Hair Bands Take Center Court in 'March Shredness'

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences
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For fans of college basketball, the month of March means March Madness. But for those who love music and clever writing (and perhaps also basketball), it means the coolest literary, music, single-elimination, NCAA-style, 64-essay competition around.

This year’s edition is called March Shredness [1], featuring the best and worst of classic hair metal.

March Shredness is presented by the team that brought March Fadness ('90s one-hit wonders) in 2017 and March Sadness [2] (best/saddest songs of the college-rock era) in 2016. We caught up with Ander Monson [3], director of the UA Master of Fine Arts creative writing program, one of the masterminds behind the competition.

March is almost half over. Is it too late to join in the fun?

The tournament will be ongoing throughout the month. Tune in [4] almost every day in March. Read the essay, listen to the song, watch the video. Vote for your favorite ? whatever that means to you, whether it’s the most technically accomplished or the most notable or the most memorable or the best-written song or the best-written essay.

We hope that a good essay can illuminate something key about these songs. Games are decided by the winner of the combined website and Twitter polls. Really, though, the tournament is about you: What does reading these essays and listening to these songs do to you? What does it illuminate about you or about the bits of culture that you consume without thinking?

How did you decide which bands would be in the bracket?

Songs for the tourney proper are in the era of hair metal ? meaning heavy metal with a pop sensibility and usually mainstream/Top 40/MTV success like Poison and Mötley Crüe, 1983-1992 ? and are selected primarily based on “hair metalness,” meaning some combination of big hair, big outfits and ostentatious/shreddy guitar solos. And because this is a genre in some ways created by the video, they must have videos ? though we make no claims as to their enduring quality.

The competition features essays by you and fellow English faculty John Melillo, Ragini Srinivasan, Jon Reinhardt, Susan Briante and Aurelie Sheehan. How did you strong-arm convince your colleagues to take part in the competition?
When most people see how much fun the tournament is, it's usually not hard to get them to participate if they have the bandwidth. These are world-class intellectuals we’re talking about here, and so of course not everyone sees the value of writing about cultural detritus and seemingly unimportant things like Bon Jovi's "Livin' on a Prayer."

But usually the reaction is immediate: You get it or you don't. And, just to give one example, Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, whom we just hired last year, told me she actually came here in part because of this project. It's really remarkable how deep some of the essays go, and how much they turn up. And they offer opportunities for smart people to nerd out about dumb things. Plus, one of the fun things about the competition is that even if you don't care about hair metal but you like essays or cultural criticism, you'll care about hair metal by the time the tourney's over. And vice versa, of course, too.

I co-hosted an episode of "Speedway & Swan," a radio show on KXCI co-sponsored by the UA Poetry Center, with Susan Briante about the intersection of poetry and hair metal. It aired last week. There, too, we see some really interesting crossovers: For writers and thinkers, it's all material!

Two UA graduate students, Raquel Gutiérrez and Gabriel Palacios, are content editors for this year's competition. They probably weren't alive during the era of hair metal. Is this all part of their musical education?

Actually, both of them are in their late 30s, early 40s, which is the ideal age for this particular tournament. And they're both fans of this stuff. They're contributing essays, too, on the bands Kix ?"Don't Close Your Eyes" ? and The Cult ? "Fire Woman."

I'm sure I could've convinced some of the younger grad students to do it, since a lot of our writers are younger, many in their 20s. In a way, it's easier to see how weird that whole era and genre was if you didn't experience it yourself. That's also why it's important to look at it from at least 10 years away: It all made so much sense at the time, and now I see how silly it was and how strange ? especially with regard to perceptions of masculinity, sexuality and gender. But for writers in their 20s, in some ways, they see it for what it was: just straight-up weird.

You are a professor in the Department of English, director of the MFA creative writing program, and recent recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship [8]. You are also the editor and publisher of the journal DIAGRAM [6] and the New Michigan Press [7]. You're a busy guy. So why do you make time to work on this competition every year?

The tournament is a ton of work, no doubt. But because it's a collaboration with my wife, Megan Campbell, that's what makes it a pleasure to work on and worth it.

It also intersects with my own research, which is about, among other things, the 1987 action movie "Predator." I'm writing an essay about the band Cinderella's classic power ballad, "Don't Know What You Got (Till It's Gone)," so it also feeds my writing. And I wrote an essay [8] for The Normal School about the first year's tournament, March Sadness, in 2016 ; it also quotes conversations with a couple professors in the UA's Department of Psychology.

In a way, a game, which adds an element of competition to literature, is a perfect way to involve my colleagues across campus. We all like music. We all like games.
What's the theme next year?

We're doing March Vladness, the Goth bracket.

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Links:
[3] https://english.arizona.edu/users/ander-monson