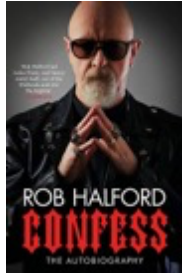


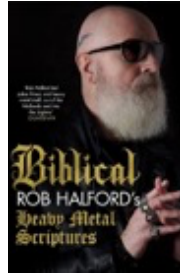
Handcuffed to Andy Warhol: The Autobiographies of Rob Halford of Judas Priest

Confess The Autobiography, by Rob Halford, Headline Publishing Group, London, 29 Sept. 2020

Biblical: Rob Halford's Heavy Metal Scriptures, by Rob Halford, Headline Publishing Group, London, 1 Nov. 2022



Cover photograph by
Larry Rostant for
Headline Publishing



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Headline Publishing

“Live Aid went on and on and on. MTV kept banging on about the fact that Phil Collins was playing Wembley, and then getting Concorde to do the Philly show as well. That riled me for some reason. I thought it was all too posey, and he was being a bit of a knob.

Pop tart that I am, I loved seeing Madonna. I’ve always been a gay metal fanboy for her...”

Rob Halford, lead singer of the heavy metal band Judas Priest in *Confess: The Autobiography*, Headline Publishing Group, 2020, page 186-187

Pop Music has been said to be the cause of moral decline since the earliest days of recorded music. In academia, tabloid journalism, television, and online, we all make the stars, and inevitably we bring them down. Part of this trope is the redemption of the pop star. Some of the fanbase always support the artist, but the pop star has still needed or wanted to explain themselves, to tell their own story. The pop tell-all autobiography, usually written after some milestone in the performers career, often age, or the anticipation of a Greatest Hits compilation, is now an expected part of an artist’s career. These autobiographies are sometimes ghost written and designed to show the performer in a new light, into a new phase of their careers as an elder of the pop union. Recognised in their pages is often a time of excess, with the inevitable regrets and backtracking.

But some of these autobiographies transcend the tropes and take us on another journey, despite acknowledging the naughty realities of a life on the stage (publishers need SOMETHING to put in the press release after all). Such is the case for Judas Priest lead singer Rob Halford’s two autobiographies; *Confess The Autobiography*, by Rob Halford, Headline Publishing Group, London, 29 Sept. 2020 and *Biblical: Rob Halford's Heavy Metal Scriptures*, by Rob Halford, Headline Publishing Group, London, 1 Nov. 2022.

These are two books with long subtitles, but for the sake of brevity and accuracy I will call them by their single word titles, *Confess* and *Biblical* – good names that accurately abstract their contents. The book names make sense in the way that they are reminiscent of other pop biographies that give way to confession and the inevitable seeking of solace. Many of those biographies include a call to spirituality and a request for forgiveness. Not so Halford's. *Confess* and *Biblical* also offer a kind of religious aetiological myth, telling us how we got to the current state of the culture wars, now a global phenomenon with the road map firmly set up in the US in the 80s partially at the expense of Halford and Judas Priest. Although the books seem a reworking of a familiar pop autobiography formula, these testaments are worth the readers time, even if louder-than-bombs guitars, black leather, and head-banging are not your thing. The main crux of the difference is that Rob Halford is gay and was closeted during most of the years of his bands greatest successes, but only just barely. The closet door was open, and the rack was full of black leather. Despite the familiar-ish path of many of the confessions, these two books retain a sense of authenticity, a feeling of someone witnessing a time many did not, literally, survive.

In "The Covid Lockdown Years," conspiracy became the cross-border free-trade commodity no one expected nor legislated against, infecting minds with myriad untruths and falsehoods, lies and hate. The fire continues years after we stopped wearing masks, the irrationally irate and the politically expedient obsessed with subcultures that serve as low hanging fruit (pun intended); Drag Queens, Queers and Trans people especially attracting the eye of the ferociously stupid and ill informed. But we have been here before, many times, haven't we? Releasing these two books amid the Covid era and its conspiracies reminds one that Halford's own problems during the culture wars and satanic panic of the 80s and early 90s hasn't been far away. Halford has been here before. It's not entirely hyperbole to say that Halford survived a witch trial and manages an elder statesman aura as a metal god, and as a gay icon.

"I made a spike about nine o'clock on a Saturday

All eyes hit me as I walked into the bar

And see the other guys were fooling in the denim dudes

A couple cops playing rough stuff, New York, Fire Island

I cased the joint, straining at the seams..."

From the song Raw Deal, from the Album Sin After Sin, 1977,

Songwriters: Glenn Raymond Tipton / Rob Halford

Raw Deal lyrics © Reach Music Publishing, Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC

In London in the centuries before homosexuality was decriminalised a local language emerged developed by queer people wishing to speak to each other unobserved by squares and the law, that language now known as Polari. The language allowed rent boys, gay men, lesbians and fellow travellers to speak to each other unheard by the authorities. Polari allowed queers to hide in plain sight.

Halford never really hid his sexuality, when you look at the evidence, he also hid in plain sight, cultivating his own visual style and cultural language to hide in a way, a style that was widely imitated. Consider the above lyrics for the song Raw Deal from the album Sin After Sin in 1977. Halford is singing about sexual encounters at a well-known gay beach resort in New York - Fire Island, in the 1970s. To the unknowing, Raw Deal is a story about an altercation in a biker bar. To those in the know, it is raw sex. In a similar vein, years later at The Live Aid concert for Ethiopian famine relief organised by Bob Geldof in Philadelphia in 1985, watched on television by millions worldwide, Halford was wearing head-to-toe black leather that would not be out of place in a leather bar in London or Berlin, except perhaps better appointed than the average heavy metal musician or fan present that day. Halford's is a very precise sort of leather, reminiscent more of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe or queer illustrator Tom of Finland than the leather battle vests worn by teenagers of the time. Tailored, fitted leather.

In the first of his two autobiographies Confess (2020) Halford provides an intimate walk through some 50 years of playing in one of the world's biggest bands and for a while the biggest heavy metal act in the world. Halford takes us from his childhood in Walsall, a small town in The Black Country in the UK, to becoming one of the most influential figures in the world of music. Halford has sold millions of records, is a Grammy Award winner and a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame - we learn. In this first book Halford's revelations of gay sex, drugs and alcohol are some of the most human and enlightened to be found in any pop biography. The closeted nature of his sexuality is bound up, says Halford, in his drug and alcohol addiction and in his recovery. Halford shows us there is something toxic about the way we seem to want our heroes in music to behave, and Halford gets at the heart of it. We want our guitar bands and pop divas, for some reason, to be a bit of a mess. But despite the fact that Halford was a bit of a mess for a while, he still managed to have a say about his times.

"... 'Breaking the Law' was a direct reference to Britain under Thatcherism at the start of the eighties, and the frustrations that a lot of working-class people felt. An even more interesting case is 'Jawbreaker' from Defenders of the Faith.

Because I've admitted its central lyrical motif is a big fat cock, some people treat it like a joke, a cartoon. It's actually a serious song, about war and anarchy and revolution in places like Cuba or Ethiopia. But I guess that gets obscured behind the, er, big fat cock..."

Rob Halford, Biblical (2022) p 52

While Confess opens on a youthful Halford - funny, endearing, figuring life out, Biblical is more in control. The wit, charm and tall tales resonate but in a more sober, sensible way. Sex

is still there for Rob in his 70s, but so is prostate trouble and getting the blues about men. In Biblical Halford lays out his aging process, how he manages long term relationships - in a way telling us that even if you lived fast, you don't have to die young. For many gay men and metalheads who grew up on the "let's party" tropes present in both gay and heavy metal culture, Halford's path to aging is welcome news. He speaks about how to keep doing what you love, creatively and sexually, long after many musicians his age, or for that matter gay men, have packed it in or shuffled off to the next realm.

*"One life, I'm gonna live it up
I'm takin' flight, I said, I'll never get enough
Stand tall, I'm young and kinda proud
I'm on the top as long as the music's loud..."*

*Judas Priest – You Got Another Thing Comin' 1982 from the album
Screaming for Vengeance*

Songwriters: Glenn Raymond Tipton / Robert Halford / Kenneth Downing

You've Got Another Thing Comin' lyrics © Ebonytree Ltd, Round Hill Songs

The shame of being a man - is there any better reason to write?

Gilles Deleuze (1998). "Essays Critical and Clinical", p.1, Verso

What Confess and Biblical bring together is a tell-all tale from a gay "pop" star who somehow managed to survive the obstacles put in his way, and in the way of every gay man living through the time. But Halford did it "metal," a term that in this use could mean "to the extreme." Many pop autobiographies feature an acceptable level of depravity and shame but in eye-dropper amounts - in a heteronormative, 80s-NME-and-MTV-friendly way. Not so Halford's writing.

"Alongside my bull whip, I had recently incorporated handcuffs into my stage gear, and I had a pair hanging from my studded belt. For whatever reason, I took them off, put one cuff on my wrist and fastened the other around (Andy) Warhol's.

He looked at me, and laughed nervously.

...Warhol then varied his conversational repertoire enough to suggest that that we should go to Studio 54....

...I still have photos of that famous night, and when I look at them, one thing jumps out at me. My t-shirt. It had a picture by a famed gay erotic artist, Tom of Finland, and it was a full-on homosexual orgy: a riot of erect cocks, bum cheeks, felatio and anal penetration..."

From Confess, Halford, p122

Halford's memoirs come as a very pleasant, often hilarious surprise. There has been heavy metal tell-all books before, and some very good ones, Nikki Sixx' Heroin Diaries (Simon & Schuster 2008) and Tommy Lee's The Dirt (Harper Entertainment 2001) among them. But Halford's books have a style and relevance not found in other tales of rock and roll excess. For that reason, these books have a more diverse audience than other books, I am aware anecdotally, from reading reviews of online retailers like Amazon. The combination of being gay and enjoying a genre not considered within the canon of queer seems contradictory. But Metal is also associated with masculinity and rebellion and it's precisely this dynamic that caught the ear of many queer young people. Halford delivers in Confess what many teenagers in the 80s would have loved to have known; their people were there in the hockey arena too, banging their heads.

While Halford himself might eschew a queer theory analysis of his words and might brand this article as those of 'just another wrist merchant' (as he calls writers in Biblical) I think there is good reason to bring Halford's writing into the context of a Queer understanding of culture. Metal has long been a subculture associated with working class white young men, but in the days of streaming where any song or genre is at our fingertips, perhaps we quite don't know who is listening.

"Those two words – carnival and protest – really do belong together. Making noise in this way, with people gathered together in rhythm and spirit, can obviously be fun and invigorating, yet history tells us that noise also stirs emotions, it intimidates. Sometimes it's meant to intimidate, at other times, the threat is merely in the ear of the beholder. In the Middle Ages, and in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there wasn't always a clear line between revelry and revolution: the unsettling reality was that very often they sounded exactly the same."

David Hendy in Noise: A Human History of Sound & Listening, Profile Books, London, 2013, page 135

The perception of Halford's lyrics and the bands music by those who would bring them down is fascinating. Judas Priest were vilified for perceived (hetero) sexual innuendo by Tipper Gore's Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC), a group founded in the United States in the mid-1980s by a group of politically ambitious "concerned" parents, including several prominent wives of politicians, such as Tipper Gore, wife of Senator Al Gore, himself future Vice President under Bill Clinton, and Susan Baker, wife of Treasury Secretary James Baker.

Songs in Judas Priest's discography with lyrics and titles by Halford include "Hell Bent for Leather" and the notorious track "Eat Me Alive," a song that became a favourite of both metal heads and music fans around the world after the PMRC named it as one of their "Filthy Fifteen" – songs with lyrics considered too raunchy for the ears of America's Youth in the 80s. But these songs were not about straight love-making but about raw gay sex.

In the late summer of 1985, the PMRC demanded Senate hearings, eventually called the "Parents Music Resource Center Senate Hearing," featuring appearances from musicians, industry representatives, and experts, but significantly the PMRC members spoke at length. PMRC members showed examples of explicit lyrics and artwork, claiming concern for the children of America. At the hearings' end, the PMRC proffered a rating system for music like those used in cinemas for the film industry, suggesting that albums with explicit content should be labelled with warning labels. They also requested that the music industry develop guidelines for explicit content voluntarily. Interestingly some PMRC Members asked that the labels include a warning label noting if a record had "occult" content, while not asking for the same warning for Christian content. So much for separation of church and state.

The PMRC's rating system was not adopted but because of the PMRC's lobbying efforts, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) introduced a "Parental Advisory" label in 1985, which became a voluntary warning label for albums with explicit content. The "Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics" sticker eventually became a great way to improve sales among all ages for music, the label itself being a badge of defiance in the face of censorship particularly for hip hop, punk and heavy metal artists.

Judas Priest were also taken to court accused of being quasi-Satanists trying to convince fans to commit suicide. Out in the world, the ear of the beholder is often a confused and muddled thing. The truth of Halford's lyrics is somewhat more celebratory, and something none of their straight critics seemed to notice – these songs are really gay or rather to be fair to Mr. Halford, can be to the ear that wants to hear them that way.

Seemingly unrelated, a second wave of heavy metal emerged as the AIDS pandemic was taking the lives of people globally in the early 80s. This second wave swept Judas Priest along with it even though they had been around for almost a decade before. In that second wave of metal, Judas Priest made better recordings than ever and rode a wave of massive success. Metal offered another way of thinking to the suffocating conservatism of the time. Halford is proud, and to many listeners ear is singing about it in 1982, a decade or more before mainstream pop music musters up the confidence. George Michael doesn't manage to sing anything quite so out until his 1998 single Outside (Epic Records 1998). Of course, Halford indicates that the meaning of his lyrics is open to interpretation. But listening back now, Halford's lyrics provide a road map for the future, loud, proud and standing tall.

"In The High School Halls

In the Shopping Malls,

Be cool or be cast out...

...detached and subdivided

In a mass production zone..."

From the song Subdivisions by Rush

Songwriters: Alex Zivojinovich / Gary Lee Weinrib / Neil Elwood Peart

From the Album Signals, Mercury Records, 1982

The thunderous guitars, screamed vocals, and the raw energy of Judas Priest's music resonated deeply with millions of teenagers the world over - and the walls of the basements of suburban homes. Priest provided an outlet for emotions, carnival and protest, a way to channel frustrations and celebrate. Halford's lyrics are anthemic, no less anthemic than those of Rush above, the music transcending the boundaries of sexual orientation and connecting to anger and rage present in youth generally, but young gay people specifically at the time. But many ears got it wrong, so wrong.

While globally Judas Priest found great success, in America that success was tempered with their inclusion in the venn diagram of that nation's "culture wars" – a phenomenon which pitted conservatives, often religious conservatives, against artists from the visual arts, education and popular music.

Compared to today's heavily financed players in American politics, the culture wars in America in the 1980s weren't so much ideological and political conflicts as they were a kind of advanced economic boycott, centred around moral and social issues that were fuelled by America's significant numbers of an increasingly organised religious right. The time was characterized by intense debates and activism surrounding topics such as abortion, homosexuality, pornography, and the role of religion. But the seeds of today's right wing, organised and monied, were there.

Self-appointed moral leaders, such as the Moral Majority organisation led by evangelical television preacher Jerry Falwell Sr. mobilized their followers and began an early attempt to influence public policy in line with their conservative religious beliefs. These organisations viewed many cultural and social changes of the era including the sexual revolution and feminism as threats to traditional American values and sought to push back against what they perceived as a decline in moral standards. This included at times, attacks on people with HIV/Aids as an example of what happens when you stray from a strict moral code, a difficult time to be gay. It was, of course, a great fundraising tactic to build television networks and mega churches. It required, of course, enemies. Heavy Metal and Gay Culture were not easy bedfellows, but both provided enemies ready to be targeted. Halford, as both a gay man, and a target of these organisations, is perhaps a figure representative of the zeitgeist of the times.

In Confess, Rob Halford speaks about Judas Priests notorious court case that saw them accused of using secret messages in their music, encouraging listeners to harm themselves.

In 1985, two young men in the US state of Nevada, named Raymond Belknap and James Vance attempted suicide by shooting themselves after a night of heavy drinking and drug use. Tragically, Belknap died from his injuries, while Vance survived but was left with visible injuries. Before their suicide attempt, both individuals had been listening to music, including Judas Priest, in particular the song Better by You, Better than Me. The song was not written by Judas Priest but was a cover of an earlier recording by the band Spooky Tooth (Island/A&M 1969). The families of the two men blamed Judas Priest for their deaths.

"We went along with it all (the trial), but there was still a general air of disbelief among us. We didn't want to belittle the tragedy of two lives that had been ended far too soon, but...this was all fucking stupid."

Rob Halford in Confess pp241

In 1986, a lawsuit was filed by the families of Belknap and Vance against CBS Records (Judas Priest's record label), the band members and their managers. The families alleged that the cover of the song from the Judas Priest 1978 album "Stained Class," contained subliminal messages that influenced the two young men to attempt suicide. The lawsuit was not concerned with the timbre of the music or its relatively vague and innocent lyrics, but by what the recording allegedly had hidden in the noise of the record, in the ether. The recording was said by the complainants to contain "backward masked" messages, that could be understood by the mind, regardless of the intelligibility of the suggestion in normal listening.

Backward masking, also known as back masking or reverse masking, is a psychoacoustic phenomenon that involves the presentation of an auditory stimulus followed by a second stimulus that occurs in the opposite temporal order. In other words, it refers to the practice of playing a sound or music snippet in reverse beneath the original forward playback but disguising it under the forward signal. The long running litigation took years to resolve, frustratingly for the band, the trial continued a conversation that ultimately had little basis in science, psychology or musicology.

The trial attracted significant media attention, and it became a highly debated case, as it touched upon the controversial issue of whether subliminal messages in music could be held responsible for individuals' actions. Can music, people wondered slackjawed, make you a zombie? Ridiculous, of course, but the plaintiffs argued that the phrase "Do it" could be heard when the song was played backward, claiming that it had a detrimental effect on the two Judas Priest fans.

"I did a radio interview with Howard Stern. I wasn't sure it was a good idea, as he was a notorious 'shock jock' – would it really help our cause? Our attorneys assured me it would and it went well. He thought the case was ridiculous and tore it to shreds on the air."

Rob Halford, Confess, page242

Possibly related to activism during the early HIV/Aids pandemic, the gay rights movement gained visibility and momentum during the same period of the 1980s with groups like Act Up (The Aids Coalition to Unleash Power) raising awareness not just of the illness, but of the people who were suffering with it. Christian conservatives vigorously opposed efforts to extend civil rights protections to LGBTQ+ people. On Evangelical television, the two attacks against culture and gay people played back-to-back for years.

In addition to these specific issues, the culture wars encompassed broader debates about the separation of church and state, the presence of religious symbols in public spaces, and the teaching of evolution versus creationism in schools. Christian conservatives sought to promote their religious beliefs within the public sphere and influence public policy

accordingly, often advocating for measures that aligned with their moral perspectives. Certain cases and examples were used as fuel for their success, among them was the case against Judas Priest.

These culture wars in the United States had a lasting impact on American society and politics. They shaped today's political landscape, with religious conservatives becoming a significant force within the American Republican Party, and beyond. The issues that dominated the culture wars continue to be debated and have had enduring effects on social attitudes, public policy, and the broader cultural fabric of the United States, the United Kingdom and beyond. And those ideas resonate globally.

During the trial against Judas Priest, several expert witnesses were called to testify, including individuals from the fields of psychology, psychiatry, and acoustics. The defence argued that there was no conclusive scientific evidence to support the claim that subliminal messages in music could cause such extreme behaviour.

Finally, in August 1990, the court ruled in favour of Judas Priest and the other defendants, stating that they were not responsible for the suicides or the injuries. The judge concluded that the alleged subliminal messages were either non-existent or so inaudible and indistinct that they could not have influenced the actions of Belknap and Vance. But the debate had continued for half a decade by that point. Halford wasn't entirely happy with the verdict though, writing, *"...I was dissatisfied with the verdict. I still am. The judge's summary, to me, merely stated that their lawyers hadn't proved their case adequately. It wasn't the total vindication we needed and deserved..."* (Halford, *Confess*, page 247)

Confess and *Biblical* transcend the standard pop autobiography and offer an intimate and fascinating portrait because they document a part of history that is in danger of being forgotten. As the saying goes, those who forget history may be condemned to repeat it. The personal tales, comic anecdotes and sexual dalliances mix with the important social and legal history of the time. These books could sit comfortably on the shelves of the Cultural Studies section as they do already in music. Halford's adversaries and detractors weren't merely people who didn't like the music, they were people with power, looking to solidify their own place in the world by taking him down. The surprising thing of course is that Halford has managed to remain resilient as he gets older; he doesn't seem bitter or jaded, and manages to tell some cracking stories.

"I always keep an eye on the charts and, back then, I loved some of the manufactured dance-pop...that was coming off the conveyor belt of Stock Aitken and Waterman...So that springtime, (Judas Priest) flew to Paris and joined them in the studio..."

Rob Halford, Confess, Page 229 to 230.

Judas Priest went on to record three songs with Stock Aitken and Waterman, including a cover of The Stylistics "You Are Everything." Except for a small clip of a few seconds, these recordings have never seen the light of day, but the anecdote reveals a band at the heart of their times, listening and thinking creatively. Without "Confess" and "Biblical" readers and

fans would be left to piece together Halford's long career, deciphering truths from lies that were created by people who would do them harm. The books serve as a witness to the power of music from a true icon.

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