What personal and cultural conditions led Black Sabbath to create heavy metal?

What makes Sabbath sound evil? Is evil in the ear of the beholder?

Is it still Black Sabbath without Ozzy?

How can Black Sabbath and existentialism help you to face your demons?

Black Sabbath is one of the world’s most influential and enduring bands. Dubbed “the Beatles of heavy metal” by Rolling Stone, they helped to define a genre with classic songs like “Paranoid,” “Iron Man,” and “War Pigs,” songs whose lyrics reveal hidden depth and philosophical insight. Confronting existential despair, social instability, political corruption, the horrors of war, and the nature of evil, this book explores the wide range of profound ideas in the band’s music and lyrics to help you understand Black Sabbath as never before. From Aristotle and Nietzsche to Schopenhauer and Marx, this book brings some of history’s heaviest thinkers to bear on the band’s music. So . . . can you help me, occupy my brain? Yes! Start reading Black Sabbath and Philosophy.

WILLIAM IRWIN is professor of philosophy at King’s College in Pennsylvania. Irwin originated the philosophy and popular culture genre of books with Seinfeld and Philosophy in 1999. Irwin has also co-edited The Simpsons and Philosophy and edited The Matrix and Philosophy and Metallica and Philosophy. He is currently the General Editor of The Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture series.

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who has guided this book series
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Introduction
“What Is This That Stands Before Me?”

The tape would stop in the middle of “N.I.B.” whenever Ozzy sang “My name is Lucifer, please take my hand.” That was enough to convince my 13-year-old self that something sinister was at work. The play button would pop up, and I would freak out. Together the songs produced a witches’ brew of guilt, fear, fascination, and intoxication. Listening to Sabbath I felt that I was doing something forbidden yet necessary, like losing my virginity. Maybe I should have heeded the tape’s ominous warning, but here I am 30 years later. Adolescent obsession has become adult appreciation.

We don’t just listen to Black Sabbath; we are haunted by them. The music and lyrics stay with us long after the songs stop playing. There is genius in the simplicity of the unforgettable riffs, and there is hidden depth in the lyrics, which confront existential despair, social instability, political corruption, the horrors of war, and the nature of evil. The name of the band is Black Sabbath, but don’t be misled. They are all about shades of gray. As with most great art, Sabbath’s songs are rich, suggestive, and ambiguous, often undercutting one message with its opposite. Sabbath flirt with the occult but embrace the divine. They tell cautionary tales of heroin’s hand of doom while themselves snowblind or high on sweet leaf. And they don’t passively plead to give peace a chance to the tune of jangling guitars; they rage in the “fight for peace” to the beat of war drums. Paradoxically, their anti-war lyrics, infused with hope and love, are sung to the tune of pounding, hyper-masculine music.

Black Sabbath are the Beatles of heavy metal. They changed everything. More than 40 years later, Sabbath’s music is still too
introduction

aggressive for most people, and it’s still not played on the oldies station. But questions linger. What makes Sabbath sound evil? Is evil in the ear of the beholder? What personal and cultural conditions led them to create heavy metal? Is it still Black Sabbath without Ozzy? Is it still Black Sabbath when Tony Iommi is the only original member? We don’t aim to give the final word in answer to these questions, but we do aim to challenge the reader and stir the cauldron a bit.

Contrary to the Spinal Tap stereotype, Sabbath inspires deep thought. And this book brings together professional deep thinkers—most are philosophy professors by trade—to address some perennial questions. Philosophy is the love of wisdom; it is about discovering truth and facing reality. And, as it turns out, Plato, Aristotle, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche can help us take Ozzy, Tony, Geezer, and Bill to a deeper level. But keep in mind that our interpretations of Sabbath’s lyrics aim to highlight the philosophical significance of the lyrics rather than to recover their original intention.

Each chapter is meant to stand alone. So, although the chapters have been arranged in an order that makes sense, they can be read in any order you choose. This also means that some of the chapters overlap in the biographical information they recount and the songs they discuss. You’ll read about the back streets of Birmingham and the opening lines of the song “Black Sabbath” more than once. The contributing authors don’t all agree with each other, and the reader certainly isn’t obliged to agree with their interpretations. This is more about questions and opinions than answers and facts.

Because of the excitement about the reunion of the original line-up announced on 11/11/11, this book focuses primarily on the Ozzy years. While that may disappoint some fans, the good news is that we have left the door open for a follow-up book, Heaven & Hell and Philosophy. Nor do we deal much with Ozzy’s solo career. So who knows? There may be two more books to come!

We’re taking Sabbath seriously and we’re not apologizing. So if you’d like to master reality, start reading Black Sabbath and Philosophy. We’ll introduce you to your mind.
No book about Sabbath would be complete without liner notes. But you won’t find here a list of famous musicians or guitar manufacturers. Nothing so exciting. You will, though, find the names of some awesome people. If you ever have the chance to meet any of these folks you’ll be glad you did.

For taking me through a hole in the sky and dealing with my megalomania, I thank all my friends from the metal daze of my misspent youth, especially Sissy Dugan, Rob Guldner, J.R. Lombardo, Troy Marziali, and Joe Schmidt.

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For being a great team and for teaching me lots about both Sabbath and philosophy, I thank the contributing authors of this book. It has
been a pleasure to work with you and I hope I'll have the opportunity to work with you again.

I wish I could thank Ozzy, Tony, Geezer, and Bill for being personal friends of mine who helped make this book a reality. But to me they are larger-than-life figures before whom I would simply bow like Wayne and Garth, proclaiming that I'm not worthy. Still, I thank them for the music that means so much to me and without which this book would just have the rather silly title *And Philosophy*.

Most of all, I thank some people I know very well, my wife Megan from Mayberry and my two headbanging children, Daniel and Kate.