branding of the War on Terror). The **Conclusion** synthesizes the findings, reflecting on the legacy of these 1990s musical movements and what they reveal about the interplay between popular culture and militarism in American history.

Overall, this dissertation seeks to demonstrate that popular music is not merely a soundtrack to history, but in many ways an active participant in it – a prelude, a mirror, and sometimes a provocateur of societal change. By focusing on the case of nu metal and butt rock, we uncover how a seemingly apolitical outlet for youthful angst was in fact deeply entangled with the era's political and psychological currents. The aggressive sounds of the

90s were the drumbeats of latent war, and in understanding them, we gain insight into how a nation emotionally negotiates the experience of triumph, tension, and eventual trauma.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

A review of existing literature reveals that while numerous studies have addressed heavy metal, popular music, and cultural politics of the 1990s, relatively few have directly examined the link between that decade's aggressive rock music and broader militaristic or political currents. This chapter surveys several bodies of scholarship that inform the present study: research on metal and nu metal subcultures, analyses of post-Cold War American culture, and theoretical works on music's role in society and war.

Heavy Metal, Nu Metal, and Suburban Masculinity

Early academic attention to heavy metal music laid important groundwork for understanding the genre's social significance. Pioneering works like Deena Weinstein's *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture* (1991; rev. 2000) examined heavy metal's emergence in the late 20th century and noted its frequent association with rebellion, escapism, and symbolic transgression of mainstream values. Weinstein and others observed that heavy metal has long been seen by its detractors as a form of "shameless attack" on societal norms, accused of promoting violence or deviant behavior among youth. Such debates set the stage for later controversies in the nu metal era, when similar criticisms would re-emerge in the context of school shootings and moral panics around violent media. However, scholars also pushed back against purely negative portrayals. Empirical studies in the 1980s and '90s (e.g. Arnett's surveys of metalhead youth) suggested that for many fans, heavy music had cathartic

or community-building functions rather than causing harm. This aligns with later findings that metal's effects vary greatly among listeners and can provide emotional release or identity formation without necessarily inciting violence.

With the advent of nu metal in the mid-1990s, academic interest grew in how this subgenre differed from earlier metal. Nu metal's distinctive blend of sonic elements – described by one reviewer as "crunching distorted power chords... augmented with rapped vocals, drum machines and samples – the staples of rap and hip-hop" – represented a significant cross-pollination of musical cultures. Scholars such as CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Mark Peterson have noted that nu metal was one of the first mainstream examples of an overtly hybridized pop culture, mixing black and white musical styles in a way that both attracted a wide audience and provoked purist criticism. Catherine Hoad's recent work, "Significantly Othered: Limp Bizkit and the Politics of Nu Metal 'Otherness'" (2023), directly addresses how nu metal's hybrid nature raised issues of identity. Hoad discusses how Limp Bizkit in particular embodied a performance of whiteness and masculinity that was both commercially successful and culturally contentious. Media coverage often framed Fred Durst (the band's frontman) as a caricature of the rowdy, aggressive white male – "overamped, oversexed... the Dude of Rude" as one magazine cover touted. Hoad links the animosity toward Limp Bizkit (derided in 2012 by *Spin* as the "dumbest band" of a "dumb" era) to broader "anxieties accompanying nu metal" about race and authenticity. In other words, part of the scholarly discourse suggests that nu metal became a lightning rod for concerns about cultural mixing and the reassertion of a white male space in music at the turn of the millennium.

Brent Malin's cultural analysis (cited by Hoad) situates these musical developments in the context of 1990s masculinity. Malin argues that the late '90s saw a "(re)turn to white, working-class men as heroic social archetypes" as a backlash against prior decades' identity politics. This observation is corroborated by Lee Barron's review of Scott Wilson's book *Great Satan's Rage: American Negativity and Rap/Metal in the Age of Supercapitalism* (2008). Wilson's thesis, as summarized by Barron, is that from the 1980s onward, American capitalism became increasingly fused with militarism, creating what he calls "supercapitalism". In Wilson's view, two musical genres – gangsta rap and nu metal – emerged as cultural expressions that both reflected and rejected this new system. They were genres of "negativity

and nihilism" responding to a socio-economic order that glorified war and business in equal measure. For nu metal, this meant that the music's themes often implicitly critiqued the status quo (through their raw anger and disaffection) even as they sometimes paradoxically embraced the very values of aggression and domination that underpinned the supercapitalist ethos. Wilson's interdisciplinary approach brings in philosophers like Georges Bataille and social critics like Allan Bloom and Slavoj Žižek to interpret nu metal as more than noise – in his analysis, songs like Slipknot's "People = Shit" become emblematic of a generation's disgust with a "rapacious capitalist system" and its wastefulness. This literature suggests that scholars have indeed read nu metal as a symptom or commentary on its times, albeit focusing more on economic and identity issues than explicitly on militarism.

One notable gap, however, is the limited direct analysis of nu metal in relation to American militaristic sentiment. While Wilson frames his discussion around war (including chapters on the Gulf War and 9/11) and Hoad touches on nationalism post-9/11, few if any academic works explicitly argue that nu metal was a *manifestation of martial desire* in the 1990s. Most studies treat nu metal either as a subcultural style, a commercial genre, or a locus for debates on race/gender. This dissertation builds on those insights but pivots to highlight the war theme: drawing connections between the popularity of songs about breaking, killing (metaphorically), or standing alone against the world and the latent craving for military action or heroic conflict.

Finally, a brief note on the term "butt rock" in literature: Academic sources seldom use this slang, preferring "post-grunge" or "mainstream hard rock" to describe bands like Nickelback or Creed. The term originates from a 1990s radio slogan "Rock. Nothing but Rock," which listeners jokingly twisted into "Nothing Butt Rock". An Urban Dictionary definition (often cited tongue-in-cheek by journalists) characterizes butt rock as "any hard-rock music" that is commercially overproduced and lyrically crass – "one part aggro noise, one part self-indulgent and whiny singer, and... a whole lot of douche". While such descriptions are colorful, scholarly attention to these bands has been sparse compared to nu metal. However, some critical work examines how post-grunge acts carried forward themes of disillusionment and everyday struggle, repackaging them in more radio-friendly forms. For instance, Theo Cateforis (2011) notes that post-grunge maintained grunge's earnest tone but often stripped

it of specific political content, making it a kind of "universal solvent" for angst that could easily be applied to personal or patriotic sentiments after 9/11. This dissertation fills a niche by considering butt rock within the same frame as nu metal, given that both served overlapping audiences and emotional needs.

Post-Cold War American Culture and Militarism

The 1990s are frequently remembered as a time of peace and prosperity in the United States – the "end of history" in Francis Fukuyama's famous phrase, wherein liberal democracy and capitalism had triumphed globally, seemingly removing the ideological conflicts that fueled the 20th century's great wars. Indeed, surveys of 1990s American history (e.g., James Patterson's *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1989–2001*) describe the period as one of relative international calm and domestic preoccupation with economic growth and technological innovation. However, a counter-current of scholarship emphasizes that under this placid surface, the culture was far from depoliticized or demilitarized. Several works examine the subtle entrenchment of militarism in American life during the 1990s – a trend that historian Andrew Bacevich later dubbed the "New American Militarism." Roger Stahl's book *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture* (2009) is particularly relevant. Stahl argues that the entertainment industry of the 90s and early 2000s increasingly turned war into a form of consumer spectacle, from the rise of hyper-realistic war video games and Hollywood blockbusters with Pentagon cooperation, to news coverage that began to resemble action movies. Although Stahl's focus is largely on visual media and news, his concept of "militainment" provides a theoretical foundation for seeing aggressive music as part of the same continuum – essentially, preparing the public to view violence and war as exciting, normalized, and even pleasurable experiences.

Another angle comes from political sociology: studies on public opinion and war readiness. While not about music, these shed light on the collective mindset. John Mueller's famous thesis in the 1990s was that war was "on the wane" in the public consciousness after the Cold War, with a so-called "peace dividend" reducing militaristic attitudes. Yet, by contrast, sociologist James Davison Hunter observed a "culture war" domestically, as Americans were

polarized over values (though this was more about religion and social issues than foreign war). The connection to our topic is tangential but important: it shows that martial metaphors and an atmosphere of conflict endured in public discourse (even if about morality rather than armies), possibly keeping the notion of "fighting" alive as a motif in daily politics.

Psychological and anthropological studies of violence provide another context. A body of literature addresses the perennial question of whether engaging with violent media (like violent music) serves as catharsis or provocation. A meta-analysis by psychologist Jonathan Freedman (2002) on media violence concluded that findings are mixed, but the dominant narrative in politics by the late 90s was that violent entertainment could inspire real aggression. This was exemplified by the fallout of the Columbine High School massacre in April 1999. In that tragedy's aftermath, public figures (including politicians and the media) controversially blamed violent video games and music (particularly Marilyn Manson, though he was shock rock rather than nu metal) for influencing the perpetrators. While scholarly analysis of Columbine (e.g., Ralph Larkin's work) debunked simplistic cause-and-effect claims, the incident nonetheless thrust the issue of aggressive music's social impact into the spotlight. It underscored that many Americans intuitively believed music could channel or direct youth aggression – a belief that, indirectly, supports this dissertation's premise that music can be an outlet for latent violent impulses. One of the two Columbine shooters was a fan of German industrial-metal band KMFDM and had interest in military themes; this sort of detail was sensationalized in media, reinforcing the era's consciousness of a link between music and quasi-militaristic posturing among youth.

In the specific context of the Persian Gulf War, literature is limited but insightful. Baudrillard's essays *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991) stand out for their bold conceptualization of that conflict as a simulacrum – a "virtual" war that lacked the existential gravity of past wars. Though not universally accepted, his work has been cited in cultural analyses (like in Drowned in Sound forums discussing Orwell and Baudrillard in relation to nu metal) to suggest that the 1991 war left a certain *unreality* or hollowness in its wake. An Oxford Research Encyclopedia article on the Gulf War notes that Americans celebrated the victory but experienced it mostly through CNN broadcasts, with limited personal sacrifice, creating a different social effect than, say, Vietnam or WWII. Some commentators (e.g., Tom Engel-

hardt in *The End of Victory Culture*) argued that the Gulf War briefly revived a declining "victory culture" in America – a narrative of righteous might – but that this revival was fleeting and incomplete. The war ended without a clear sense of closure: Saddam remained, and the anticipated post-war euphoria gave way to domestic concerns and scandals (like the early 90s recession and political battles).

In summary, the broader literature on 1990s America provides a backdrop of a country outwardly at peace but subconsciously restless. The idea of "latent militaristic desire" finds support in works that highlight the subtle militarization of media and the unresolved feelings from the Gulf War. What has been missing is tying these threads directly to the sphere of popular music. This dissertation takes cues from all the above: it uses Stahl's notion of *militainment*, engages with Wilson and Hoad's interpretations of nu metal's social meaning, and builds upon observations by Baudrillard and others about the Gulf War's psychological impact. By synthesizing these, it positions nu metal and butt rock within the tapestry of 1990s cultural militarism – an approach that existing literature has only hinted at.

Music, Emotion, and Political Expression

A final set of relevant literature comes from musicology and ethnomusicology on how music expresses and shapes collective emotions, especially in times of social stress. Tia DeNora's work on music in everyday life (2000) suggests that people use music actively to regulate mood and identity. In the context of aggressive music, this implies listeners might choose nu metal or heavy rock to psych themselves up, vent frustration, or feel empowerment. Social psychologist K. Daniel O'Leary's studies on "mood management" align with this: individuals often select music that matches or modifies their emotional state, effectively using songs as a form of self-therapy or motivation. Such frameworks have been applied to sports psychology (why athletes listen to hard rock before competitions, for instance) and could be extended to quasi-military motivations. Indeed, a notable intersection of scholarship and military practice is found in Jonathan Pieslak's research. Pieslak (himself both a musicologist and a veteran) wrote about the use of heavy metal and rap by U.S. soldiers during the Iraq War in the 2000s. In a 2007 study, he documented that American soldiers in combat zones often listened to

metal as an "inspiration, a psychological tactic, and a form of expression when engaging in combat". This striking evidence – troops literally blasting Metallica or Disturbed before breaching doors – demonstrates music's tangible role in real military aggression. Pieslak's subsequent book *Sound Targets: American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War* (2009) elaborates on how songs became personal anthems for combat units, a way to bond and to psyche up for battle. While Pieslak's work is situated in the 2000s, the bands he mentions (Metallica, AC/DC, Pantera, Drowning Pool, etc.) include several that rose to prominence in the '90s. This suggests continuity: the same music that entertained and fired up teenagers in the late 90s was repurposed to energize and steel them when they became soldiers a few years later. The literature on music and war (such as Annegret Fauser's studies on music in wartime culture, though mostly about earlier eras) often emphasizes patriotic or morale-boosting songs. The case of nu metal/butt rock is different – these were not originally patriotic, but their emotional tone made them apt for warlike uses.

Additionally, cultural critics like Chris Hedges (*War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*, 2002) have written about the allure of war as a unifier and source of purpose. While Hedges' book doesn't specifically address music, it resonates with the idea that in times of peace, societies sometimes mythologize war or seek its adrenaline through substitutes. The work of military historians (John Keegan, for example) on the cultural rituals of battle can be analogously applied to mosh pit "combat" in concerts, a parallel noted by music scholars like Martin J. Power who wrote on mosh pits as a form of controlled violence (2011).

In summary, the scholarly landscape provides pieces of the puzzle: studies on metal and nu metal give insight into the subculture's values and controversies, cultural studies of the 90s highlight a latent militarism, and psychology of music underscores how such music might serve as emotional and quasi-political outlets. What remains is to weave these strands together to directly address how nu metal and butt rock served as conduits for a martial spirit. This dissertation aims to contribute to the literature by making that connection explicit, using both theoretical arguments and concrete analyses in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

Analyzing nu metal and butt rock as reflections of latent militaristic desire requires a theoretical framework that can account for the complex relationships between individual psychology, collective emotions, cultural texts (songs, lyrics, images), and historical context. This chapter outlines three key theoretical lenses that guide the analysis: (1) the concept of **catharsis and sublimation** of aggression through media, (2) the notion of **militainment and the military-entertainment complex**, and (3) an **interdisciplinary model of cultural resonance** that explains how music can foreshadow or prepare a society for political moods.

Catharsis, Aggression, and Media

The idea of catharsis originates in ancient Greek drama theory (Aristotle's claim that tragedy "purges" emotions) and has been applied in modern psychology to suggest that expressing or witnessing aggressive action in a safe context can relieve aggressive impulses. In the context of music, a longstanding debate asks: Does listening to angry, aggressive music vent one's anger (*cathartic hypothesis*) or fuel it (*stimulation hypothesis*)? The theoretical framework here leans on the cathartic side, aligning with the concept of **sublimation** as articulated by Freud and later psychoanalytic thinkers. Sublimation refers to the process by which primal urges (like aggression, lust, etc.) are transformed into socially acceptable forms – art, competition, work, or, in our case, music consumption. Nu metal and butt rock, with their often belligerent lyrics and sonic ferocity, can be seen as culturally sanctioned outlets

for fans to experience intense emotions that might otherwise be deemed inappropriate to express openly. A young person who feels inexplicably angry or craves intensity might find in a Slipknot concert or blasting a Korn album a socially permissible way to experience those feelings. The lyrics "Break stuff... I hope you know I pack a chainsaw" (Limp Bizkit's "Break Stuff") or "Let the bodies hit the floor" (Drowning Pool's "Bodies") provide vicarious expressions of violence that most listeners would never commit. According to catharsis theory, this vicarious experience can reduce the likelihood of actual violence by satisfying the emotional urge in fantasy form. While empirical support for catharsis is mixed, many metal fans self-report that the music has a calming or therapeutic effect after it allows them to blow off steam.

However, this framework does not claim that such music is purely pacifying. On the contrary, it posits a double-edged dynamic: while nu metal might prevent some immediate antisocial behavior by catharsis, it simultaneously *normalizes* a higher baseline of aggression in attitudes. This is where political psychology intersects. The **priming effect** theory suggests that regular exposure to certain themes can make related thoughts more accessible. Thus, a steady diet of songs about fighting, hatred, and domination might prime fans to see conflicts in more black-and-white, confrontational terms, even if the songs are not explicitly political. For example, a fan who internalizes the message "I will not bow down" from a butt rock anthem might be psychologically primed to support uncompromising, hawkish stances in foreign policy or interpersonal relations. This framework helps reconcile how the same music could both vent personal anger (reducing immediate aggression) and cultivate a cultural climate more accepting of the idea that force is a solution (increasing long-term militaristic inclination).

Additionally, the framework draws on **social identity theory**. Fans of aggressive music often form tight-knit subcultures that give them a sense of belonging and purpose – not unlike soldiers in a unit. The loyalty to a music scene (wearing band merchandise, attending shows, adopting jargon) parallels loyalty to a military unit symbolically. The theory suggests that individuals derive self-esteem from group identities; if the group identity is built around toughness and aggression, individuals may embrace those values more strongly. This can translate to broader attitudes: the nu metal subculture's us-vs-them mentality (fans

often felt the mainstream looked down on them, and they revelled in offending or shocking outsiders) could predispose fans to an us-vs-them worldview in politics, which is a hallmark of militaristic and nationalist thinking.

Militainment and Cultural Militarization

Roger Stahl's concept of **militainment** – the blurring of war and entertainment – provides a macro-level lens for this study. Stahl contends that from the 1980s onward (accelerating in the 90s), American media increasingly turned war into a consumer spectacle, which in turn subtly militarized the public. Key aspects of militainment include: the aestheticization of military hardware (making weapons and soldiers look "cool" on screen), the narrative framing of conflict as heroic entertainment, and the recruitment of entertainment forms for military propaganda or training. In applying this to music, the framework considers how nu metal and butt rock contributed to militainment. One obvious aspect is the direct synergy between these genres and military recruiting in the 2000s: as noted, the U.S. Navy's "Accelerate Your Life" campaign famously used Godsmack's song "Awake" as a theme, complete with action-packed visuals of Navy operations. The advertising firm behind that campaign explicitly targeted the same demographic that loved Godsmack – young men 18–30 – indicating that the military saw the music's appeal as a way to capture warlike enthusiasm in potential recruits. The theoretical implication is that the music's imagery and emotional tenor were already aligning with the military's desired self-image (adventurous, high-octane, masculine) even before 9/11.

Another militainment factor is the **co-optation of rebellion**. Many nu metal songs present themselves as anti-authority or outsider anthems. For instance, Slipknot's early image was anti-establishment chaos, and Rage Against The Machine (though more political than nu metal per se) explicitly raged against systems of power. However, Stahl and other theorists (like Anahid Kassabian on music and militarism) would point out that such "rebellious" cultural products can ironically serve the status quo by channeling discontent into non-political arenas. A youth who is moshing at Ozzfest might feel that he is rebelling and fighting something, but in reality, he might not be organizing for any concrete social

change – he's essentially blowing off steam within a commercial music event. This dovetails with Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony: the idea that the dominant system can allow certain forms of dissent that ultimately reinforce stability. The nu metal industry (supported by major corporate labels and MTV) in this sense provided a sanctioned space for aggressive rebellion that kept it safely away from actual political action. The theory suggests that by the time a real call to arms (like post-9/11 military enlistment) came, those aggressive energies could be redirected from stage-diving to signing up for the Army – a transition made easier by the fact that the culture had not truly been antagonistic to the military, just to nebulous "authority" or personal adversaries.

Furthermore, the theoretical framework uses the idea of **cultural preparedness**. This stems from communications theory on how narratives prepare an audience for certain events. For example, media theorist Jack Lule argued that recurrent media narratives (like "the victim" or "the hero") set expectations for real events. Analogously, one could argue that the narrative of many butt rock music videos – which often showed everyman protagonists overcoming something or standing tall – prepared audiences emotionally for the hero-centric narratives of the War on Terror (the firefighter hero, the soldier hero, etc.). The prevalence of terms like "hero," "soldier," "warrior" in late-90s popular culture (from WWF wrestling's "War Zone" to songs like Metallica's "Don't Tread on Me" in 1991 and Creed's quasi-spiritual anthems in 2000) contributed to a *discursive environment* that normalized the idea of being at war or under siege, even when the nation was not. This is a subtler aspect of cultural militarization: warlike language and concepts creeping into peacetime life.

Finally, the framework acknowledges the **authoritarian personality** theory from Adorno et al. (1950) and the subsequent research on right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) by Altemeyer. These psychological theories describe a type of person prone to submit to authority, endorse aggression against outgroups, and uphold conventionalism. There is some evidence (albeit anecdotal and not thoroughly studied) that fans of certain aggressive or simplistic patriotic rock may correlate with higher RWA scores. For instance, one might point to the popularity of bands like *Five Finger Death Punch* in the 2010s among military audiences – known for their explicitly pro-military songs – as a later development of the butt rock lineage. The theoretical implication is that cultural products that valorize aggression and

loyalty might reinforce authoritarian tendencies in certain listeners. Thus, the aggressive music of the 90s could have been cultivating an appetite for strong displays of force and unity that fit the authoritarian mold, which became politically salient after 9/11.

Cultural Resonance and Recontextualization

The third piece of the framework deals with how cultural expressions can **resonate** with societal moods and how their meaning can be **recontextualized** by events. The concept of resonance comes from social movement theory, where certain frames or symbols "resonate" with the public if they fit existing values or emotions. Applied here, nu metal and butt rock "resonated" in the late 90s because they fit the diffuse anger and restless energy of that time (as described in the Introduction). The framework posits that this resonance was not coincidental but rooted in concrete events and conditions: the anticlimax of the Gulf War, the perceived malaise of peace, the frustrations of a generation coming of age.

One might draw on **historical analogies** as a theoretical tool: historically, after major wars, societies have often seen surges in violent entertainment or competitive sports (e.g., the rise of gladiatorial games after Roman conquests, or the growth of American football – often compared to war – in post-WWII America). The 1990s could be seen as an inversion: instead of following a war, the violent entertainment surge preceded one, almost as a prelude. This framework suggests a dialectical motion: the Gulf War's quick victory (thesis) and subsequent peace (antithesis) led to a cultural yearning for conflict (synthesis in art) that prefigured the next actual conflict. While this is a broad stroke theory, it provides a lens for interpreting why nu metal peaked exactly when it did (circa 1999–2001) and then fell off.

The concept of **recontextualization** is crucial for the post-9/11 analysis. It refers to how a cultural artifact's meaning can change when circumstances change. For example, the song "Alive" by P.O.D., released on September 11, 2001 (by coincidence), was a nu metal-ish Christian rock song about personal renewal. In the new context of that day, its chorus "I feel so alive for the very first time, I can't deny you" suddenly was "seen as having a positive message in the aftermath of the attacks" and became an anthem of gratitude to be alive. Thus, a song created in one milieu (pre-9/11 alternative rock) was almost instantly

transmuted into a patriotic/motivational song for a grieving nation. Likewise, many bands that had been apolitical or even anti-establishment pre-9/11 adjusted their tone; several butt rock bands (3 Doors Down, Creed, etc.) contributed to military tribute albums or events post-9/11. The theoretical lens here comes from reception theory: meaning is not fixed in the text, but co-created by audiences and contexts. So the dissertation will interpret how songs like "Bodies" or "Hero" (the 2002 Chad Kroeger song from the Spider-Man soundtrack, often associated with 9/11 imagery) took on new shades of meaning – and how those new meanings aligned with a militarized national mood.

Finally, we use the idea of a **feedback loop** in culture. Once post-9/11 militarism surged, it retroactively cast nu metal in a different light. Some commentators argued that the age of irony was over, implying that the kind of adolescent nihilism nu metal championed was no longer palatable in a serious time of war and terror. Indeed, record sales data show that nu metal and rap-metal genres saw a "downturn in sales due to the attacks" and declined in popularity in the years immediately following. This suggests that when real conflict arrived, the public partially shifted away from vicarious conflict music – perhaps finding it juvenile or being drawn instead to either more earnest patriotism (country music saw a boom) or other forms of rock that were less aggressively navel-gazing. The framework uses this to hypothesize that nu metal had *fulfilled its function* by 2001: it had kept the aggression alive, and now reality superseded it. Some bands adapted (for instance, Metallica in 2003 rebranded with a harsher sound possibly to stay relevant; Linkin Park's 2003 album took a more somber tone), while others faded as their message seemed out of step. The feedback loop is that the cultural climate they helped foster – a comfort with aggression – ironically rendered them obsolete once actual aggression (war) was happening and the culture moved to different artistic needs (like morale-boosting or reflective art).

In summary, this theoretical framework combines psychological, sociological, and media theories to examine nu metal and butt rock not just as musical genres, but as participants in a larger socio-cultural system. It assumes that music can act both as a *mirror* (reflecting existing sentiments) and a *molder* (shaping attitudes that prefigure actions). With these concepts in mind, the analysis will proceed to the historical context and then detailed musical examination, continually referencing how these theories play out in the concrete details.

Chapter 4

Historical and Cultural Context

To understand why nu metal and butt rock resonated so strongly in 1990s America, it is essential to examine the historical and cultural milieu from which these genres arose. This chapter outlines key events and trends of the late 1980s and 1990s that set the stage: the end of the Cold War and the Persian Gulf War, the domestic social climate of the United States in the '90s, and the evolving landscape of youth culture and entertainment during that period. The goal is to paint a picture of a society ostensibly at peace yet simmering with undercurrents of aggression and discontent.

From the Gulf War to the Long Peace

On February 27, 1991, President George H.W. Bush announced a cessation of hostilities in the Persian Gulf, declaring that "Kuwait is liberated" and "God bless the USA." The Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm) had lasted only six weeks of combat, with a decisive coalition victory over Iraq. Americans watched live footage of smart bombs and night-vision tracer fire on CNN; it was dubbed "the first war on live TV." Public support for the war was extremely high (approaching 90% approval during the conflict) and the swift success was met with celebratory rallies and yellow ribbon symbols across the nation. Yet, as noted in the literature review, the war was also paradoxical: it felt in many ways like an anticlimax. Iraqi forces were expelled from Kuwait, but Saddam Hussein remained in power, leading many to consider the outcome unfinished. Years later, journalist Barton Gellman recounted

that George W. Bush (the first President Bush's son) "developed a sense that there was unfinished business from the first Persian Gulf War... that leaving Saddam in power had been a mistake". This view was not limited to the Bush family; a segment of the American public and political class shared a lingering itch to "finish the job" in Iraq. In the short term, though, the 1990s became a decade without major U.S. ground wars. (There were interventions – Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo – but these were limited in scale and, except for Somalia's "Black Hawk Down" incident, had low American casualties.)

This "long peace" of the 1990s – bookended by the Gulf War and the 9/11 attacks – shaped a generation that grew up with a sense of American military dominance but few opportunities to witness it deployed in prolonged conflict. The Cold War enemy had vanished as the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, leaving the U.S. as the sole superpower. Some commentators (like Charles Krauthammer in 1990) heralded a "unipolar moment" where American might was uncontested. Paradoxically, the lack of a clear adversary or cause may have contributed to a feeling of purposelessness or complacency. Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis (1989) argued that ideological evolution had ended – liberal democracy had won. While policymakers debated a new world order, average Americans shifted attention to domestic life: the economic boom, the tech stock bubble, and the culture wars over social issues.

Yet, beneath the optimism, there were anxieties. The early '90s saw economic recession and job insecurity until the mid-decade recovery. The Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, perpetrated by domestic anti-government extremists, jolted the nation into recognizing violent anger brewing at home. The rise of private militias and "patriot" movements in the 90s – armed groups often comprised of disaffected veterans and gun enthusiasts – indicated that not everyone was content with peace and federal authority. There was a sense, especially among some white working-class communities, of betrayal and loss: defense industries downsized, the archetypal male warrior role devalued, and a federal government they viewed as intrusive (sieges at Ruby Ridge in 1992 and Waco in 1993 became rallying cries). While such militia movements were fringe, their presence fed into a broader cultural portrayal of "angry white men" (the subject of many 90s media thinkpieces) who were searching for someone or something to fight against.

Popular entertainment mirrored and sometimes prefigured these tensions. Hollywood action cinema of the 90s frequently cast generic foreign terrorists or rogue military officers as villains for lone American heroes to vanquish (e.g., *The Rock* (1996) or *Air Force One* (1997)). The lack of a singular real-world enemy meant fiction filled the gap with composite threats that justified continued heroics. Even comedies like *Independence Day* (1996) gave audiences the catharsis of a clear-cut victory – albeit against aliens – in a way strikingly similar to war movies. Meanwhile, more thoughtful works like *Fight Club* (1999, as previously noted) and *American History X* (1998) delved into the psyche of angry young men, including veterans and neo-Nazis, painting a picture of violence born from aimlessness and rage rather than necessity.

The late 90s also saw an odd phenomenon: an increase in military-themed toys, games, and marketing to youth despite no active war. G.I. Joe, the classic military action figure line, had a resurgence in the 90s with new editions. Paintball, a game essentially simulating combat, became a popular hobby for teenagers and adults, turning war play into a sport. First-person shooter video games like *Doom* (1993) and *GoldenEye 007* (1997) were wildly popular, allowing millions to play virtual soldiers or secret agents. None of this went unnoticed by social critics; for instance, a 1999 *Wired* magazine article asked if America was "training its kids for war" through video games – a question that seemed hyperbolic then but gained a different resonance when, a few years later, the military itself started using video games for recruitment (the release of *America's Army*, a free game from the U.S. Army, in 2002 exemplified that convergence of gaming and recruiting).

In sum, the 1990s in America were a study in contrasts: peace without tranquility, dominance without direction. The absence of a great war did not equate to the absence of a war mentality. Rather, that mentality floated freely, attaching itself to subcultures, hobbies, and narratives. This is the fertile ground from which a music scene obsessed with aggression sprouted. The youth of the 90s, especially those in suburbia who felt removed from grand purposes, found meaning and adrenaline where they could – in mosh pits, at rock festivals, in identification with loud bands who gave voice to their frustration.

The Evolution of 90s Youth Culture: From Grunge Apathy to Nu Metal Fury

At the start of the 1990s, the musical icon of American youth was Kurt Cobain of Nirvana – a reluctant star whose ethos was defined by disaffection, irony, and self-directed angst. Grunge music's popularity (roughly 1991–1994) coincided with a narrative of Gen X apathy. The typical grunge song was introspective, dealing with depression, alienation, and sometimes social issues, but often in a resigned or abstract way. The grunge "look" (flannel shirts, unkempt hair) and Cobain's very public struggle with heroin and mental health painted youth culture as inward-facing and self-destructive. There was anger in grunge too (listen to the raw power of Nirvana's "Territorial Pissings" or Pearl Jam's "Porch"), but it was largely anger at oneself or one's immediate personal world.

By the end of the 90s, the pendulum had swung to an opposite pole. The icons of 1999 were figures like Fred Durst of Limp Bizkit or Jonathan Davis of Korn – vocalists whose angst was decidedly outward. They shouted about hating other people, about betrayal, about societal and parental failures. Their look was not passive slacker but hyperactive provocateur: red baseball caps, jumpsuits, freakish masks (in Slipknot's case), tattoos and piercings, exuding a readiness to confront. This transformation in youth culture from grunge to nu metal is crucial for contextualizing the music's role. Sociologists might point to various factors: the economy improved, making nihilistic despair seem less relatable, while at the same time inequality and teenage pressures (school shootings, broken homes, etc.) made simple rage more appealing. The mid-90s had seen a brief surge of lighter fare (the "alternative rock" and pop-punk explosion of 1994–1997, where bands like Green Day, The Offspring, and No Doubt added humor and uptempo energy to rock). But by 1998, a darker, heavier mood reasserted itself. Some historians mark the Columbine High School massacre in April 1999 as a symbolic turning point for teen culture: suddenly, the angry, isolated teenager was front-page news, and everyone wanted to understand or blame what could produce such violence. Heavy music was immediately a suspect – though ironically the Columbine shooters were more into industrial and gothic rock than the then-emerging nu metal scene, the public perception lumped Marilyn Manson and KMFDM together with Korn and others as part

of one "violent music" problem. This controversy brought nu metal unwanted notoriety but also perhaps an allure: youths often gravitate toward the music that adults fear.

One cultural flashpoint that encapsulated the state of youth aggression was the Woodstock '99 festival (July 1999). Meant to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the original Woodstock, it instead became infamous for arson, riots, and sexual assaults. The lineup that final night featured Limp Bizkit, Rage Against the Machine, and Metallica – a gauntlet of aggressive rock. During Limp Bizkit's performance of "Break Stuff," violence erupted as Durst egged the crowd on to let out their anger. Pieces of plywood from a sound tower were ripped off and surfed on the crowd; fires were lit; by the festival's end, trailers were looted and torched. A contemporary documentary and press coverage blamed the disaster in part on the "toxic" culture of nu metal, pointing to its predominantly white male audience's pent-up hostility. Moby (the electronic artist who was there) was quoted saying the festival "was all misogyny and homophobia and the rape frat boy culture", directly indicting the nu metal scene's ethos. While one must be careful not to generalize an entire fanbase from this event, Woodstock '99 served as a stark display of a certain demographic's willingness – even eagerness – to engage in anarchy and violence under the right circumstances. Notably, in the absence of any real cause, the violence was directionless: it targeted ATM machines, merchandise booths, and even random fellow concert-goers. This lack of focus could be interpreted as the very "latent aggression" this dissertation examines – powerfully present, seeking an outlet, but not aligned to any articulated political or moral objective.

At the same time as nu metal raged, the so-called "butt rock" bands were laying the groundwork for a more anthemic, everyman strain of rock music. Bands like Creed (whose debut album arrived in 1997) and 3 Doors Down (who broke out in 2000 with "Kryptonite") had a different tone: their songs were less about anger at others and more about personal struggle, yearning, and often vague uplift. Creed's "My Own Prison" and "What's This Life For" channeled spiritual angst; their later hit "Higher" (1999) had quasi-religious, aspirational lyrics ("Can you take me higher, to a place where blind men see?") that resonated widely. Significantly, these bands tended to avoid explicit profanity or shock tactics, which made them more palatable to mainstream radio and a bit older audience. If nu metal was the voice of rebellious youth on the fringes, butt rock was the voice of those same youth

a few years later, perhaps after graduating high school – slightly more mature, looking for meaning or comfort but still drawn to heavy guitar and emotive vocals.

By the late 90s, the mainstream rock radio format ("hard rock" stations) was saturated with either nu metal or butt rock artists. For example, Billboard's rock charts in 2000–2001 feature bands like Staind, Puddle of Mudd, Godsmack, and Linkin Park dominating airplay. These bands collectively projected an image of emotional volatility, toughness, and often, masculine insecurity or resentment. In their music videos and stage shows, one saw frequent use of military or combat imagery. Godsmack's video for "Awake" (2000) featured sequences of the band performing in an industrial environment intercut with footage of shadowy figures engaged in aggression – fitting, since "Awake" later became linked to Navy ads. Even more directly, 3 Doors Down produced a song in 2003 titled "When I'm Gone" and made a special version of the music video paying tribute to U.S. troops deployed overseas, including footage of soldiers and their families; the song became an unofficial anthem for servicemen/women during the early Iraq invasion period. This example is post-9/11, but the band and song came from the same cultural pool as their 90s peers, indicating how seamlessly the butt rock style transitioned into open patriotism.

It is also worth noting the regional aspect: many of these bands hailed from American heartland or southern states (e.g., Puddle of Mudd from Kansas, Disturbed from Chicago, Creed from Florida, 3 Doors Down from Mississippi). They were not products of the coastal liberal cities typically associated with setting cultural tone, but rather of the middle American milieu that also contributes disproportionately to military recruitment. This geographical correlation may be incidental, but it hints at why their themes meshed with a pro-military audience.

To conclude this context: By 2000, American youth culture had in large part normalized aggression as a form of expression. Whether it was the cartoonish violence of professional wrestling (WWF's "Attitude Era" in the late 90s, which heavily featured nu metal entrance themes and attitude) or the cathartic rage of nu metal songs, being angry and loud was "in." The culture valorized a kind of performative anger – think of the popularity of *Jackass* (stunts and pain as entertainment) or the trash-talking attitudes in skate and BMX subculture. While these are distinct from militarism, they cultivate a comfort with risk, violence, and

domination. The youth of the 90s were, in a sense, training emotionally for something – they just didn't know what. And as the next chapter will analyze, the music was both reflecting their state and further reinforcing it, one breakdown riff and one roaring chorus at a time.

Chapter 5

Musical and Lyrical Analysis

Having established the cultural stage, we now turn to the music itself – the primary texts of this study. This chapter provides an analysis of the musical characteristics, lyrical themes, and visual aesthetics of nu metal and butt rock, demonstrating how they embodied the latent aggression and militaristic undercurrents discussed earlier. The chapter is divided into two sections: one focusing on **nu metal** and the other on **butt rock**. While there is overlap and both are part of a continuum of late-90s hard rock, nu metal and butt rock had distinct styles and fan profiles that merit separate examination before synthesizing their sociopolitical commonalities.

5.1 Nu Metal: Sound and Fury as Surrogate Combat

Nu metal (often stylized as nü-metal) emerged in the mid-1990s as a hybrid genre combining elements of heavy metal, hip-hop, and alternative rock. Musically, nu metal is characterized by downtuned, sludgy guitar riffs; a strong emphasis on rhythm and groove (often borrowing syncopation from hip-hop beats); DJs or electronic samples adding layers of sound; and vocal approaches that can shift rapidly from screaming or rapping in verses to melodic singing in choruses. This dynamic, bi-polar structure of many nu metal songs – quiet, tense moments erupting into explosive refrains – mirrors the emotional rollercoaster of anger and release. It is a sonic dramatization of pent-up rage bursting forth. In the context of sublimated aggression, one could analogize the verses to the tension-building phase (troops amassing,

or emotions simmering) and the choruses to the battle (full-on sonic assault).

A textbook example is the song "Break Stuff" by Limp Bizkit (1999). Clocking in at just over 2 minutes, the song is an unrelenting outburst. Musically, it's anchored by a simple, heavily distorted riff that repeats with menacing insistence. The drums have a martial stomp quality – mid-tempo, pounding the toms in a way that one could easily imagine as the sound of soldiers marching or a door being kicked in. Fred Durst's vocal delivery starts in a restrained, spoken-word cadence (almost like someone clenching their teeth trying to stay calm) and builds to all-out screaming by the end. Lyrically, Durst taps directly into the id: "It's just one of those days when you don't wanna wake up / Everything is fucked, everybody sucks". This line, emblematic of nu metal's bluntness, externalizes blame and invites confrontation. The song goes on to threaten violence: "I'll skin your ass raw... I just might break your fucking face tonight." There is no specific enemy named; it's a general adversarial stance against anyone who crosses the narrator. This generalized aggression is key: it makes the song widely applicable to any grievance the listener has, be it against a personal bully, a boss, or an abstract idea of an oppressor. The call to action – essentially encouraging the listener to physically lash out ("give me something to break") – positions the song as a soundtrack for imaginary (or real) destruction. It's not surprising that Durst's performance of this song at Woodstock '99 coincided with actual physical destruction by fans.

Another feature of nu metal lyrics is their frequent use of violent or warlike imagery to describe personal struggles. Korn's songs, for instance, often dealt with Jonathan Davis's personal trauma and mental health, but couched in aggressive metaphors. In "Blind," Korn's breakthrough 1994 single, Davis begins with the shouted question "Are you ready?!" – a line that became iconic in the genre. The phrase can be seen as multi-layered: on the surface, hyping the crowd for the song, but in context it feels like gearing up for a fight or an ordeal. It's the kind of thing a drill instructor might shout, immediately tapping into the energy of preparation for conflict. The song's lyrics, while abstract, hint at feeling disoriented and enraged, culminating in the line "I can see, I can see I'm going blind" – possibly a metaphor for losing oneself in fury. The exact interpretation matters less than the delivery: the song channels the sensation of being on the brink, which again resonates with adrenaline and

combativeness.

Slipknot took the martial aesthetic further: the nine-member band wore matching industrial jumpsuits and individualized grotesque masks, akin to a unit of shock troops or some horror-movie special forces team. They referred to their fans as "maggots," a dehumanizing term reminiscent of military training's harsh language to break individuality. A Slipknot live show in the late 90s/early 2000s was an exercise in discipline within chaos – the members headbanging and jumping in choreographed unison at times, and engaging the crowd in coordinated actions like the "jump the fuck up" moment (in the song "Spit It Out") or the 'Wall of Death' mosh technique where the crowd splits in half and then charges at each other on cue. These are mosh pit behaviors but have a distinct martial arts flavor, almost ritualized combat among fans. The lyrics of Slipknot's best-known anthem "People = Shit" leave nothing to subtlety: the title itself is a blunt force statement of misanthropy and nihilism. As Lee Barron noted, Wilson linked this song to themes of societal waste and negativity. The refrain "People equal shit" repeated over pummeling drums and rapid-fire riffing is the kind of slogan that, in a different context, could be used to indoctrinate soldiers to desensitize them to killing (dehumanizing the enemy as literally being excrement). Slipknot didn't advocate any real violence, but the emotional effect of chanting along to such a line is a form of psyching oneself up to be merciless – a mental state not unlike preparation for battle.

Rage Against the Machine (RATM), though often placed outside nu metal due to their earlier start and overt political content, were hugely influential on nu metal's rap-rock fusion and share the aggressive sonics. Their track "Bulls on Parade" (1996) provides an interesting thematic crossover: it explicitly addresses the military-industrial complex ("Weapons, not food, not homes, not shoes, not need, just feed the war cannibal animal") and features the famous line "They rally round the family, with a pocket full of shells." This double entendre – shell casings and sea shells – critiques how warfare is packaged as family patriotism. RATM's music was militant in both sound and message, urging listeners to see the real wars behind cultural phenomena. Many nu metal fans were also RATM fans, absorbing at least some of this politicization. However, most nu metal eschewed direct political commentary; it was more about a mood of rebellion than a cause. Still, RATM's influence kept a certain

awareness alive. (Interestingly, after 9/11, RATM's song "Killing in the Name" – about police brutality – was one of those the Clear Channel memo advised radio stations to temporarily not play, due to its line "some of those that work forces are the same that burn crosses," which was deemed sensitive; this shows how even rebellious music was seen as too charged in the new warlike patriotic climate.)

Musically, one can also analyze the tonal and harmonic aspects. Nu metal often employed modal guitar riffs with a droning quality – many songs revolve around one or two chords. This static, relentless harmonic structure creates a sensation of being "stuck" in a groove or a fight, rather than moving through a narrative progression (compare to classical war-themed music which might have triumphant key changes; nu metal stays in the trenches harmonically). The use of dissonance, such as tritones (the "Devil's interval") and atonal guitar squeals (made by techniques like DJ-like scratching on strings or effects pedals), added to a sense of chaos and menace. Drummers in nu metal would frequently use double-kick patterns borrowed from thrash metal, imitating machine-gun fire in effect. Bands like Slipknot and Mudvayne had very proficient drummers who would unleash extremely fast percussive barrages. The human body responds to rhythm viscerally – a fast, steady beat can increase heart rate and adrenaline. This is why historically drums have been integral to warfare (marching cadences, battle cries). Nu metal's rhythmic assault can be seen as tapping into that primal response: listeners might not be conscious of it, but their bodies and brains are being conditioned to a fight-or-flight arousal state by the music's structure.

Lyrically, aside from anger at others, nu metal explored feelings of betrayal, loyalty to one's tribe, and vengeance – all concepts familiar in war literature (though in nu metal framed at a personal level). A song like "My Generation" by Limp Bizkit (2000) attempted an anthem for youth, with Durst proudly proclaiming, "If only we could fly, Limp Bizkit style" and then railing against those who look down on his generation. He drops a telling line in the bridge: "Now don't give a fuck and we won't ever give a fuck until you give a fuck about me and my generation.". The aggressive apathy here ("don't give a fuck") flips when he says unless you respect us ("give a fuck about me"), we will remain hostile. It's a combative stance demanding recognition – akin to a restive population warning authority to heed them or face consequences. The music under that line was heavy and staccato, like

musical stomping on the ground to make the point. The song's video even featured the band performing in a transparent box with a rowdy crowd outside and at the end, the box shatters – a symbolic riot breaking containment.

In terms of visual aesthetics, nu metal bands leaned into imagery that can only be described as paramilitary meets horror. Aside from Slipknot's pseudo-uniforms, others had their own twists: Korn's logo and album art often used jagged, militaristic fonts and creepy childlike figures (hinting at trauma); Mudvayne in their early era painted themselves in odd tribal/alien patterns as if to look like futuristic warriors or monsters; Static-X donned industrial outfits and had lead singer Wayne Static's hair spiked up a foot tall, evoking a shock-trooper silhouette. Even Limp Bizkit, who dressed in more casual sports attire, often had militaristic settings in videos – e.g., the video for "Rollin'" (2000) has them dancing on top of the World Trade Center, which in retrospect feels like a show of dominance over the city skyline (though intended as a cool visual, it inadvertently became eerie after 9/11). The common thread in these visuals is intimidation and unity: the band members often looked like a unit, whether by matching outfits or coordinated moves, presenting themselves as a force not to be trifled with.

To summarize nu metal: It provided an aural and lyrical simulation of combativeness. The fans, when engaging with nu metal – whether alone via headphones, or collectively in a concert – were effectively partaking in a ritual of aggression. They could scream along to violent lyrics, engage in physical (mosh) battles with friendly combatants in the pit, and feel part of a tribe that glorified its strength and "otherness" to mainstream society. In doing so, they expended and celebrated aggressive energy that had no real war to go to. As one nu metal fan reflected on a forum (paraphrasing): "When I crank up those songs, it's like I'm invincible, ready to take on anything." This psychological empowerment is exactly what one seeks before going into a real fight – and indeed, as Pieslak found, real soldiers later did the same with these songs.

5.2 Butt Rock: Mainstream Melodies with Martial Undertones

The term "butt rock," as noted, is colloquial and somewhat pejorative, but it points to a cohort of late-90s/early-2000s bands that were less experimental than nu metal yet shared the heavy guitars and emotive male vocals. These bands, often categorized as post-grunge or alternative metal, include Creed, Nickelback, 3 Doors Down, Puddle of Mudd, Staind, Daughtry (in the later 2000s), and others. They tended to have more conventional song structures (verse-chorus-bridge), more melody in the vocals, and lyrics focused on personal issues (relationships, inner struggles, sometimes hinting at social commentary in a broad sense). While nu metal was the music of youthful rebellion, butt rock was the music of young adulthood trying to find direction. However, underlying many of these songs is a sense of earnest yearning that easily dovetailed into themes of heroism, faith, and, in some cases, patriotism.

One key aspect is the vocal style: singers like Scott Stapp (Creed) or Chad Kroeger (Nickelback) sang in a low, throaty, powerful tone that some described as "constipated" (hence one joking origin of "butt rock"). This macho vocal presence conveyed seriousness and strength, even if the lyrics were about vulnerability or pain. The delivery often resembled a preacher or a drill sergeant in its force – consider Creed's hit "One" (1998) where Stapp belts "One, oh one, the only way is one." The lyric calls for unity and is vaguely anthemic ("We are all one" meaning humanity), which took on a quasi-patriotic resonance later on. During the chorus, Mark Tremonti's guitar plays soaring, sustained power chords that give a sense of uplift (major key progressions). It's a formula that can send tingles down the spine – the same physiological reaction national anthems aim to provoke with big major chords and held notes on the word "free" in The Star-Spangled Banner, for example. So even without explicit nationalist lyrics, a song like "One" has the musical hallmarks of a unifying battle cry: strong male voice, call for unity, and triumphant musical resolution.

Nickelback's breakout song "How You Remind Me" (2001) was a relationship song on its face – about the ups and downs of love – but musically it's aggressive mid-tempo rock with a huge chorus. The chorus's opening line "This is how you remind me of what I really

am" can be interpreted beyond a lover addressing another; in performance, Kroeger sings it like an indictment and an affirmation rolled into one. It's not hard to see how listeners could apply that feeling to whatever in their life needed confronting. Notably, that song was omnipresent on radio in late 2001 (it was the number-one song of the entire year on Billboard). In the immediate wake of 9/11, many Americans found solace in familiar pop songs or searched for meaning in them. An article noted that amid the surge of patriotism, some found Nickelback's music "helped the grieving process" – not because the lyrics were about 9/11 at all, but because the emotive catharsis in the music allowed release. In a sense, butt rock's less abrasive approach made it a better vessel for mainstream emotional channelling – including the collective sadness and anger post-9/11.

One butt rock track stands out for explicit martial theming: 3 Doors Down's "Citizen/Soldier" (2007) which was directly written as a tribute to the National Guard, even used in recruitment ads. While this came later, 3 Doors Down's earlier work, like "Kryptonite" (2000) and "When I'm Gone" (2002), paved the way. "Kryptonite" uses superhero imagery ("I'll be your Superman") to talk about loyalty and support – themes that resonate with military ethos of having someone's back. "When I'm Gone" is sung from the perspective of someone about to leave (could be interpreted as a soldier deploying) telling loved ones to carry on and remember him. Indeed, in 2002–03, that song was adopted by many soldiers and their families, and 3 Doors Down even performed at military events with dedication. The music of these songs is mid-tempo, strong backbeat, minor key verses shifting to major key choruses (signifying hope emerging from darkness). It's the musical language of sacrifice and honor – one could easily swap in lyrics about a fallen comrade and the music would fit an elegy.

Godsmack, bridging nu metal and butt rock, warrants mention. Songs like "Awake" and "I Stand Alone" (2002) are rife with warlike feeling. "I Stand Alone," featured in *The Scorpion King* soundtrack, is literally about a warrior's pride (the movie was a sword-and-sandal action flick). Lyrics: "I stand alone, feeling your sting down inside me / I'm not dying for it." Sully Erna's defiant roar of "I stand alone" in the chorus is practically a Spartan yell of defiance. The music video intercuts the band performing with scenes of the film's battles, further cementing the martial association. This song, like "Awake," was embraced

by military audiences; in fact, Erna's justification for their songs in Navy ads was that the music is "energetic" and fits "extreme situations" and that recruits join because they "want to... shoot people! ... or protect the country". It's an unusually candid remark: the vocalist of a major rock band basically acknowledging that their music's energy corresponds to the urge to fight and kill (followed by a quick patriotic addendum). It illustrates that the artists themselves were aware on some level of the connection between their aggressive sound and the mindset of combat.

Staind's ballad "It's Been Awhile" (2001) — though a slow song — illustrates another aspect: the confessional, repentant mode that often comes after aggression. Its mood is regretful, as the singer contemplates past mistakes. One might wonder how this ties in, but it's part of the emotional war cycle: after fury and battle, there is reflection and guilt. The popularity of such songs (which often sat alongside heavier tracks on the same albums) gave a full spectrum of quasi-military emotional journey: the adrenaline of fight (heavy singles) and the pathos of loss (power ballads). In war films, you often have the intense battle scenes and then the quiet aftermath where soldiers mourn – similarly, a butt rock album might have its share of fist-pumping rockers and a couple of acoustic or slower tunes about pain and apology. This served to humanize the anger, making it even more palatable to a broad audience because it wasn't relentless; it had "heart." That heart, in a nationalistic context, could be interpreted as the noble suffering of a warrior soul.

Visually, butt rock bands were less theatrical than nu metal. They often dressed in ordinary clothes (jeans, leather jackets, etc.), perhaps to seem relatable. Nickelback famously looked like a bunch of regular Canadian guys, and their bland image was part of why critics sneered, but also why millions found them accessible. This "average Joe" presentation meant that when they sang about fighting or standing strong, fans could imagine themselves in those shoes – not as masked demons on stage, but as themselves with a bit more courage and amplification. This everyman quality was key to butt rock's mainstream success and later its co-option for patriotic purposes. Post-9/11, when Americans hailed the heroism of "ordinary" firefighters, police, and soldiers, the music that best captured the spirit was not going to be nu metal with its freaky costumes; it was going to be these earnest, slightly gritty but fundamentally mainstream voices.

The content of butt rock lyrics often revolved around themes of redemption, faith (Creed had overt Christian undertones), overcoming hardship, and devotion. All of these can easily be framed in militaristic narratives: redemption through service, faith in a higher cause, overcoming the hardship of war, devotion to comrades or country. Indeed, after 9/11, Creed performed in the 2002 Super Bowl halftime show a medley that included "My Sacrifice," complete with an on-field display of flag imagery and a release of white doves. The performance was widely remarked as dripping with patriotism (perhaps excessively so, it was criticized as well). The song "My Sacrifice" wasn't written about war specifically, but lines like "I've seen the light, in your eyes... My sacrifice" took on new meaning in that context of national sacrifice. The capacity of these songs to be repurposed is evidence of their broad-strokes emotional writing – they were almost designed as blank checks of feeling that could be cashed in various situations.

In conclusion, butt rock offered a more melodic, widely acceptable face of the same latent aggression and desire for meaning that nu metal channeled. If nu metal was the raw recruit's angsty roar, butt rock was the veteran's weathered shout – both voices in the same army of pop culture, fulfilling slightly different roles. Together, they dominated rock radio at the turn of the century, ensuring that if an American tuned in, they were likely hearing either rage, resolve, or some mixture of both set to distorted guitars.

From the analyses of both nu metal and butt rock, we see a spectrum of musical expression that covers aggression, solidarity, mourning, and triumph. These are precisely the emotional components of a war narrative. It is as if, in the absence of a real war to live through in the 90s, the culture generated its own internal war in the musical arena – complete with its rallying cries, its battles (mosh pits), its casualties (the emotional toll expressed in lyrics), and its victories (the cathartic climaxes of songs). The next chapter will explore how these musical experiences fed into the sociopolitical realm – how listeners and society internalized or utilized these outlets, and what implications that had as America moved into the post-9/11 period.

Chapter 6

Sociopolitical Implications

The rise of nu metal and butt rock in the 1990s was not just a musical shift; it was also a sociopolitical phenomenon in subtle ways. While few would claim these genres directly drove political change or policy, they contributed to shaping the attitudes, values, and emotional preparedness of a generation that would soon face profound national challenges. This chapter discusses the sociopolitical implications of the trends we've analyzed, examining how these musical movements both reflected social currents and potentially influenced them. Key areas of focus include: the psychological impact on their audience (and overlap with military demographics), the interplay with media and political discourse (particularly the culture wars and debates on violent entertainment), and how these genres' prominence set the stage for the post-9/11 public response.

Channeling Aggression: Catharsis or Conditioning?

One immediate implication of aggressive music prevalence is the question of whether it served as a healthy outlet or a conditioning tool for further aggression. This debate ties into longstanding arguments about violent media. In the 90s, as discussed, events like the Columbine shooting led to Senate hearings and public forums on the influence of music. Figures like Senator Joseph Lieberman lambasted "shock rock" and "marijuana music" as corrupting youth. Nu metal often got lumped into these critiques despite its differences from goth or industrial music. For example, in 2000, the *Parents Television Council* released a

report criticizing MTV's content, citing Limp Bizkit's videos as glorifying destruction and rage to impressionable viewers.

From a sociopolitical view, these criticisms were part of a larger narrative that youth culture was out of control and needed moral guidance – a narrative often championed by conservative politicians. Ironically, some of the same conservative currents that decried the music's profanity and anger would later embrace the patriotic fervor that those same angry youths exhibited when war came. In essence, the establishment was wary of uncontrolled aggression in youth when it was aimless or anti-authority (as in nu metal's rebellion), but the apparatus of state and society was quick to redirect that aggression toward sanctioned ends (military enlistment, patriotic unity) when context shifted.

It raises the question: did nu metal and butt rock listeners become more disposed to militaristic action or acceptance of violence as a solution? The answer likely varies individually. However, anecdotally, many military members in the 2000s were fans of these genres – a correlation noted even in casual forums and certainly exploited by recruiters who, for example, gave out free compilation CDs of heavy rock to potential recruits at outreach events. Researchers have looked at pre-9/11 military recruits (the late 90s cohort) and found a cultural profile that included enjoyment of high-adrenaline music, extreme sports, and so forth – all indicative of a certain thrill-seeking and aggression-positive mindset. It's plausible that heavy music didn't create these traits but attracted people who had them, and then reinforced them. Thus the music scene and the propensity to join the armed forces might have been co-occuring outcomes of an underlying personality trend in a segment of youth (particularly young men): the "warrior" personality in waiting.

Political psychology would ask: did the constant engagement with themes of rage and power desensitize fans to violence or authoritarian attitudes? Catherine Hoad's analysis suggests that nu metal's audience found a renewal of "hegemonic masculinity" and conservative politics post-9/11. In plain terms, the white male angst that nu metal voiced slid into a more traditionally authoritarian, nationalist stance when the nation was attacked. This is supported by the observation that many former nu metal fans became supporters of the War on Terror, at least initially. The overlap between, say, fans of Metallica/Pantera (earlier heavy bands adored by soldiers) and those who enthusiastically displayed "These Colors

Don't Run" decals on their trucks after 9/11 was considerable in anecdotal experience.

Sociologically, one can say nu metal/butt rock provided a **tribal identity** to youths that valued strength and aggression. That identity, in peacetime, sometimes manifested in anti-social ways (fights at concerts, unruly behavior, local news panics about mosh pit injuries, etc.). But once a legitimate external enemy was provided (the terrorists), that identity had an outlet in sanctioned social form – protecting the tribe (the nation) with actual violence (military force). The music, in effect, helped keep the warrior archetype alive in a generation that might otherwise have had no context to develop it.

On the other hand, one must also consider whether the presence of these musical outlets may have prevented worse outcomes domestically during the 90s. If we subscribe to a catharsis theory, maybe the availability of aggressive music and subculture averted some violent crimes or self-destruction by giving angry youth a sense of belonging and a way to vent. For instance, numerous fans have claimed that bands like Korn or Linkin Park (a later wave bridging nu metal and emo) saved their lives by giving them an emotional outlet instead of them resorting to real-life violence or suicide. In a social stability sense, having a controlled burn of societal anger in art can be beneficial. The 90s did see high-profile violent incidents (Columbine, etc.), but the fact that they were shocking and not routine suggests youth violence was not ubiquitous. Perhaps vicarious aggression in music did play a small mitigating role.

From a community perspective, the fan scenes around these genres had their own norms and support networks. Mosh pit etiquette, for example, often emphasized that if someone falls, others pick them up – a camaraderie and code, arguably a positive social behavior (even if outsiders just see a chaotic fight). Fans protected each other in pits and at concerts, building informal bonds. This parallels how soldiers form brotherhoods in training exercises even before war. In the microcosm of a rock show, fans learned teamwork under "combat conditions" (the roughness of the crowd). This camaraderie might have predisposed some to the comradery they later found in military units.

None of this implies a direct pipeline from Ozzfest to the Army, but culturally, one can see the synergy. Indeed, the U.S. military in the 2000s incorporated heavy music in various ways: not only the aforementioned recruiting ads but also using bands for morale (e.g., in

2003, the Navy invited Drowning Pool to Guantanamo Bay, fully aware that "Bodies" had been used on detainees, a bizarre full-circle moment where the troops celebrated a song partly notorious for its use in torture). When asked, military officials gave rationales such as: "This is the music they like; it pumps them up" – a pragmatic acknowledgment that this cultural product fit their needs. This reveals that by the 2000s, any stigma that aggressive rock was anti-authority had faded in the face of its utility for nationalistic ends. The sociopolitical implication is that the boundary between rebellious culture and patriotic culture is quite thin, once context changes. The establishment co-opted what was once condemned.

Cultural War and Politics

During the late 90s, America was engrossed in a "culture war" in political discourse (e.g., battles over Clinton's scandals, gay rights, etc.). Music came into this in various ways. Rap music's violence and misogyny were often a target (and nu metal, which sometimes used hip-hop elements and similarly coarse language, got secondary flak). These debates did not obviously link to militarism, but they revealed a conservative longing for "traditional" virtues and an aggressive pushback against art seen as degenerate. Interestingly, nu metal's audience sometimes aligned with conservative attitudes on some issues even as the music was crude. For example, many nu metal songs spat on the idea of political correctness and embraced a kind of unfiltered machismo – which resonated with conservative critics of 90s liberalism. It's telling that while Tipper Gore's PMRC targeted metal in the 80s, by the late 90s you saw some conservative commentators almost empathizing with the angry white youth who felt emasculated by a changing society (one recalls Bob Dole campaigning in 1996 partly on criticizing entertainment but also speaking to "angry white males" who felt left behind).

One sociopolitical angle is how nu metal's discontents dovetailed with the early seeds of populist sentiment. Songs raged against an opaque "system" or bullies – Rage Against the Machine was explicitly left-wing, but many fans interpreted their anti-authority stance in a more general way (some even twisted it into anti-government in a right-wing sense, which the band decried). Likewise, when Limp Bizkit screamed "I'm so sick of the tension, sick

of the hunger," fans could fill in their own villain – maybe the government, maybe their boss, maybe social elites. There's a line from a 2010s retrospective that called nu metal "the soundtrack of the disaffected working-class white youth of the late 90s." Those youths, a decade or two later, became a key demographic with strong political impact (e.g., part of the base for Trump's populism in 2016). It's speculative, but one could argue that the nu metal moment kept alive a form of grievance that later got channeled politically. The militaristic desire aspect intersects here because populist movements often carry a strong undercurrent of militarism (toughness, law and order, etc.). The aggressive energy that headbangers spent in the 90s pits didn't disappear; as they aged, some found new outlets in politics or paramilitary subcultures.

In terms of media representation, by the year 2000, the moral panic around heavy music had subsided a bit compared to the mid-90s. Possibly the media got bored or moved on to blaming video games more. This meant that by 2001, heavy rock was not under heavy fire; in fact, after 9/11, some media voices even suggested that angry music might not be what the public wanted. There was a Newsweek piece, for instance, speculating that the era of angry shock entertainment was over, as people craved comfort. Indeed, the early months after 9/11 saw a resurgence of older soft songs on radio and a dip for some aggressive genres. But that was short-lived. Soon, as war started, the anger came roaring back, now pointed outward. The sociopolitical dynamic in the early War on Terror was interesting: on one hand, a call for unity and seriousness (which might have implied less tolerance for juvenile angry music), but on the other, a huge amount of actual aggression to be unleashed (which found complement in that very music). The record sales downturn for nu/rap metal that Wikipedia notes can be interpreted as a shift in popular taste, but the music didn't disappear; it just evolved (nu metal morphed into metalcore, post-grunge butt rock remained strong and even integrated more open pro-military themes).

A side implication: the integration of heavy music into military culture potentially fosters an environment where war and conflict are viewed through a hyper-masculine, action-movie lens. Anthropologists studying military training note that soldiers often use music and language to create an "othering" of the enemy and to pump up aggression. The use of nu metal tracks in actual combat zones (like reports of tanks blasting Metallica at Fallujah, or inter-

rogators using rock at loud volumes on detainees) suggests that the entertainment product became part of the arsenal of war – literally weaponized in some cases. This blurring of pop culture and military tactic is militainment incarnate. It implies a certain arrogance of power: American soldiers could play their cultural noise as a psychological weapon, symbolically asserting Western pop culture dominance while fighting. It's a far cry from "Ride of the Valkyries" in *Apocalypse Now*, but conceptually related – using music to amplify intimidation.

From a global sociopolitical perspective, one might also ask how the popularity of these aggressive American music genres affected perceptions abroad. In the late 90s, U.S. pop culture was ubiquitous globally. Nu metal bands toured Europe, Asia, etc., and youth overseas listened too. Some commentators (e.g., Scott Wilson in *Great Satan's Rage*) saw nu metal as an American negative export as well – projecting American youth's disillusionment worldwide. After 9/11, anti-American extremists sometimes pointed to U.S. cultural decadence and aggression in media as signs of a corrupt society. It's conceivable that images of limp bizkit inciting a 100,000-strong crowd to "break stuff" might have fed stereotypes of Americans as chaotic or violent. Of course, these are minor compared to policy grievances, but culture can feed narratives.

Internally, however, by the early 2000s, the narrative had been flipped to unity and patriotism. Many nu metal musicians themselves adapted: some, like System of a Down, went anti-war and were ostracized by some (their 2005 song "B.Y.O.B." criticized the Iraq War – but System had always been more left-wing political outliers in the scene). Others laid low or shifted content (Metal bands like Slayer and Megadeth, known for war-themed songs, continued and saw their fanbase split on political lines). The butt rockers often leaned pro-troop: e.g., Aaron Lewis of Staind in the late 2000s started doing country-influenced songs praising America's heartland.

So one effect: the post-9/11 era revealed a fault line – those who would repurpose their aggression toward external enemies vs. those who questioned authority and conflict. The mainstream trend in rock generally followed the former in the immediate years: a wave of "post-grunge patriotism," like the band Madison Rising (explicitly pro-America rock) emerging, and many butt rock artists playing at military bases. The rebellious edge was

somewhat domesticated in face of national crisis.

Yet, sociopolitically, this had a double edge. While at first it unified, the long war and its controversies eventually made some fans cynical. By 2006-2007, when the Iraq War grew unpopular, one sees less overt use of heavy music in rah-rah contexts (recruiting ads shifted tone). There's a theory to pose: perhaps the heavy music that fired up young men to fight also contributed to a certain disillusionment when the reality of war didn't match the glorification (e.g., veterans coming back, listening to the same songs now laced with more bitter meaning). But that's beyond the 90s scope mostly.

One concrete sociopolitical impact: recruitment. Military enlistment did see a spike after 9/11 spontaneously. But maintaining recruitment through the mid-2000s required targeted strategies. The use of music and lifestyle targeting (like sponsoring Ozzfest or creating video game-like ads with rock soundtracks) was documented. This indicates that the Pentagon recognized the value of a generation raised on aggressive tunes – not shying away from it, but harnessing it. Over time, as war weariness grew, the military sometimes tempered the aggression in outward marketing (emphasizing humanitarian aspects or technical skills). However, units in combat continued to use music internally.

The interplay of these musical cultures with gender politics is also notable. These genres were male-dominated in artists and audience, and often criticized for misogyny (Woodstock '99's sexual assaults hammered that point). Some sociologists might argue that the militaristic desire we speak of was largely a masculine phenomenon – tied to a crisis or reassertion of white male identity. That has broader sociopolitical implications: when men, especially white men, feel emasculated or restless, society often sees either reactive violence or a push for war (the idea of war as a stage for proving manhood). The 90s was a decade of increasing gender equality in many realms, which some men perceived as a loss of their traditional role; aggressive music may have been, for some, a coping mechanism or a statement of retained virility (with its hypermasculine posturing). Come 2001, the war gave men (and women, but the narrative often centered on men) a chance to step into a heroic warrior role again. The embrace of soldier as hero in the 2000s can be seen in part as society accommodating that masculine narrative – and the popularity of rock songs about being strong and holding on fed into it.

To sum up, the sociopolitical implications of nu metal and butt rock's rise are multi-faceted: - They maintained a cultural environment where aggression was an acceptable, even celebrated component of identity, easing the population's pivot to war mode when needed. - They reflected and possibly exacerbated a sense of disillusionment and resentment among parts of the youth, which had political consequences in the long run. - They were subsumed into nationalistic expression after 9/11, demonstrating how flexible cultural symbols can be – mosh pit rebels one year, de facto patriotic hype men the next. - They spotlighted gender and class undercurrents, revealing a demographic's psyche that policymakers might ignore at their peril (these "nü metal kids" are today's middle-aged voters in many swing states).

In the next chapter, we'll explore the specific transition in the wake of 9/11 – how these genres and their cultural freight were recontextualized in the new era, providing concrete examples of what we've touched on in implication here.

Chapter 7

Post-9/11 Recontextualization

September 11, 2001, was a rupture point in recent American history, and its effects rippled through every aspect of culture – music included. In this chapter, we examine how the nu metal and butt rock phenomena were recontextualized in the years following 9/11. We look at immediate reactions (such as changes in media programming and artist responses), the role these genres played during the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, and how their popularity and cultural meaning evolved as the initial war fever gave way to a more complex reality. This recontextualization is where the latent militaristic undercurrents discussed throughout this dissertation became explicit in some cases, and where the legacy of 90s aggressive music took on new life or, alternately, faded as new trends emerged.

The Immediate Aftermath: Censorship and Patriotism

In the days after 9/11, there was a brief quasi-censure of anything that might be seen as too aggressive or insensitive. The most cited example is the Clear Channel memorandum – a list of songs that radio programmers were advised (not officially ordered, but it was taken as guidance) to remove or pause from playlists due to lyrical content that could be upsetting after the attacks. On that list were multiple hard rock/nu metal tracks: notably, bodies by Drowning Pool (for obvious reasons – "let the bodies hit the floor" was too on-the-nose); Chop Suey by System of a Down (line "self-righteous suicide" and chaotic feel); and others like "Boom" by P.O.D., "Down With the Sickness" by Disturbed, etc. Even Metallica's

"Seek & Destroy" and "Enter Sandman" made the list. This reactive move shows that at first the gatekeepers worried the public had no stomach for violent-tinged entertainment in the face of real violence.

Simultaneously, there was a swell of overt patriotism in music. Country artists released flag-waving songs (e.g., Toby Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue" became infamous), but rock had its share. As mentioned earlier, Creed's performances took on patriotic trappings, and numerous rock bands played at benefit concerts or patriotic events (for instance, in October 2001, there was "United We Stand: What More Can I Give" – a huge concert in Washington with diverse artists including Creed, who performed "My Sacrifice" with an honor guard of police and firefighters on stage).

For nu metal bands that were more anti-establishment (Rage Against the Machine, System of a Down), the period was tricky. RATM had already broken up in 2000, but their music was temporarily blacklisted from some radio due to anti-authority messages that didn't fit the unity mood. System of a Down, whose members are of Armenian descent and outspoken about genocide and U.S. foreign policy, released their album *Toxicity* on 9/4/2001, just a week before 9/11. It shot to number 1, ironically, the very week of the attacks. Their single "Chop Suey!" was climbing charts but then got pulled from many stations (Clear Channel list). Despite that, *Toxicity* still became one of the defining rock albums of that period and by early 2002 System of a Down was voicing opposition to the coming Iraq War. At their concerts, they spoke out and got some backlash; however, interestingly, many nu metal fans did not turn against them – a sign that not everyone was simply following patriotic fervor. There remained pockets of skepticism. But those voices were relatively subdued until later.

For the mainstream of butt rock, post-9/11 was an opportunity to align with the national mood. Nickelback's popularity soared in late 2001 with "How You Remind Me," which in no way was about 9/11, but some listeners informally attached emotional meaning to it as background of their lives then. 3 Doors Down, whose song "Duck and Run" (with implicitly militant language in just the title) was out earlier in 2001, found that track picking up spins on rock radio with some hearing it as defiance (though it was written pre-9/11, lines like "this world can't bring me down" resonated anew). By 2002, as the Afghanistan War continued, 3 Doors Down released "When I'm Gone," which explicitly in live shows they

dedicated to troops; the music video's special version with soldiers, as mentioned, hammered the connection home. The song became a number 1 rock hit and an anthem for deploying soldiers missing their families.

Another interesting moment: in 2002, MTV (the same channel that had elevated nu metal in TRL days) put on a program called "MTV 20: Live and Almost Legal" for their 20th anniversary, which had multi-artist performances, including a surprising duet: Staind's Aaron Lewis performing an acoustic "Outside" with Fred Durst of Limp Bizkit showing up as a guest. But in that performance, Durst ad-libbed lines like "I'm feeling those lighters, the American flag," etc., appealing to patriotism (the concert was close to 9/11 anniversary). It was a bizarre sight for those who knew Durst as the guy who said "fuck everything" – here he was draping himself in the flag to get a crowd cheer. It exemplified how figures of the 90s rebellion were now trying to fit into the patriotic wave (sincerely or cynically). Notably, Limp Bizkit's own relevance waned soon after – their 2003 album *Results May Vary* sold poorly, which might suggest that their particular brand of adolescent angst didn't translate into the post-9/11 era's preferences. The Hoad article noted Limp Bizkit became widely reviled and seen as dated by the early 2000s, partly because their anger was seen as immature or misdirected in a time when real issues (terror, war) were at hand.

Thus, one recontextualization: nu metal as a fad receded, some of its audience moving on. Meanwhile, butt rock – being more adaptable – persisted and even thrived by absorbing the new themes. That transitional period (2001-2003) saw, for example, the emergence of Evanescence (female-fronted goth-tinged rock which was emotional but less overtly angry, topping charts in 2003) and Linkin Park's evolution (their 2003 album *Meteora* had more introspective tracks and enormous success). These indicated that the dominant rock mood was shifting slightly from outward rage to inward struggle/pain articulation, perhaps reflecting that after the initial war drums, the reality of drawn-out conflict was sinking in. People needed catharsis for grief and uncertainty too, not just adrenaline to fight.

However, on the war front lines, heavy music was more entrenched than ever. The 2003 Iraq invasion saw numerous press stories about soldiers hyping up to metal (e.g., Marines in tanks blasting *Let the Bodies Hit the Floor*, which many embedded journalists found noteworthy). The military hadn't publicly condoned such specific songs (they didn't exactly put

Drowning Pool in recruiting commercials – they used safer songs like Godsmack's instrumentals or generic rock background), but they didn't stop it either. An infamous anecdote: in Baghdad 2004, some PsyOps units were reported to have used Metallica and AC/DC songs to coerce insurgents out of hiding or to unnerve them during standoffs. It's a far cry from Vietnam-era troops listening to Jimi Hendrix in downtime; here music was directly integrated as a weapon/tool. That's how normalized the association of heavy music with conflict had become.

At home, support for war was high early on but began to erode by 2004-05 as insurgency grew. One saw subtle changes in music popularity: patriotic country songs peaked in 2002-03 then declined; by 2004, more songs critical of war or at least weary of it emerged (Green Day's "American Idiot" in 2004 captured a youth backlash to Bush-era militarism; though not nu metal or butt rock, it spoke to a broad alternative audience). But on rock radio, butt rock still reigned – only their themes started to shy from explicit war references as public opinion split. The band Live (a 90s alt-rock band) put out "Overcome" in late 2001 and it was used heavily in media as a 9/11 tribute (again showing how pre-existing songs got recontextualized; "Overcome" was about personal issues, but lines like "the wounds are coming open" suited news montages of Ground Zero). By 2005, one of the big rock hits was "BYOB" by System of a Down – an anti-Iraq War protest song disguised in a thrashy, party-sounding track. Interestingly, it hit 1 on the rock chart, indicating an appetite by then for critical voices – something that would have been unthinkable on mainstream rock radio in late 2001. System of a Down asked in the song, "Why do they always send the poor?" referring to soldiers, and directly called out a "fascist nation". That a song with such lyrics got airplay suggests the recontextualization had come full circle: the war had brought nu metal's political edge to the forefront where originally it was latent.

As nu metal faded, a lot of its fans either moved to metalcore (an underground, more extreme scene) or to more mainstream hard rock forms. Newer bands like Breaking Benjamin, Three Days Grace (the second wave of butt rock mid-2000s) took up the mantle, singing generally about personal angst but in a post-9/11 world, their music videos often had dark warlike aesthetics (Breaking Benjamin's "Diary of Jane" video in 2006 features imagery of a solemn burial, for instance, not war per se but that funereal vibe of a nation acquainted

with casualties).

Meanwhile, recruitment commercials post-2003 sometimes toned down rock, interestingly. The Army's "Army Strong" campaign in 2006 had a bombastic orchestral score rather than rock. Perhaps a recognition that a broader pool was needed beyond just rock fans, or that tying too closely to a subculture might alienate others. Or maybe as casualties grew, the tone had to be less gung-ho. Regardless, inside the military, rock and metal remained popular, a shared culture among troops that spanned rank and unit.

One more recontextualization aspect: the image of rock musicians. In World War II or Vietnam eras, mainstream American society often saw popular musicians (swing or hippie rock, respectively) as separate from or even opposed to martial values. But in the 2000s, having butt rockers play at military events blurred that divide. It's like the convergence of warrior and entertainer classes. Ted Nugent, a rocker from an older era, became an outspoken pro-military figure, doing USO tours and such. Younger artists largely kept politics out overtly unless they were one extreme or another (System on left, perhaps a band like Avenged Sevenfold on the right, with their later songs like "Critical Acclaim" praising troops). The war on terror era saw a breakdown of the old stereotype that rock was anti-war – now you had rock in service of war (and some rock against war too, but not dominating radio).

By late 2000s, nu metal was mostly considered passé; butt rock evolved into "active rock" format which continued strong. The cultural aggression that had been a hallmark of 90s youth music found new, more polished outlets – e.g., the rise of "energy drink" culture (mixed martial arts, etc., often accompanied by heavy music). Some original fans aged into different tastes or responsibilities, but the impression remains: when 9/11 happened, a large portion of the American youth populace was, strangely, psychologically primed for a fight. They had spent a decade reveling in violent fantasies and rage via music, and now reality presented something to channel that into.

Reflecting on the hypothesis of this dissertation: indeed, nu metal and butt rock can be seen as surrogate outlets that foreshadowed the post-9/11 mood. The foreshadowing is evident in how seamlessly many of those songs and artists transitioned to war contexts. It's not that Fred Durst or others predicted 9/11 specifically, but the general emotional

atmosphere they cultivated was one that could be, and was, redirected to martial purpose. The "latent cultural aggression" became patent aggression.

However, foreshadowing also implies perhaps a warning unheeded: the chaos of Woodstock '99 or the nihilism of Slipknot's message might have been telling us that a segment of society felt disillusioned and only alive when engaged in aggression. If the 90s had ended differently (say, no 9/11), might that aggression have turned inward (more domestic terrorism or unrest)? We can't know, but history provided an outward target, which can be seen as a unifying distraction or a vent. Some commentators after 9/11 did note that the country seemed to gain a sense of purpose that had been lacking; even some nu metal artists found a kind of redemption by aligning with something larger than themselves (e.g., Drowning Pool's members, whose song inadvertently became a troop anthem, embraced their role entertaining troops until the lead singer's death in 2002; they even re-recorded "Bodies" as a clean version for WWE tribute to troops, etc.).

As the War on Terror dragged, public sentiment darkened. By the mid-2010s, a nostalgic revival of nu metal ironically occurred among some who grew up on it ("nü nostalgia"), but now often tinged with either irony or a different perspective. Today, one can see the 90s nu metal craze as a curious prelude to 21st-century struggles – the last roar of an analog-era youth that then had to face very real digital-age conflicts.

In conclusion, the post-9/11 recontextualization confirms the dissertation's thesis strongly: those musical movements did emerge as surrogate outlets for martial impulses – and when real war arrived, they were intimately entwined with the national mood and mobilization, serving both as soundtracks and ideological bridges. They had prepared the soil, so to speak, and once the seed of war was planted, it grew fast, fed by the energy that had been cultivated in that music.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

In the final analysis, the trajectory of nu metal and butt rock from the mid-1990s into the early 2000s reveals a compelling narrative about American culture's relationship with aggression, war, and collective catharsis. What began as a musical outlet for a generation's diffuse anger and identity struggles ultimately became, in part, a conduit for the very martial spirit that would galvanize the nation after an unforeseen crisis.

This dissertation set out to demonstrate that these ostensibly apolitical or personally-directed musical trends were in fact deeply entwined with latent cultural forces – specifically, a desire for conflict and heroism left unfulfilled by the Gulf War's abrupt end. Through an interdisciplinary lens, we have seen how: - **Cultural Studies and Sociology:** Nu metal and butt rock reflected anxieties around masculinity, power, and belonging in 90s America. They gave voice to those who felt disempowered or restless in a time of peace and prosperity, channeling personal grievances into sonic fury. As a subculture, they fostered a paramilitary sense of unity (mosh pit camaraderie, band "uniforms," lyrical us-vs-them framing) that prefigured the patriotic unity after 9/11. - **Musicology:** The musical structures of these genres – heavy riffs, martial rhythms, explosive dynamics – were inherently suited to mirroring and inducing a fight-or-flight adrenaline response. They served as "practice" for the physiology of combat in a metaphorical sense. The fact that American soldiers later literally used these songs in combat situations underscores the continuity between the emotional experience of a nu metal concert and the psyche needed for real battle. - **Media Studies:** The marketing and media portrayal of these genres shifted from depicting them as dangerous

outsider music in the late 90s to embracing them as part of mainstream patriotic culture by the early 2000s. This shift illustrates the fluidity of cultural symbols – one minute Fred Durst is the bad influence blamed for youth violence; the next, he's leading an arena in a cheer that implicitly supports the national cause. Entertainment and news media both contributed to and reacted to this recontextualization. - **Political Psychology:** Perhaps most crucially, the psychological impact on the audience prepared a segment of the population to accept and even welcome the call to arms that came after 9/11. The years of "letting out the negative energy" via music may have prevented some destructive behaviors during the 90s, but when a socially sanctioned target (terrorists) appeared, that pent-up aggression could be morally justified and externalized. The Authoritarian Personality tendencies – valorization of strength, identification with aggressive leaders – found fertile ground among some fans, which post-9/11 politics capitalized on in rallying support for war (e.g., the framing of the War on Terror in stark good vs evil terms resonated with the simplicity of many nu metal lyrics which cast the world in friend vs enemy binaries).

The argument that nu metal and butt rock emerged as surrogate outlets for unresolved martial impulses is strongly supported by the patterns observed. The Persian Gulf War was indeed a quick victory that lacked the narrative arc of a grand conflict; Americans had no "We won the Great War" moment comparable to WWII's end – they had a win, but an anticlimax, as Saddam remained and a sense of "unfinished business" lingered in political memory. In the 90s, with no new external war to focus on, one can argue Americans turned inward, at times on each other (the culture wars, rising political polarization, incidents of home-grown terrorism). The youth, inheriting a world supposedly at "the end of history," created their own battles in culture – on the fields of Lollapalooza and Ozzfest, in the pages of music magazines debating authenticity, in the emergence of extreme sports and violent video games as substitutions for dangerous adventure.

These musical movements absolutely foreshadowed the post-9/11 national mood. The foreshadowing was not in specific geopolitical prediction, but in emotional tenor. After 9/11, the country went through stages: shock, unity, wrath, pride, fatigue, and division. The early stages – unity and wrath – were where the imprint of late-90s rock culture was most evident. The near seamless appropriation of 90s anthems into wartime anthems attests

to that. When President George W. Bush spoke of rallying the nation to "smoke out" the enemies and cautioned "you're either with us or with the terrorists," one hears an echo of the nu metal blunt-force dichotomy (not unlike a lyric such as "you better get some better beats and uh, get some better rhymes" which is a Durst line basically saying step up or shut up – the attitude of uncompromising confrontation). The national mood allowed little room for subtlety in late 2001-2002, much as nu metal had little room for subtlety.

As the nation mobilized for two wars, the aggressive music was there as fuel and as mirror. But what about the later stages – fatigue and division? By the mid to late 2000s, the initial militaristic euphoria had given way to debates, dissent, and a more somber outlook as casualties mounted and victory remained elusive. Interestingly, that period saw the mainstreaming of more emo and introspective rock (the rise of Fall Out Boy, My Chemical Romance, etc.), a softer ethos where vulnerability was emphasized over chest-thumping. It's as if once the real war was in motion and its grim realities evident, the cultural need shifted – from hyping war to coping with its strain. This could be a subject for another study, but it reinforces that the relationship between music and societal mood is dynamic and cyclical.

The interdisciplinary approach in this dissertation allowed us to connect dots that a single-discipline analysis might miss. We saw that scholarly frameworks exist to interpret these trends – Wilson's concept of supercapitalism linking war, waste, and music, Stahl's notion of militainment, Hoad's insights on masculinity crises – and we situated nu metal and butt rock right at the intersection of those ideas. In doing so, we contribute to the understanding of "metal studies" and popular music in general by highlighting that popular genres can serve as early warning signs or preparatory grounds for societal shifts. What youth passionately scream in their music in one decade, they may end up enacting or supporting in the next, given the right circumstances.

It is important, however, to acknowledge complexity. Not every fan of these genres became a war hawk; not every aspect of nu metal was militaristic (some of it was deeply personal – e.g., Korn's songs about child abuse perhaps channeled aggression for therapeutic reasons unrelated to war). Culture is multifaceted, and individuals interpret songs differently. There were surely pacifist Korn fans and combative folk music fans. We must guard against too deterministic a reading. Nonetheless, the broad patterns we traced are real and significant

in aggregate.

Additionally, one might ask: if nu metal and butt rock were surrogates for war impulses, what happens when the surrogates are replaced by the real thing? As noted, nu metal faded as actual war rose – perhaps indicating that the surrogate was no longer needed in the same form. The attention of the public (and youth) shifted to real events, and cultural expressions adjusted accordingly. It suggests that culture can indeed act as a pressure valve; but once the pressure is vented in reality, the cultural form changes shape.

The legacy of this era of music, as we stand today, is mixed. On one hand, it is sometimes derided in musical terms (critics often look down on nu metal/butt rock as low-brow); on the other, its influence is undeniable on those who grew up with it, many of whom populate the armed forces, public services, and various walks of life. Understanding that legacy in relation to American militarism gives it a new gravity beyond just nostalgia for songs of one's youth. It situates those songs as part of a continuum in American cultural history – akin to how folk songs reflected Civil War sentiments or swing music accompanied WWII, nu metal and butt rock were the soundtrack of the late Pax Americana and its abrupt end.

In closing, this dissertation demonstrates the value of examining popular culture not as trivial entertainment but as a repository and engine of deeper social currents. The rise of angry, martial-sounding music in a time of official peace tells us that beneath the surface of 90s triumphalism lay unresolved tensions. Those tensions found expression in art before finding release in policy and action. This pattern is not unique to this era – one could argue parallels in other empires or periods – but witnessing it in our contemporary context provides insight into how future latent impulses might also be lurking in today's culture, awaiting catalysis by events.

To tie it back to a human level: recall the young man at Woodstock '99, throwing debris in fire, screaming lyrics about breaking stuff – feeling part of something powerful and destructive. Two years later, he might have been a Marine in Kandahar, throwing grenades, shouting battle cries, part of something powerful and destructive on a much larger scale. Did he reflect on the similarity of the adrenaline rush, on whether one was a substitute for the other? Perhaps not consciously. But culturally, the line from one to the other is direct enough to trace.

Thus, the argument that nu metal and butt rock acted as surrogate outlets for martial impulses holds strong. They were, in effect, a prelude to war – a noisy, chaotic rehearsal in the cultural imagination for the very real dramas to come. And in that lies both a caution and a profound understanding: that even in peace, the seeds of war's emotions grow, often watered by the arts, and the harvest can be sudden and all too real.

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