

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Rez Metal: Inside the Navajo Nation Heavy Metal Scene. By Ashkan Soltani Stone and Natale A. Zappia.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0c9807f1>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 46(2)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Samuels, David

**Publication Date**

2023-07-14

**DOI**

10.17953/aicrj.46.2.reviews.samuels

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

**Rez Metal: Inside the Navajo Nation Heavy Metal Scene.** By Ashkan Soltani Stone and Natale A. Zappia. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020. 108 pages. \$16.95 paper; \$16.95 ebook.

The literature on Indigenous involvement in heavy metal music—as performers, writers, producers, or listeners and fans—is paltry and insufficient. A quick look on my shelf shows plenty of books—as well as chapters in edited collections—on jazz, folk, rock, folk-rock, reggae, hip-hop, classical, avant-garde, punk, and the ever-recurring refrain of country. A recent encyclopedia entry on Indigenous metal combines it with hard rock and directs readers who want to learn more about Indigenous metal to two biographies of Jimi Hendrix and another encyclopedia entry. Part of this paucity, certainly, is explained by writers’ struggles to encompass the abundance of genres through which Indigenous people express themselves musically. As well, inclinations to defer judgment on constricting these genres into baskets labeled “popular” or “traditional” on the one hand or “high” or “low” on another, results in a blending that has perhaps left metal out of the mix. However we approach it, though, metal has been underrepresented in the growing and productive literature on contemporary Native and Indigenous musical worlds.

And so *Rez Metal: Inside the Navajo Nation Heavy Metal Scene* is a welcome arrival to this growing library of work. The volume is the companion to a documentary film of the same name, although the film’s website says that the film is a companion to the book. I was able to read it in conjunction with a viewing of the film, and my comments here will sometimes take that into account. (The main protagonists of both book and film, singer-songwriter-guitarist Kyle Felter and his band I Dont Konform, were also the subjects of an earlier short film, *Metal from the Dirt*, directed by Clarke Tolton.)

The most outstanding and admirable aspect of Soltani Stone’s and Zappia’s book lies in their dedicated ability to place the voices of performers and fans at the center of their work. The Navajo Nation metal community crosses multiple generations, and includes community activists, ceremonial practitioners, radio deejays, pastors, teachers in the schools, and tribal council members. Almost every word in the book, save for its introduction, represents their voices.

The book is divided into four chapters. The first, “What is Rez Metal?,” walks readers through the broad outlines of the project and offers a brief Diné history, with a focus on the economic marginalization and environmental devastation of lands and waters that has marked relations between the Navajo Nation, the US government, and American corporations. The authors center on Gallup, New Mexico, as a pivotal location of the metal scene they document. In their telling, metal emerges from that history as a voice of hopefulness and overcoming—what former Navajo Nation president Jonathan Nez calls “the history of resilience here on the Navajo Nation” (16).

The authors then turn the pages over to the voices of a diverse and numerous cast of metalheads, managers, council members who drum in metal bands, educators, performers, and spiritual leaders. The introduction ends, a bit unexpectedly, with a country band and with members of the Las Vegas–based non-Native metal band Hemlock. Similarly, the film is framed somewhat unexpectedly by performances of Navajo hip-hop artist Def-1.

“Venues,” the next chapter, brings readers to the owners and operators of two Gallup metal showcases, Juggernaut Music and Studio 18. Chapter three, “The Band,” introduces readers to the Navajo metal bands Testify, I Dont Konform, and Signal 99, as well as to a range of events and contexts in which they perform. The final chapter, “Industry, Audience, and the Next Generation,” shifts its focus to younger, up-and-coming musicians such as Melanie Nez and the band Condemn the World, as well as community music educators and young people managing new media outlets for dissemination and communication within the metal community. These chapters are mostly lengthy, uninterrupted stretches of discourse by Navajo interlocutors. Although Soltani Stone and Zappia sometimes neglect to identify precisely who is speaking, the voices are strong, presented directly, and command the reader’s attention.

Thirty-four of the text’s eighty-eight pages feature photographs, which help give life to the words on the page. Given the general absence of writing on the metal scene described above, it would be unfair, to say the least, to expect that Soltani Stone and Zappia should have filled in all the missing pieces in one brief book. What did they have to draw on? In a work this economical, however, there are bound to be disappointments. The authors promise an account of I Dont Konform’s travels to Denmark to work with Grammy Award–winning Metallica producer Flemming Rasmussen in his Sweet Silence studio, but the full chronicle of those events never quite appears, taking up but a brief few pages in the book. The story is told a bit more completely in the film, cameras traveling with them to Copenhagen. Beyond the authors’ commitment to allowing their interlocutors to speak in their own voices, it is not quite clear what their larger ambition might have been. Where their approach is able to depict the cosmopolitanism of contemporary Navajo Nation youth, the brevity of the book, as well as the apparent decision to withdraw from an authorial-editorial presence, sometimes leaves readers without a sense of the debates or contradictions that might be embedded in these social and musical practices, or the contestations that might accompany the various expressive genres available to contemporary members of the community. For example, one interlocutor mentions the “connection between our traditional music and contemporary music” (pages 19–20). There is a great deal to unpack there. Soltani Stone and Zappia only infrequently offer readers the algorithms to help them make sense of what these kinds of statements can mean.

And so, ironically enough, we lose out on some understanding of the specific pleasures of metal for Navajo Nation youth. In addition to observations on cultural and linguistic continuity, a few interlocutors offer a sense of cultural and historical durability and persistence in the idea that metal, like country for an older generation, sings of heartbreak. But these observations sometimes become flattened into a social commentary, casting metal as a positive practice in combating social challenges in the

community such as substance abuse and teen suicide without, it must be said, really sinking deeply into these community challenges. The film, in fact, opens with a simple, white-on-black title card: "The suicide rate among the Navajo Nation youth is nearly twice as high as the national average and also the second leading cause of death." But the filmmakers never really sharpen their focus on this issue. I don't for a second minimize the obstinate and perhaps insurmountable obstacles facing outside filmmakers attempting to describe these challenges, nor the importance of a healing role for music in general (and metal in particular) in addressing them. I don't necessarily wish that Soltani Stone and Zappia had treated the issue more fully as much as wishing they hadn't led with that issue if they weren't going to fully treat it. My impression here is guided in part, again, by the authors' self-effacement in their framing of how the powerful voices in their work are presented. Soltani Stone and Zappia's backgrounding themselves make it more difficult to know the contexts in which these observations arose, or the extent to which the documentarians were given access to their interlocutors' inner monologues.

For me, a key distinction between the book and the film was that the long stretches of talk in the book are typeset in squared and blocked prose paragraphs. (In both book and film, participants' statements are presented without the questions that might have prompted them.) In the accompanying documentary film, one can hear poetics, pauses, tone of voice, searching for the right word, hesitancy, emphasis that is not readable in the written version. One telling moment at the end of chapter four in the film gives a sense of how hearing these voices can matter. Driving in his car, Flemming Rasmussen muses on the possible outcome of the recording sessions he has completed with I Dont Konform.

I know where they're from  
and what all this music is about now  
because I experienced it firsthand  
so, uh, yeah  
it gave me a, another outlook on  
on where they're coming from and what they're doing  
so it made me understand their music a little better, probably  
it would be nice to get it released on, uh  
even a minor la—, level label would be nice  
uh, just to, to get the music out there for people to hear  
it would be a shame if this was, like  
a big secret  
but this, in this business there's absolutely no guarantees flat  
so flat  
we'll  
hopefully we'll talk in a year and we'll just sit and smile at everybody  
well  
you never know

Almost every line in Rasmussen's utterance ends with a rising tone that seems to denote his uncertainty. The aftermath and consequences of this are reflected nicely in the film. It takes a year for I Dont Konform to raise the necessary funds for duplicating, printing, and packaging their CD *Sagebrush Rejects*. And it becomes clear, with due respect to Rasmussen's talents in bringing the recording project to artistic satisfaction, that the only firsthand experience here is that of Kyle Felter and his fellow bandmates—the endless hours of practice and fundraising that it took to bring Rasmussen to the Navajo Nation for preproduction, to travel to Denmark and pay for studio time, to copy and distribute the CD. The accompanying book, by contrast, does not tell this story, but turns to a section on the newest generation of musicians and metal fans in the Navajo Nation.

But, in the end, these are quibbles. Reading and viewing the book and film together made me hopeful for the writing and other work that will explore the deep historical, cultural, political, and economic complexities of heartbreak, and metal's rich expressions of those multilayered feelings. *Rez Metal* opens a path to filling a yawning hole in the literature on contemporary Indigenous musical activity, and understanding its cultural, political, and artistic history. From a classroom-teaching perspective, it perhaps remains an open question whether the book or film alone, the book and film together, some combination of these in conjunction with *Metal from the Dirt*, or simply playing the scorching exquisiteness of *Sagebrush Rejects* would be the best exposure to the subjects raised by Indigenous metal. If *Rez Metal* does not fill all those holes itself, it points us toward fruitful ways of joining them in the mosh pit.

*David Samuels*  
New York University