



# IT WASN'T JUST A PHASE, MOM!: WHEN GOTH BECAME A YOUTH SUBCULTURE



**I**n the '80s, Goth became a lifestyle. Fueled by enormous hair, smudged eyeliner, slow dancing, and echoing guitars, it was a subculture that became the most legible and far-flung demonstration of Goth thus far. Pretty much every idea we have of what Goth is today—infrequent loads of all-black laundry, the most prolonged makeup routines imaginable—was formed in the '80s.

By then, “Gothic” wasn’t applied just to music but to an entire generation of people who were aping the



Siouxsie Sioux and the Banshees perform, circa 1983.

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RIGHT: Punk, goth, and New Romantic British teens photographed in 1984.

style of their favorite bands and dancing sulkily under disco balls. Subcultures themselves—from skaters to New Romantics—also became a recognizable part of life in this decade.

Largely a reaction against Thatcherite and Reaganite Conservatism in Britain and the United States, respectively, subcultures were ways of navigating life outside mainstream structures. Members of these subcultures organized their identities around music, fashion, and style. Goth, in particular, required an intense level of participation. If you’ve ever tried and then given up on applying winged eyeliner, you might begin to have some understanding of the dedication that goes into maintaining the Goth look.

Goth was among the most insular of subcultures. Onlookers got the point of punk—it was overtly political, anarchic. They got the point of skaters, too; kids

SCAN HERE . . . FOR A PLAYLIST OF  
TOTALLY '80S GOTH SONGS



- |   |   |
|---|---|
| ♦ “Medusa” - Clan of Xymox                    | ♦ “She Sells Sanctuary” - The Cult        |
| ♦ “Goo Goo Muck” - The Cramp                  | ♦ “Release the Bats” - The Birthday Party |
| ♦ “Pretty Girls Make Graves” - The Smiths     | ♦ “Sebastiane” - Sex Gang Children        |
| ♦ “Spellbound” - Siouxsie and the Banshees    | ♦ “Tainted Love” - Soft Cell              |
| ♦ “Eighties” - Killing Joke                   | ♦ “The Host of Seraphim” - Dead Can Dance |
| ♦ “Lucretia My Reflection” - Sisters of Mercy | ♦ “Gecko” - The Creatures                 |
| ♦ “Since Yesterday” - Strawberry Switchblade  | ♦ “Charlotte Sometimes” - The Cure        |
| ♦ “The Killing Moon” - Echo & the Bunnymen    | ♦ “Human Fly” - The Cramps                |
| ♦ “Pandora (for Cindy)” - Cocteau Twins       | ♦ “Don’t Fall” - The Chameleons           |
| ♦ “Black Celebration” - Depeche Mode          | ♦ “The Shadow Of Love” - The Damned       |
|   | ♦ “Scary Monsters” - David Bowie          |



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## LOOK LIKE A GOTH: A HAIR TUTORIAL

### YOU WILL NEED:

- ♦ A fine-tooth comb ♦ Super-super-super hold hairspray
- ♦ Patience and courage

### INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Take your hair that you haven't washed in at least a week and douse in hairspray.
2. Sit on a coffin lid (or a chair, if you must) and tilt your head upside down. Take a strand of hair and backcomb the living daylights out of it. Do this to every single strand.
3. Coat hair in an extra layer of hairspray.
4. Take your fine-tooth comb and begin to futz together your backcombed strands.
5. Once your hair resembles a hissing cat, apply yet another layer of hairspray. This time, really make it count. Hold your breath, keep your finger pressed down on the can's button.
6. Voilà! Your hair looks terrifying. It's perfect.

like going fast. But Goth was baffling and impenetrable to just about anyone outside of it. There was no obvious point to Goth—though that was the point of Goth. It was a feeling, not a purpose. Who would want to spend literal hours applying liquid eyeliner, backcombing their hair until it resembled an angry skunk, and making their appearance so outlandish that it would make the average person walk in the opposite direction? Someone who felt not of this world, or at least too dark or deep or romantic for it. In short, a Goth.

Subcultures are just as much a manifestation of everything their members want to be as what they certainly *don't* want to be. The Goths did not want to be mainstream. They did not want to be shallow. They did not want to dance to the disco music that was popular at the time. What they did want was to brood, to dig deep, to find romance in the dark corners of the night. They were—just as Bowie had envisioned them—outsiders.

♦ LEFT: Olli Wisdom in 1983.

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Subcultures also implied a degree of rebellion, which was perfect for the Goths. As we learned in the first chapters, Goths picked up a bad reputation fairly quickly. For many centuries, “Gothic” was thrown around disparagingly to describe society’s vandals and villains. By the ’80s, those people had taken a sexy, rebellious turn. Even so, there was still a fair amount of derision thrown toward the Goths, though that only stoked their rebellious fire. In the ’80s, Goths doubled down and reached new heights (quite literally, with their hair and Doc Marten boots). They took the world by storm.

For a subculture to really take off, you need a breeding ground upon which the new species will hatch. For Goth, that space was the Batcave, a weekly club night that existed briefly between 1982 and 1985 in London’s aptly named Gargoyle Club. Dreamed up by the social lightning rod that was Olli Wisdom, who was then the singer of glam-Goth band Specimen, and his friend Jon Klein, Specimen’s guitarist and later a member of Siouxsie and the Banshees, the Batcave would go on to define the look and feel of Goth in the decade to come.

Prior to the Batcave’s opening, London had been overrun with disco and jazz joints, with very few spaces dedicated to alternative or underground culture. With the Batcave, Wisdom and Klein brought a distinct aesthetic and vision, one that would offset the brightness of the disco balls hanging all throughout London’s chintzy venues. “No Punk, No Disco” read the sign out front. The Batcave recoiled from the light—literally. It occupied a dank little corner of a Dickensian street in Soho.

To enter the club, visitors had to step inside a rickety elevator and climb two floors. When the doors opened, their eyes would have to adjust to a blackness even darker than the smog-filled sky outside. The first thing they’d see would be the cheap Halloween decorations, skeletons made from shoddy plastic, or possibly the coffin hanging from the ceiling. The walls were covered with crumpled trash bags and throat-tickling cobwebs. This sorry state is what they now call the “legendary” Batcave, but if we’ve learned anything about the Goths, it’s that they can romanticize just about anything.

Revelers at the Batcave, circa 1985.



But beyond the cheap decor and projections, the Batcave truly earned its legend status. It was a multisensory world of darkness and sound. The music thumped while projections of Gothic bands and visuals played faintly on the walls. On the dance floor and by the bar, you’d regularly find A-List Goth clientele, including members of Bauhaus, Nick Cave, Robert Smith, and Siouxsie Sioux.

Every Wednesday night, the Batcave was the place to be. You’d never seen people dressed so decadently, and each with their own take on Goth, from fishnets aplenty to haunted opera gowns. It set the stage for artier, heavily costumed bands like Alien Sex Fiend, who were one of the Batcave’s recurring acts. The club hosted a great many Gothic bands, including Sex Gang Children and the Guana Batz, who would go on to set the scene ablaze.

After the bands put down their guitars, Hamish MacDonald, the Batcave’s resident DJ, would play a long four-hour set. The Goths moved to his throbbing beats with all the heaviness in their bodies at least twice as slow as their disco nemeses. The bodily music MacDonald played, with basslines so low they felt like they were shaking your bones, gave physical expression to the dancers’ dark fantasies. Each Wednesday night, Goth wasn’t just an idea or aura, but something you could actually feel in your body. Dancing as one obsidian mass, nights at the Batcave felt almost ritualistic, ceremonial. It was as though time slowed down while the attendees created a world even darker than the one they were trying to escape.

The setting was a point of fascination for the music journalists who spectated as often as they could, keen to sniff out a new scene in the aftermath of punk and glam. In the first years of the Batcave, the phrase “Gothic rock” became a regular fixture in the alternative music press. As it grew in popularity, “Goth” became a tag those within the scene tried to distance themselves from. For outsiders, “Gothic rock” was a convenient way to label and make sense of a new social and cultural phenomena. For the Goths themselves, it was just another coffin-shaped box.

Before the Batcave, Goth had been an insulated world. But as the word spread, outsiders wanted in. Record companies came snooping, knowing that they could whip up a quick buzz by signing a Goth or Goth-adjacent band. By that time, playing Gothic rock was a surefire way to get prime time radio play



and substantial press coverage. The BBC regularly broadcast Goth acts. *NME* and *Melody Maker*, Britain’s biggest music magazines, covered the Goth music scene extensively and were largely responsible for the crystallization of Goth in the public eye.

One band whose popularity soared because of Goth’s trending status was Siouxsie and the Banshees. While they’d been bubbling underground since their formation in 1976, the Goth tag brought them to the surface, and they would soon dominate what Goth would become. Like most bands who were labeled so, the band despised the Gothic branding. But even if it was unintentional, absolutely everything about the band was Goth, from their name—inspired by the Vincent Price film *Cry of the Banshee*—to their somber backstory.

Siouxsie and the Banshees photographed in 1977.



The band’s leader, Siouxsie Sioux (born Susan Janet Ballion), was born to a Belgian doctor and a British secretary in 1957, the youngest of three children. She grew up an outcast in a middle-class suburb of London and fell even further into herself at fifteen when her father died in 1972 of an illness related to his alcoholism. In her grief, she lost a substantial amount of weight, grew physically ill, and ended up in the hospital. It was during her admittance that Sioux heard David Bowie for the first time. It was the same performance that had transfixed Kate Bush and so many others, the made-up man on TV blowing the young girl’s mind.

That performance gave Sioux the courage, or at least the initiative, to become herself. She began taking the short train journey from her suburb to London, finding in the city a then

thriving punk scene. She darted in and out of venues across the capital, taking style inspiration from all walks of life. By the time she reached the latter half of her teens, Sioux donned a mixed assemblage of punk, cabaret, and S&M-inspired regalia, somehow fitting the mishmash into a coherent whole. When she returned to her little suburb, she got a kick out of the shocked faces from her neighbors.

While she went on to become one of post-punk’s most compelling vocalists, Sioux was less interested in musical proficiency than she was creating a dressed-up vision. She’d taken a leaf out of Bowie’s glam book in that way. She wanted to recreate in sound the goose bumps she’d felt watching Bowie on *Top of the Pops* or Anthony Perkins in Hitchcock’s *Psycho*. She wanted to capture the shock of something new and to conjure an atmosphere filled with tension, suspense, and unease.

In 1975, during glam’s faded afterglow, Sioux met a bassist named Steven Severin, with whom she shared a dark sense of humor and outlook on life. Severin was a diehard fan of Edgar Allan Poe and Vincent Price films (and yet he still didn’t care to be called a Goth). At the time, the culture at large was beginning to reflect Severin’s tastes. Stephen King’s horror had a strong foothold on the literary market; the 1976 film adaptation of his first novel, *Carrie*, awash with (pig) blood, was representative of loose censorship and a growing taste for graphic horror.

The media being produced at the time may have suggested a more liberal mindset, but conservatism across Britain and America was just as stiff as



Siouxsie and the Banshees’ first album, *The Scream*.

THE MOST GOTHIC BAND NAMES OF THE '80S

- ◆ Christian Death
- ◆ Southern Death Cult
- ◆ Dead Can Dance
- ◆ Ghost Dance
- ◆ 45 Grave





Robert Smith in 1992.

ever. When Siouxsie and the Banshees formed in 1976, they played to a very underground audience. Their first ever show at London's 100 Club in September of that year was one of their most confrontational and outrageous performances ever and soon became something of a legend. Borrowing the Sex Pistols' Sid Vicious on drums, the Banshees played a twenty-minute jam of cacophonous noise filled with mock covers of rock classics, as well as a twenty-minute improvised performance of the Lord's Prayer, just because. Such a performance transcended words, understanding, and labels.

Nevertheless, "Goth" found itself attached to the Banshees some two years later. Nick Kent, a music journalist who caught one of their shows in the winter of 1978, thrust them under the Doors' shadow, comparing them to the architects of Goth in his live review. After receiving a flurry of Goth-related press,

the Banshees scored their first record deal with Polydor in the summer of '78. While they'd been on label heads' radars ever since their iconic performance at the 100 Club, those in the business had no idea where to place the band. Sioux was quite literally a fearsome performer, prancing around onstage as though she were looking for a fight—and they had no idea how to market that. "Goth" then became the perfect category in which to make sense of them and sell them.

With Polydor, the band released *JuJu* in 1981, considered by some to be the first Goth album ever. It achieved both critical and commercial success and enabled them to play a big national tour with a band called the Cure as their support act.

Robert Smith, the Cure's lead vocalist, joined the Banshees as their temporary guitarist, an experience that would fundamentally alter Smith and his band going forward. Before their tour with the Banshees, the Cure were outfitted like four polite young men with tidy haircuts, sensible button-up shirts, and Macintosh jackets, the kind of band that might play a distant relative's wedding. After the Banshees tour, they grew out their hair, backcombed the frizzy ends, and dressed in black. From thereon, the Cure took less influence from the brighter side of punk and ska and lost themselves to the dark forest that was Goth.

Aesthetically, Smith was very much Sioux's male analogue. He had the same bat's nest of hair, the same look of menace in his eyes, the same dark palette coating the lids. But the band's sound didn't quite mirror the ghoulishness of their image until their fourth album, 1982's *Pornography*.

While their first three albums conveyed a clear trajectory towards the increasingly dim and dirge-y, *Pornography* was the Cure's most deliberate attempt to create something truly frightening. They entered their recording sessions with the goal of freaking out their listeners and spooking themselves in the process. To aid in that mission, they each dissolved little squares of hallucinogens on their tongues and turned their sense-warping experience into sound. The result, as you can hear on *Pornography*, is almost overwhelming, great monoliths of noise, with stacks of guitars and synths piled tall as a turret.

Listening to *Pornography* from start to finish feels like walking through a heavy fog before falling through the trapdoor to hell. But what should have remained buried underground soon took to the surface, reaching the Top 10 of England's album charts and turning the Cure from a cult act into one of the country's most formidable bands.

One act who took the Cure's quasi-mainstream success and ran even further with it was the Sisters of Mercy, the most explicitly Goth of the bands on our timeline so far. Formed in Leeds, England, in 1980, the Sisters of Mercy, like most Goth rock bands, started as a joke that was then taken very, very seriously. Andrew Eldritch, the band's lead vocalist, originally saw the band as a project to marry the outrageous showmanship of American rockstarism with the austerity of British post-punk, a combination he personally found hilarious. He especially got a laugh out of performing the Sisters of Mercy's ridiculously bleak cover of ABBA's "Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)."

Like just about everyone else from the scene, Eldritch had been enabled and essentially changed by Bowie's *Top of the Pops* performance of "Starman." Eldritch felt that Bowie had given him permission to become a larger-than-death version of himself onstage, a persona large enough to overpower the man who suffered from stage fright.

The Cure's *Pornography*.

