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Xero Tolerance: A Critical Look at the Complicated Legacy of Type O Negative

By Brandon Futernick

Everybody has that band that, when they come on the stereo, takes them back to the glory days of their youth. For me, one of those bands is Type O Negative. They've been an all-time favorite of mine for nearly half my life now, and it all started with a joke.

I was a 16-year-old metalhead at a party in 2007, and at one point, a drunk friend started chanting the chorus to the Type O Negative song "Black No. 1" in everybody's faces. He did it so many times that it caught on, and eventually all of us were chanting this chorus, changing the word "black" to his name, "Max." It became an ongoing inside joke, and the chant got so stuck in my head that I ended up seeking out the real thing.

Though they didn't click immediately, Type O grew on me fast and eventually became the soundtrack to some of the pivotal years in my adolescence. My friends and I were kind of obsessed with them. We'd endlessly quote jokes from their notoriously goofy interviews, we'd try (and fail) to cover their songs in an old band of mine, and I had a bit of a ritual of driving home from college on the back roads of Long Island blasting their record *October Rust*. On a crisp fall day with the windows rolled down, it was the closest I could get to free therapy.

I actually was lucky enough to see them live three times before frontman Peter Steele's untimely passing in 2010, after which the band dissolved, and the value of getting to experience them in the last few years of their career is something I hold close to my heart.

What drew me in most was the texture of their music. I've not heard another band that comes close to capturing their essence, but if you can imagine the heft of Black Sabbath, the melodic prowess of The Beatles, and the dark atmosphere of early Cocteau Twins, you'd get something close to Type O Negative. The combination of the trembling chorus and jackhammering fuzz on Steele's bass, the glossy reverb on Kenny Hickey's guitars, the cold precision of Johnny Kelly's drums, and the glistening atmosphere of Josh Silver's keyboards gave them an otherworldly and completely singular sound.

And on top of that was Peter Steele's voice. He stood at 6'7" with a muscular build and possessed a booming baritone that befit his towering frame. When he sang, he would channel his most visceral emotions into every word. *What* he was singing felt secondary to *how* he was singing it. His lyrics were fairly direct, but it was the intensity of his delivery that resonated with me more than the words themselves. It felt like his damp, wine-soaked breath was going to jump right out of the speaker and onto my face. He was right there, commiserating with me over whatever topic he was writing about.

And he'd offset this intensity with an endearing, childlike sense of humor. I've always been a fan of puns and wordplay and some of Steele's most sincere screeds would be followed by a clever line just dripping in sarcasm or self-deprecation. Many of his jokes were sort of morbid, but they acted as a proverbial spoonful of sugar to help the medicine of his more intense lyrics go down a bit easier.

All of these elements made them stand out among the endless sea of tough-guy metal bands from the '90s and early 2000s. The aggression and volume in many of those bands made a lot of sense to me; I was a shy kid and didn't really know yet how to stand up for myself – the intensity of heavy metal felt like it spoke for me in a way that my own voice couldn't.

But with Type O Negative, there was more to it. They played loud and had plenty of piss and vinegar to go around, but the way Steele let the listener into his own life by talking about his own depression, grief, and insecurities felt fairly radical to this young metalhead. I don't think I truly understood it at the time, but I was riddled with anxiety and depression then too. And hearing a band who could combine that larger-than-life sound with my sense of humor and similar insecurities – I mean, what else could I ask for?

As I grew up, Type O became less of a constant in my daily listening, but they remained a heavy influence on my tastes. I don't think I would have been able to appreciate the dark ambience of bands like The Cure, the aforementioned Cocteau Twins, New Order, or Joy Division, all of whom I count among my favorites today, without first dipping a toe into that world with Type O.

Despite being disbanded for over a decade, the surviving members of Type O Negative have been slowly reissuing their discography on LP for the first time in the last few years. As a 31-year-old white dude in Williamsburg, I obviously collect vinyl, so 2021 has given me a chance to spend a lot of time with Type O Negative again, and the experience has been, in a word, complicated.

On the one hand, Steele's willingness to speak openly about his struggles with mental health issues still resonates. Songs like "World Coming Down," which tackles his chronic depression, "In Praise of Bacchus," which takes on his anxiety and feelings of self-worth, and "Everything Dies," which addresses his grief for lost family members, are so bare that it's hard not to relate even as an adult. Steele once told MTV in an interview that he wanted to be remembered "[as] someone who has helped people through hard times." He joked that "misery loves company and I think we're good company." And when the shit hits the fan, Type O Negative can still be some of the best company I could ask for.

But there are other times when Steele and the rest of the self-proclaimed "Drab Four" veered into being overly irresponsible with their lyrics. I had remembered that Steele's politics bent right-wing, but I don't think I truly understood in my younger years how overtly hateful some of his lyrics could be. In revisiting their discography as an adult, I came to realize there are some harsh instances of misogyny, racism, and homophobia scattered throughout their catalog and it made me feel uneasy about my fandom of the band.

When I dropped the needle on their debut record, *Slow, Deep, and Hard*, for instance, I felt immediately repelled as I heard the racist tirade against welfare recipients Steele tossed out in "Der Untermensch". I was aware that the song had gotten them in some trouble after it was released, especially in Germany, where that phrase had been used to describe Jews during the Holocaust, but I don't think I really grasped the weight of his words when I was younger. And in revisiting it today, it cast a bit of a pall over my opinion of the band.

Steele argued throughout his career that most of his more controversial lyrics were an attempt at dark, shocking humor, but even with that qualification, some of his words have too sharp of an edge for me to feel comfortable with. He's been dead for more than a decade now, but if he were alive today, I'd be kind of afraid to hear his take on our current political situation. He said a lot of things that would repel many progressive-minded folks from ever supporting him, and I can't say I'd blame them. But if they, or I, looked the other way, we'd also miss out on his moments of radical vulnerability, which is a rare find in the world of loud, brash heavy metal.

So what do you do with someone like Peter Steele and a band like Type O Negative? Do you separate the art from the artist and take the good with the bad? Can *World Coming Down* still be my go-to album to find resonance in when I'm feeling depressed if the same guy who wrote it also spewed some blatant racism on *Slow, Deep, and Hard*?

It's not an easy question to answer, but I wanted to take a deep dive into Type O Negative's catalog and reassess their pros and cons. I've listed their albums from most to least problematic in an effort to understand how much of a net positive or negative influence they've had. I hoped that this would help me make sense of their complicated legacy.

SLOW, DEEP, AND HARD (1991)

I guess, in some sense, I should have known that I was about to get my hands dirty just by looking at the cover. The sleeve of Type O Negative's debut album shows a distorted close up of penetration (stolen from a porno mag in an act that, in the reissue liner notes, keyboardist Josh Silver admitted was "a blatant copyright violation"). And that sort of vulgar, exploitative imagery really sets the tone for the content of the album.

Even when I was a teenager, this was actually my least favorite Type O album. The songs, which were originally written for Peter Steele's former hardcore band, Carnivore, stood out for being way less polished and far more aggressive than the group's subsequent output. So they don't really sound like the same band they'd end up becoming. I'd always liked punk and hardcore music, but knowing the rest of their discography, I felt like this record was, even musically, just weaker than the rest of their catalog.

Lyricaly, it's a bit of a concept album told from the perspective of an exaggerated version of Steele as he discovers his girlfriend is cheating on him. He decides to find her, kill her and her lover, and then kill himself. Delightful. I was obviously aware of the subject matter when I was younger, but as an angsty teen who just felt misunderstood, his anger made sense to me, even if I wouldn't have ever expressed it as pointedly as Steele does here.

And complicating the matter is that the bile he directs at this woman on songs like "Unsuccessfully Coping With The Natural Beauty of Infidelity" is admittedly steeped in some effective humor. One verse accuses her of "practicing freelance gynecology" followed by the line "where there's a womb there's a way/with you it's for free." The inherent misogyny of that sentiment makes me a bit queasy today, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't still think that was clever wordplay.

As mentioned above, the song "Der Untermensch" is the most jarring example of their "dark humor" going too far. It's the hardest song to have to contend with as a fan of the band. Steele apparently fell hook, line, and sinker for the welfare queen rhetoric of Reagan's America and this song finds him ranting and raving about how people on public assistance are a "waste of life." He calls them "subhuman scum," suggests that he "tear down the projects," and vows to "send you back to where you're from." It is blatantly, unashamedly racist and that sucks. I never liked this song very much, but today, it makes me sincerely, deeply uncomfortable.

Songs like "Xero Tolerance" and "Gravitational Constant: $G = 6.67 \times 10^{-8} \text{ cm}^{-3} \text{ gm}^{-1} \text{ sec}^{-2}$ " have always been endearing to me from a compositional perspective, as they combine the aggression of hardcore punk with the clang of industrial metal, which I haven't heard before or since, and the lyrics of the latter song actually resonated with me a lot when I was a teen.

I've always had a lot of social anxiety and, in high school, before I knew what you called it, I blamed myself for missing out on a lot of experiences because of it. In "Gravitational Constant", there's one verse that really meant a lot to me, and is probably some of Steele's most introspective and honest lyrics. He

wrote, "I built myself a nice little cage/With bars of anger and a lock of rage/I can't help asking, 'Who's got the key?'/When I know damned well it's me," and I felt that HARD. The rest of the song deals with Steele threatening suicide and concludes with the line "Suicide is self-expression." I thought that was cool and edgy when I was younger, but today I think it's pretty reckless and immature.

All in all, I don't think I fully wrapped my head around how wrong-minded a lot of Steele's anger was when I first got to know this album. Something about it felt wrong then, but today it's abundantly clear. My own maturity, combined with society generally drawing harder lines against racism and misogyny in the ensuing years, makes this an uncomfortable and disappointing listen.

THE ORIGIN OF THE FECES (1992)

Type O Negative's second release was a fake live album that was actually recorded in their home studio. The content essentially serves as alternate, looser versions of the tracks on *Slow, Deep, and Hard*. The track names appear as mislabelings of the original titles like you'd find on a bootleg ("Unsuccessfully Coping With The Natural Beauty of Infidelity" becomes "I Know You're Fucking Someone Else," a reference to a repeated lyric in the song's final verses), but the lyrical content is no less problematic. I never really found myself listening to this one when I was younger, so it didn't make much of an impact on me.

I will say that this release gets a few extra points for the inherent humor that comes from the fact that the fake "crowd" they added in spends more time jeering them than cheering. In fact, a "YOU SUCK!" chant that originated on this album became a staple for their real-life crowds for the rest of their career and that was a really funny thing to experience.

Some credit is also deserved for their cover of Black Sabbath's "Paranoid" that appeared on the record's reissue in 1994. Here, we find the band completely reinterpreting the classic song into something much deeper and more powerful than the Sabbath version; it's a rare example of a cover that transcends the original and I always loved it.

The tempo is dramatically slowed, the key is completely changed, and aside from the lyrics, it's barely recognizable as the signature Sabbath song. Steele's alteration of the chorus lyrics to "Can you help me feel/Cause I'm not made of steel" present an early glimpse into the uncertainty and depression that I really related to when I got into the band. They turned a solid, but largely unemotional song into a pensive dirge that taps into a far deeper sense of despair than the original ever could. As a fan of darker tunes, I stand by their re-interpretation of this song as one of their most creative and emotional pieces of work.

LIFE IS KILLING ME (2003)

The band's penultimate record took some time to grow on me back in the day. For the most part, it wasn't particularly extreme or offensive, but it just didn't feel like it had its own sonic identity like the rest of their albums.

Early on, the only songs that jumped out to me were the fantastic "Anesthesia," a song about the desire to numb oneself from heartache, and the nostalgic "(We Were) Electrocute," where the narrator reflects on the good times with an ex-lover. These songs still stand out to me today as some of their best work, both

musically and lyrically, but the album as a whole did eventually wear me down into considering it a favorite.

In an interview with Dutch magazine [Pitfather](#) a few months before the album's release, Steele said that the record was written while he went through "some sort of midlife crisis," and there is an air of introspection to Steele's lyrics on this album that largely feel more mature than a lot of what he'd expressed in the past.

One poignant example is "Todd's Ship Gods (Above All Things)," which finds the narrator, who I presume to be Steele, reckoning with his father's influence on him as a child. The narrator calls his dad the "author of the testosterone scriptures," and describes how he instilled an emotionally stifling sense of "masculinity" in him. Steele never spoke on the record about how autobiographical this song was, but I always assumed it was about his own childhood. If that's true, it could give a glimpse into how he ended up so angry as an adult.

But as humbled as Steele may have been in reflecting on his upbringing, *Life is Killing Me* also contains another instance of him going too far with his "dark sense of humor" in the form of the song "I Like Goils."

Steele got a lot of attention from gay men after posing nude in *Playgirl* magazine in the mid-'90s and felt the need to pen a song to clarify just how straight he was. The resulting track goes way beyond the already unnecessary intended message, and many of Steele's lyrics cross a line into flat-out homophobia. "Forget the jar of Vaseline/Hey rich bitch-boy, I'm not gonna be your queen" goes one line, and "Now I don't know whose ass you've licked/No shit-tongued boy will ever taste my dick" goes another.

"Obviously, I do have the right to be heterosexual," said Steele in an interview with [As Long as It's Black](#), addressing interpretations of the song as being "anti-gay." While this is obviously true, it's clear to me today that there's a difference between simply "being heterosexual" and referring to gay men as "shit-tongued boys" and immortalizing it in song.

Jokes about homosexuality, though always hurtful to their targets, were generally more accepted in the '90s and early 2000s, so it may not have registered as offensive on a large scale at the time. Today, this song feels needlessly cruel and malicious. It was never a favorite of mine, but it brings down an otherwise well written record. I cringe at the thought of ever playing this song out loud.

DEAD AGAIN (2007)

Dead Again was just a few months old when I discovered Type O Negative, so it's always had a special place in my heart as the only record I was there for. The first time I saw them live was on the tour supporting the album, and bearing witness to a very rare performance of the album's gorgeous ballad "September Sun" is a memory I still greatly cherish.

This was the first album since 1993 where Type O used live drumming instead of programming them electronically. The more organic, lively quality that followed made it really stand out to me from their previous work. They leaned in on their punk and hard rock influences and I've always loved how they maintained their sonic identity despite changing up their process.

Songs like "Halloween in Heaven," an ode to fallen rock and rollers, and "Dead Again," about Steele's then-recent drug abuse, harken back to the sound of *Slow, Deep, and Hard* with (thankfully) less problematic lyrical content. The main vocal melody of the song "She Burned Me Down" always felt like it

could have been torn right from a page of Paul McCartney's book, and the Beatle fanatic in me has always loved that song, even as looking back at it today reveals a disheartening pattern of Steele frequently blaming women for his problems in lyrics across his entire career.

The record actually came right on the heels of a chaotic period in Steele's life, during which he had been imprisoned for assault and institutionalized for cocaine-induced psychosis. "When you're in the eye of the storm, you don't see the storm," he said in an interview with [Artisan News Service](#) in 2007. Steele felt betrayed by his family for having him committed and was incensed. "I just feel like certain people who said that they 'loved me' took advantage of my situation," he said in the same interview. "And I think it's fucking disgusting."

He went on to refer to his family's actions as "tripping a blind man," which inspired the *Dead Again* song of that same name. The track always felt a bit uncomfortable to me, because Steele was aggressively lashing out at people who were trying to help him. As I've grown up and dealt with people in my own life battling addiction, his defiance of help in this track makes me more sad than anything else.

Steele had become a born again Christian not long before *Dead Again* ("I went from dope to Pope," he joked in an interview with [hardtimes.ca](#) in 2009) and the song "These Three Things" finds him proselytizing some problematic, small-minded gospels. Referring to abortion, his lyrics shun the act, calling it "infanticide" and "the worst sin you've ever performed" before making an allusion to "burning sulfur," referencing an eternity in hell for those who commit this "sin."

He also makes an ambiguous reference to the formation of Israel ("Not a nation but a self-proclaimed state/Since the year of our Lord 1-9-4-8") and the Jewish concept of Zionism ("Should there be failure to convert Zion?/What came as a lamb returning as a lion"). It's unclear to me what he's singing about, but I found his shunning of abortion to be repellant even when I was 16, and I'm pretty okay with not knowing where he was going with his references to Israel.

Today, I feel largely the same about this record as I did when I first got into it as a teen, in that the music is fantastically composed, but close attention to the misguided anger and religious overtones make it a little difficult to swallow.

BLOODY KISSES (1993)

Though it was actually their third release, *Bloody Kisses* is where Type O Negative established the sound and attitude that would define their career. The album contains their biggest hit, "Black No. 1 (Little Miss Scare-All)," a sarcastic ode to goth subculture inspired by, you guessed it, an ex-girlfriend of Steele. It was my friend's repetition of this song's chorus that convinced me to try the band in the first place, so I'll always hold it in high regard as my gateway into their music.

Thankfully, Steele largely avoided problematic lyrics on this one, but couldn't help but jibe people with the songs "We Hate Everyone" and "Kill All The White People," which are sarcastic responses to accusations of racism that the band faced in light of the material I've already noted.

"Too Late: Frozen" was an early favorite of mine that still holds up. I've always found the middle section to be completely transcendent. The song morphs into a psychedelic elegy where Steele's voice is rendered unrecognizable by a pile of effects that make him sound like John Lennon on The Beatles "Tomorrow Never Knows" (I once met Sal Abruscato, the drummer on this album, who settled a bet for me by confirming that it is Steele singing in this section). The tone of his trembling voice over the plodding

rhythm became the soundtrack to the season of winter to my ears and I've chased sounds like these for my Cold Weather playlists ever since.

I'm glad to say that *Bloody Kisses* holds up today. It took Type O Negative's sound to a whole new level and became the archetype for goth metal that has yet to be effectively replicated. In stripping away the tough-guy lyrical content and getting more personal with songs like "Bloody Kisses (A Death in the Family)" and "Can't Lose You," Steele composed a record that is compelling in both its sincerity and its humor. When I hear this album now, it reminds me why I became such a huge fan.

OCTOBER RUST (1996)

For me, this record has always felt like a warm blanket on a cold day. Even though it deals with some of the band's usual dark themes, it also takes on love, nature, and the beauty of autumn. Sonically, the record finds Type O Negative experimenting with their most lush and grandiose soundscapes yet, and there's something about the wavering chorus effects on the guitars and bass that strikes an emotional chord in me that I can't articulate but feel deeply upon every listen.

I've always had certain music that I associate with certain seasons, and listening to the right songs at the right time of year unlocks a tidal wave of nostalgic bliss in me that no drug or therapy could compare to. *October Rust* is the ultimate example of this sensation.

When I was 18 and in my first year in college, I was in a pretty content place in my life. I had class until the evening, and I used to drive home from school with my windows down, this album blasting, and the cool autumn breeze brushing against my face as I watched the sun go down over the back roads of Long Island. It was a rare feeling of truly being at peace.

Steele's words were secondary to the joy that the sound of the album would bring me, but the lyrics meant a lot, too. Opener "Love You To Death" is largely about the pleasure of a tryst with a lover, but towards the end of the song, Steele's repeated refrain of "Am I good enough for you?" resonated with my own uncertainty and lack of confidence in relationships. I was afraid to even tell women that I was interested in them for a long time, and as a scrawny young nerd, it was comforting to hear somebody with the physique and status of Steele confessing to the same feelings of inadequacy. Ditto for the song "In Praise of Bacchus," where Steele wails "She hates me," over and over again, deep in a bottle of wine.

Though I've grown up and gained more confidence and self-awareness, this album still resonates deeply with me. There's no problematic ranting or raving here to feel hesitant about today, just some introspective songs about life, love, and uncertainty. Listening to *October Rust* today, I'm taken right back into my old 2000 Hyundai Sonata, traversing the back roads of Garden City, feeling the breeze rush through the car. I can see the sunsets and smell the crisp, autumn air, and it gives me a sense of that same peace that the record brought in my youth.

WORLD COMING DOWN (1999)

This is Type O Negative at their emotional peak. Largely putting the romance and humor aside, Steele created a set of bleak, catastrophic songs that captured depression in a way I'd seldom heard before.

"I have a hard time coping with abandonment," said Steele in an interview with [Outburn](#) in 2000. "Whether it's a parent dying or someone I love dying or a woman leaving me, or even a lost pet or something, it's just not something I deal with well." He went on to say that he wrote the album during a depressive slump following a number of deaths in his family. In the songs, his grief and depression is palpable.

On the title track, my long-standing favorite song in their catalog, lyrics like, "I'm so fortunate, yet filled with self-hate/But the mirror shows me an ingrate" and "I could easily start pointing fingers/Since the blame is mine it always lingers" cut me to my core as a kid. I was deeply ashamed of the way my anxieties held me back from being fully present in friendships and relationships growing up, and I truly felt Steele's pain when he sang these words. I didn't have the maturity yet to understand how anxiety is not a choice, and I blamed myself for being stifled by it. But it gave me a deep sense of comfort to hear these sentiments put out there so plainly by somebody else, and that helped me cope with what I saw as my own shortcomings.

When I first got into the album as a kid, I could empathize with the pain of grief that Steele expressed in songs like "Everyone I Love Is Dead" and "Everything Dies," but I was fortunate to not have had much exposure to the loss of loved ones at that point.

Today, sadly, that is very different. As I was halfway through writing this very essay, my best friend since childhood died from a drug overdose. My relationship with him and Type O Negative happen to be deeply intertwined and, though we had a bit of a falling out recently, I thought about him a lot as I approached this piece. I obviously had no idea that he'd be gone before I'd finished writing, and I wondered what he, who still adored the band, would think about me writing a critical essay about them and publishing it. I figured he wouldn't love the idea, and I hate that I'll never find out.

It's difficult because this friend was actually at the party I mentioned in my introduction, and we discovered and fell in love with Type O Negative together. He played drums in my own band that (poorly) covered their songs, and it was with him that I would endlessly quote their interviews and blast their albums while driving through the streets of Long Island. He stood right next to me two of the three times I saw them live. So it's been a struggle for me to think of Type O Negative without thinking of him.

In "Everyone I Love Is Dead," Steele sings about poring through "A dusty stack of photographs/Of times I've cried, but mostly laughed," and in the month since my friend passed, that's been nearly my whole life. I've spent hours and hours going through old photos and videos from our teenaged glory days, trying to find a reason to smile through the tears.

"You love someone, there will be grief/The kiss of death, lips of a thief," Steele laments at the start of that same song, and I've thought a lot about this sentiment. He was my best friend for most of my life and the grief of his loss after years of being so close has been overwhelming. It's been impossible to go anywhere without being flooded with memories of time he and I spent together. As beautiful as our friendship was to live through, it's been that painful to have to learn to live without it.

The loss of my friend has been a deeply difficult experience to cope with, but having Steele's bare and honest lyrics about his own encounters with grief has been extraordinarily helpful in processing my own. *World Coming Down* was a significant album for me in my youth, and it's now become even more relevant and helpful for reasons I'd never imagined I'd have to face.

So there you have it. My relationship with Type O Negative has been one that's gone with me through some euphoric highs and devastating lows. But what do I do with them now?

I think it is important, essential even, to call out inappropriate behavior and hold bad actors to account for their misguided actions and views. I think it's also important to acknowledge the harm that broadcasting malicious and pointed attacks on marginalized communities can create. By normalizing homophobia, misogyny, and racism in his lyrics, I believe Peter Steele and Type O Negative contributed to a desensitization of harm against these communities, and it's a stain on their reputation. It's something that the surviving members and fans need to contend with as they interact with the material.

But though it's important to acknowledge and grapple with harmful rhetoric and actions, I also think it's important to not let one's worst actions define them. Nobody has acted perfectly all of the time, and I do think that to completely shun a person and erase their work based on some of their lowest moments is unproductive. We can and should call out mistakes, but how can we learn from them if we push people away for making them? It makes me very uncomfortable that Peter Steele made such hateful remarks and immortalized them in song, but I don't believe that I have to agree with everything that he said in his worst moments to be able to appreciate his best work.

Honestly, I can't help but feel inextricably connected to Type O Negative. They've been with me through more than half of my life now and I have a lot of joyful memories that involve their music. And many of those memories involve my best friend who is no longer here. When I listen to them, it reminds me of him, and that makes me happy as I move through the grief of his loss. If that's not worth keeping their music in my life, then I don't know what is.