



## FEATURES

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### In Goth They Trust

Fanatic followers have kept the underground flame burning

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Bruce Britt

On a recent April weekend, a shadowy horde descended on the glitzy streets of Las Vegas. Clad in provocative black lace, velvet corsets, pallid makeup, studded fetish attire and other accouterments, the mysterious brood gathered at the Huntridge Theatre to mingle and enjoy the sounds of industrial rock, thunderous neo-metal and haunting pop.



The Cure

Though the grimly stylish mob resembled the cast of some postmodern horror film, they were actually goth rock devotees attending Convergence, the Internet-organized, gothic and industrial convention and music festival. Each year, the confab attracts music labels, promoters, marketers, DJs and the like. Viewed as a death cult after it was linked to the 1999 Columbine High School murders, the U.S. goth movement has rebounded with style, and the Convergence conference has helped dispel many misconceptions. By all accounts, the annual festival is usually a civil — even jovial — affair.

Yet amid the fun this year is a debate about goth's oft-neglected place in contemporary culture. Despite evidence of its growing popularity and influence, some claim the goth movement gets little respect from the mainstream music industry. Fans say radio and MTV have continually snubbed even the most musically accessible goth bands, while few major records companies have signed distribution pacts with indie goth labels.



Good Charlotte

The music industry's indifference suits many goth fans just fine; they actually enjoy dwelling outside the mainstream. But lately, an increasing number of bands unrelated to the goth scene have co-opted the look and sound of the underground. One sees tinges of the goth aesthetic in the dark punk fashions of Good Charlotte, while goth-punk band AFI scored a coup recently when its DreamWorks Records album *Sing The Sorrow* debuted at No. 5 on the Billboard 200 album chart. But the strongest indication of goth's resurgence is the Arkansas band Evanescence, whose Wind-up Records debut disc shot into the Top 10 within weeks of its release.

Though some hardcore goth fans dismiss AFI and Evanescence as "goth lite," others view their success as a positive step. "I think artists like AFI and Evanescence introduce new people to the sound," says Sam Rosenthal, vocalist and songwriter for the influential goth band Black Tape For A Blue Girl and founder of his indie goth label Projekt Records. "Because of those bands, some people are going to branch out and discover more underground goth sounds."

Rosenthal's philosophical perspective is not shared by many other goths, who shudder at the thought of mainstream acceptance. "The goth scene loves being underground, and it wants to stay underground," says New York goth fan Jensen Lee. "By embracing bands only they know about, goth fans feel like they're part of an exclusive community. But the thing is, goth artists want to make money just like anyone else."

Lee's comments underscore the challenges facing the underground goth scene. Could a genre that thrives on illusion and mystery withstand a Seattle-like record industry siege?

Though that question remains to be answered, one thing is certain: Goth has come a long way since its modest late-'70s origins. Combining punk defiance with the artsy excesses of the Velvet Underground, David Bowie, Kraftwerk, Siouxsie And The Banshees, Bauhaus, the Cure and Sisters Of Mercy sculpted a new sound characterized by haunting melodies, yearning lyricism, rakish fashion and stark live performance. The term "gothic" was coined after Bauhaus released the single "Bela Lugosi's Dead" in 1979. "It doesn't have anything to do with gothic literature or architecture," explains Dave Heckman, founder of the preeminent indie goth label, Metropolis Records. "It's just a name the British press gave to the darker bands of the post-punk movement."

Goth's popularity snowballed during the '80s and was flourishing by the early '90s, when founding artists such as Siouxsie And The Banshees and Ministry performed at Lollapalooza. Meanwhile, young turks like Nine Inch Nails, Skinny Puppy and Front 242 represented the next wave, merging clangorous industrial rock with cinematic lyrics.

But in a sudden twist of fate, the no-nonsense alt-rock movement drove goth underground. There it evolved, fueled by college radio, marketing firms and a global network of fiercely loyal fans.

Further disseminating the gospel were 'zines like *Gothic Beauty*, *Movement* and *Outburn*. Additional networking took place through annual conferences like the Dark Arts and Convergence festivals, and through clubs such as New York's Batcave, Los Angeles' Coven 13, and San Francisco's Death Guild. In addition, indie labels, including Metropolis, Projekt, Century Media and Cleopatra, have nurtured new acts such as Lacuna Coil, VNV Nation, Audra, Wumpscut, Apoptygma Berzerk, Switchblade Symphony, Collide and countless others.

Goth has so extensively assimilated other influences that the scene has fractured into subgenres such as goth-industrial, goth-punk and goth-metal. Absurdist bands like Voltaire and See Colin Slash come off like the goth equivalent of Spike Jones, while other acts specialize in a more subdued form called "darkwave." Danceable techno-pop bands perform in the style known as EBM (Electronic Body Music).

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Lollapalooza Returns

Rock's Seasonal Celebrations

Dualtone Personality

These days, the goth and industrial scenes are so closely associated, even experts are hard-pressed to define what goth is. "It really can't be summed up simply," says Scary Lady Sarah, a popular Chicago DJ and promoter. "If there's a common thread, it's the mood — a melancholy feel, a darkness. But it's not something you can pinpoint very easily."

Insiders say this confounding multiplicity underscores the diversity within the goth scene itself. "We are a melting pot of already existing cultures," explains Jett Black, a Portland, Ore. music marketer and promoter, "so we bring to the goth scene aspects of other music cultures, as well as other walks of life not specifically focused upon music, some of which are mutually exclusive. And not everyone gets along ... In fact," says Black, "it is very difficult to find anything that we would all agree upon."

As diverse as the scene may be, experts say goth generally attracts fans seeking a more emotional rock experience. And while outsiders might view the scene as depressing, fans are inspired by goth's horror-show aesthetics, sci-fi imagery and darkly sentimental — yet often socially conscious — lyrics.

"I think the goth scene is mostly [made up] of people that would be considered outcasts," says Projekt's Rosenthal. "There's a lot of melancholy and self-analysis in a lot of goth lyrics, and more alienated people tend to gravitate toward that."

Sonya Brown confirms Rosenthal's theory. The *Gothic Beauty Magazine* music editor describes her mid-'90s initiation to goth music as transcendent. "Goth gave me something that I didn't get from any other genre," Brown says. "There was a deepness in the music that was more meaningful than the music on the radio."

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