

Northwest Terror Fest, 'for and by metalheads,' returns

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The crowd at a previous Northwest Terror Fest. This year's NWTF runs May 9-11 at Neumos and Barboza. (J. Donovan Malley)

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Special to The Seattle Times

Seattle's recent [music history](#) has been dominated by indie bands and the rise of local hip-hop. Heavy metal? Not so much, at least not for mainstream audiences. But among fans of underground music, Seattle is the natural home for one of the country's most extreme music festivals.

"There has been this resurgence of interest in specifically underground extreme metal, and a lot of that resurgence belongs to the Pacific Northwest," said Joseph Schafer, co-founder of [Northwest Terror Fest](#), a 21-and-older heavy metal celebration, whose sixth iteration runs May 9-11 at Neumos and Barboza on Capitol Hill. "The concept of 'Cascadian black metal' has its roots here. Grunge is part of that lineage and newer bands like Bell Witch. Portland's thunderous cauldron of cutting-edge death metal is also part of that. We're all part of one ecosystem and one family tree.

“Terror Fest, from the start, was envisioned as a conservation effort of that lineage,” Schafer said. “At the very least, I think it’s great for one weekend for this city to have a reminder that there is a gnarly working-class art form that lives here and is not going away.”

This year’s Terror Fest features 39 bands from a variety of metal subgenres alternating on the festival’s two stages. Belgium’s Amenra, headlining Thursday, is one of half a dozen international bands performing alongside Friday and Saturday headliners, Forbidden and Weekend Nachos, as well as locals like Seattle’s [Undulation](#), [Nox Novacula](#) and [Oxygen Destroyer](#). And for the first time, the festival will host a vendors marketplace (1-6 p.m. Friday and Saturday at nearby bar Narwhal).

Most people are familiar with traditional heavy metal — also known as trad metal, this is the “denim and leather” ’80s bands like Seattle’s Queensrÿche and Metal Church. Taking that aggressive sound to extremes, genres like death metal, black metal, grindcore and many others are characterized by heavily distorted guitars, blast beat drumming that well surpasses 200 beats per minute and incomprehensible lyrics that are growled, hissed or screamed — anything but sung. But metal can also go to extremes in other directions, as with glacially paced doom bands. And many styles incorporate elements of very unmetal genres like ambient and folk. NWTF attempts to include nearly all of them.

Schafer and co-founder Parker Folsie teamed up with Southwest Terror Fest founder David Rodgers to produce the first Northwest Terror Fest in 2017.

“He really did teach us how to do basically everything, and then after the second year he said, ‘I think you guys have got this,’ ” said Folsie. Around the same time, Leah Solomon came onboard and the three executive producers now manage NWTF as a team.

Among metal festivals nationwide, NWTF stands out for its small size and eclectic programming.

“When you look at Maryland Deathfest or Hell’s Heroes [in Texas], it is much more intimate what we are doing,” said Solomon. Compared to those bigger festivals that typically attract thousands, Neumos holds 650 people, while Barboza fits just over 200. Altogether, NWTF accommodates roughly 1,000 ticket holders, mostly from Washington, Oregon and California, but also from Canada, Mexico and countries in Europe.

“You’re not going to hear 13 bands in a day that sound similar to each other. You’ll hear some quiet stuff, and then you’ll hear the scariest things that we can find,” said Solomon.

“Terror Fest really cements the fact that there is a thriving metal scene here, and the balance of local and national/international artists is great,” said Olivia Hatfield, who performs as The Executioner in melodic blackened death metal band Undulation.



Seattle melodic blackened death metal band Undulation will play at this year's Northwest Terror Fest. (Wolfgang Ratzlaff)

The eclectic lineup is a direct result of the three producers' wide-ranging and often divergent tastes. "I've wanted to do a trad metal day for years, and this year I get it," Schafer said. "In contrast, this year has so much death metal in the basement. This is the gnarliest Barboza we've ever had."

Although primarily a fan of death metal, Solomon is also excited to see industrial synth on the lineup. She loves watching fans of extreme styles vibing to the more melodic synthesizer music they wouldn't normally choose to listen to.

Folse, on the other hand, is known for his aversion to melody.

"It's a bit of a running joke, but every now and then I have to say, 'Joseph, don't forget that the name of the festival is Terror Fest,'" he said. Stylistic differences aside, they all agree that there is no room for hate at the festival. "There are some bands and styles of music and lyricism that we will not book because it is just overtly degrading, offensive, racist," said Folse. "We don't put up with any nonsense."

Instead, they make a conscious effort to book bands that include women, people of color and LGBTQ+ musicians, and have always had a published anti-harassment policy — still unusual among metal festivals.

Cellist and vocalist Jackie Perez Gratz has played Terror Fest with the bands Ludicra and Grayceon in the past. She is returning this year with Bay Area indie doom-rockers [Giant Squid](#). “Everyone I interacted with from the audience, other band members and from Terror Fest itself were welcoming and engaging,” she said. “I had such a fun time attending the other days of the fest and seeing the familiar faces and fantastic performances throughout the weekend.”

But the name of the festival is still Terror Fest.

“Terror Fest doesn’t water itself down,” said The Executioner. “It’s a fest for and by metalheads and the weird, scary, off-putting music that we love so much.”

Northwest Terror Fest

May 9-11; Neumos and Barboza, 925 E. Pike St., Seattle; 21-and-older; full passes \$215, single-day \$75; accessibility info: Barboza is not wheelchair accessible, for Neumos accessibility details and accommodations, email info@neumos.com; northwestterrorfest.com

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