

The 'Life And Liberation' Of A Black Female Metal Fan

DAVID GREENE, HOST:

No, you haven't accidentally switched stations. This is still public radio. We're just rocking out to the band Judas Priest.

GREENE: This is a favorite band of music writer Laina Dawes. She is all about their loud and fast guitars, the piercing vocals - and she loves to see them perform live. But now I'm going to tell you something that shouldn't matter: She's a black woman. This, she says, can make things very uncomfortable out on the metal scene. She's been verbally harassed and told she's not welcome.

LAINA DAWES: There's still a lot of resistance in terms of who should be listening to what genre of music based on their gender and their ethnicity, which is - does not make any sense to me, you know, in 2012.

GREENE: But that's the reality, and Laina Dawes writes about in issue in her new book, "What Are You Doing Here?" Dawes' story takes us back to when she was a child. The band Kiss grabbed hold of her.

DAWES: I was just enthralled with their make-up, and they looked really scary and really exciting. And right after that I asked my parents if they could buy me a Kiss record. And so I received "Kiss Double Platinum" when I turned eight years old.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "DEUCE")

GENE SIMMONS: (singing) Baby, if you're feeling good. Baby, if you're feeling nice. You know your man is working hard. He's worth a deuce.

DAWES: Being 11 or 12 years old, I really resonated with the sound of anger and my internal struggles or what I was going through. And I found that listening to the music in my bedroom, being able to just, you know, feel like you could scream and yell and really express your anger, that really helped me out when I was a kid.

GREENE: What were these inner struggles that made you want to scream at your parents and scream at teachers and so forth?

DAWES: Well, my background is I was adopted. I grew up in a very rural part, outside of Kingston, Ontario, Canada. I went to a primarily all white school, so we dealt with a lot of racism. So my parents, even though they were always there and supportive as much as they could be, I didn't feel that they were taking my concerns seriously.

Like, you know, getting on the school bus and things being thrown at you, and teased and racial insults. As soon as I got home, I knew that I couldn't tell my parents. I knew that they wouldn't understand, and that really caused a lot of depression for me as a kid, because I really didn't feel like I had anyone to talk to about it.

GREENE: So you're coming home from school having been the only black child on the school bus and feeling a lot of racism. You come home and you don't even feel like you can talk to your parents. You just go right to your room.

DAWES: Right. Right. I just - subconsciously I knew that I was on my own. I didn't feel like anyone would really understand. Or, I guess not even that - that would do anything about it.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG)

GREENE: When was the first time that you started to feel like this world of metal was not very welcoming to a black woman?

(LAUGHTER)

DAWES: Well, it was funny. Because I was in high school and there was a boy who went to another high school. And so he was really into metal, and we would talk on the phone. And I remember that he said that he wanted to meet me at a shopping mall on the weekend.

And he said, well, what do you look like? I said, well, I'm black and this and this. And he hung up the phone. I never heard from him again.

GREENE: As soon as you told him that you were black.

DAWES: Right. And also from, you know, other reactions of, you know, my black female friends in high school and their parents wondering why I'm wearing a Def Leppard T-shirt or whatever, and really kind of questioning me on my cultural legitimacy as a black person.

All of those together made me really understand at a pretty young age, that, as a black woman, I'm not supposed to be doing this, and there's something wrong with me because I enjoy this music.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG)

DAWES: In some ways, black communities, you know, music is so integral in terms of a storytelling mechanism. Back in the blues era, African-American women were actually able to talk about their hardships and sorrows through music, and be very personal. To listen to that is a real sign of cultural legitimacy.

Hip-hop, because it's also obviously a black-centric music form, when I was in my 20s and hip-hop was coming out, a lot of black people felt that if you listened to hip-hop, that means that you're really black, that you're proud of yourself, that you know who you are. So when black people listen to quote/unquote "white-centric" music - which is rock 'n' roll, or country, or heavy metal, punk, hardcore - it's seen that they are somehow not proud of who they are, they would prefer to be somebody else outside of being black. And it's seen as a slap in the face.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG)

GREENE: How has crossing this very difficult boundary changed you?

DAWES: I think it's just made me a stronger person. I mean, things that you find that you really are passionate about, they usually don't come easy to you. I've had experiences at concerts and shows that have really hurt me and have really made me think, why am I doing this again?

(LAUGHTER)

DAWES: Like what's the point. And really, when it comes down to it, it's the music. It makes me feel so good that I'm willing to put up with the occasional challenging experience in order to do something that I've really wanted to do since I was a child. And at 11, 12 years old I never thought I would be doing what I'm doing today.

GREENE: Laina Dawes, thank you so much for talking to us about this.

DAWES: Great. Well, thank you very much for your time. I appreciate it.

GREENE: She's the author of "What Are You Doing Here?: A Black Woman's Life and Liberation in Heavy Metal." And if you would like to read an excerpt from "What Are You Doing Here?" - we have it up at our website, npr.org.

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