

INTRODUCTION



WHAT IS "WHAT IS GOTH"?

Ask a Goth person "What is Goth?" and they'll likely tell you, "I'm not Goth." Which is a sure sign that they are, in fact, %666 Goth. If you find this confusing, this book is for you. If this makes perfect sense, this book is for you — but it is also about you.

It's no wonder that the G-word perplexes both insiders and on-lookers alike. This one hard-working four-letter word has been asked to define so many things: music, fashion, architecture, typefaces, literature, cinema, a Germanic tribal horde and, for about 30 years now, the kind of people prone to hanging out in graveyards sipping red wine and pretending it's blood while reading Shelley aloud and contemplating the bleakness of existence (and/or holing up in their bedrooms with Joy Division records). At least that's who one might think a Goth person is by the way we are most often portrayed in news reports and the kind of articles that pop up around Halloween or whenever a teenager wearing a black T-shirt shoots someone.



I say “we” here because I am, unabashedly, Goth.

I wasn’t born that way, a daughter of darkness. But it didn’t take much. In fact it took exactly 4 minutes and 20 seconds of television. MuchMusic, then the Nation’s Music Station in Canada, had just come to my area and, being obsessed with popular music, I watched every day after school. And on one afternoon in the late 1980s Much played “She Sells Sanctuary” by a British band I didn’t know, The Cult. Like most videos of the era, it was a simple performance clip, the band lip-synching and fake-playing in a studio — in this case one bathed in psychedelic coloured lights. It’s not, viewed today, particularly Goth. (Singer Ian Astbury is dressed like a hippie and guitarist Billy Duffy has short white blond hair, to start.) But its opening moments — a red curtain parts to reveal a shadowy, Shaman-type figure all in black slowly swirling his hands around in a fog — hypnotized me like nothing I’d seen before. And the song itself — with its incessant drumbeat, intoxicating echoey guitar riffs and infectiously simple, haunting refrain about the world dragging us down was my first exposure to something that bombastically melodramatic. I knew melancholy from poetry, but this was ache you could dance to. For me, being exposed to “She Sells Sanctuary” was like getting a blood transfusion: I woke up afterwards and my insides were completely different. I had a totally new pulse.

After The Cult came The Cure. And Love and Rockets and Bauhaus and The Sisters of Mercy and



Siouxsie and everything else I could get my hands on in a small town, pre-internet. A random photo of three scary looking guys in a free magazine turned me on to Skinny Puppy, and from them came the discovery of industrial music. By this point, I had moved to Toronto, knew the word “Goth,” and was well on my way to exploring everything that meant. Ultimately, I started publishing my own fanzine (*The Ninth Wave*, named after an album side by Kate Bush) and guest co-hosting a campus radio show, *Beyond the Gates of Hell*, with the Gothiest boy in town. It was about this time that I started being asked, “What is Goth?” A lot. Especially by the media.

On many occasions I primped for evening news cameras or wayward reporters and tried my best to explain what the hell all this was. I would declare how we are not (all) suicidal or satanic, speak haughtily of a love for poetry and philosophy and beauty and romance, trying my best to convey, in a way that just might make it into the inevitably truncated soundbite, just what is Goth.

I was, of course, doomed.

Since it first crawled out of the clubs of England and America in the death throes of the 1970s, the subculture we’ve come to call Goth has been difficult to explain. At the start, these denizens of the night were known as batcavers or death rockers, the music was generally considered part of post-punk and the clothes were simply . . . black. Mystery lingers over who first appropriated the word “Goth” to describe



this new kind of young freak; my beloved Ian Astbury (one of those Goth icons who insists he's not Goth at all) is just one who has staked his claim to it.

By the mid-1980s, the G-word was well established, and a collective consciousness evolved around the term. Gothic rock was a legit musical genre. There were Goth-specific shops, Goth magazines and Goth festivals. Goth was now a somewhat recognizable thing, a world of Victorian- or Medieval-inspired sense and sensibilities co-mingling with punk rock and S&M attitude and fashion. And the diverse crew of anarchists, art school brats and horror movie fans who had started it seemed to have been distilled into a fairly homogenous bunch — one quite easy to identify. Or so we thought. Thanks to explosion of the internet in the mid-1990s these people — many of them misfits in small towns around the globe — started to find each other in great numbers. And as they chatted amongst themselves, they discovered that as much as they were all drawn to what had come to be known as Goth, they weren't necessarily alike. A popular question became, "Is [this thing I like/hate] Goth?" Because, like any good species seeking immortality, the subculture was mutating, drawing upon new influences such as cyberpunk, rave culture and anime and finding new ways of expressing a devotion to the dark side beyond black eyeliner and backcombed hair. The different factions named themselves: rivetheads, Cybergoths, Romantigoths, etc. Each new wave brought their own codes of con-



duct and methods of communication. For the one thing these sub-groups had in common was that each sought to distinguish itself from the others, and from youth culture trends at large. And so, Goths reevaluated what the G-word meant, twisting it into new variations to suit the bewildering number of subgenres and sub-subgenres, so much so that terms such as Trad Goth emerged to distinguish the old-school original folk from the new.

The net.goths also developed their own particular parlance, a mash-up of in-jokes and slang designed mostly for self-amusement but also serving to keep outsiders out, or at least make fun of them when they crept 'round. ("Them" meaning mostly the legions of spooky kids adopting Goth in the late 1990s in wake of the mainstream popularity of Hot Topic and Marilyn Manson.) If you've ever thought Goths take themselves too seriously, you've never watched them make up names for their silly dance moves or craft Goth specific pick-up lines. (You can look up Pulling the Taffy and Nice Boots in the pages that follow.) Valiant attempts to catalogue this Goth talk were made, with FAQs helping Babybats and Elder Goths alike decipher an ever-evolving lexicon of musical genres, clothing styles, communities, and so on. But as the web grew, these resources fell fallow. Now, as a second and third generation of children of the night have come into their own, with their own bands, fashion and texting or IM shorthands, it seems we're barely speaking the same language anymore.



So it's no real surprise that it's more difficult than ever to actually explain What Is Goth. You could turn to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but even it has trouble:

Goth: 1. a member of a Germanic people that invaded the Roman Empire in the third and fifth centuries. 2. an uncivilized or ignorant person. 3. (goth) a) a style of rock music derived from punk, often with apocalyptic or mystical lyrics. b) member of a subculture favouring black clothing, black and white make-up, metal jewelry and goth music.

As a self-professed word geek I am loath to pick a fight with the mighty OED. Yet as a Goth Girl, I must. For while I am certain that those who laboured over this particular entry were as scrupulous as can be, in their brevity they have failed to suitably put to rest the question of What Is Goth? Rather, in boiling it down to three parts fashion to one part music (which wouldn't be quite so insulting if they didn't list black-clad youths and our "apocalyptic" racket after an archaic definition of Goth as an "uncivilized or ignorant person") they have reminded us that the guardians of language have not kept up with all the ways in which this word has evolved, its myriad meanings.

What about the academics, then? Yes, they too have tackled the question. In the past decade, several dense explorations of our spooky sub-cultural capital have



emerged to line university library shelves — essays and treatises on Goth identity by curious English professors and music critics and sociologists and historians. If you devour these works you may come out armed with more highfalutin words to describe our bonds (and our bondage attire) but not a useful definition of What Is Goth.

In defense of hardworking dictionary editors, reporters and scholars everywhere, this is, after all, an unpopular culture. It not only lurks in shadows, it lingers, it loves, it *lives* to be mysterious. Despite this, the first rule of Fright Club has never been “Don’t talk about Fright Club.” In fact, quite the opposite. Goths spend an extraordinary amount of time discussing and debating and defining their Gothness. The way Goths talk about being Goth (or not Goth) is as intrinsic to the culture as big boots and a copy of The Cure’s *Disintegration*. It is precisely our distinct lexicon (and the black humour that goes with it) that most distinguishes us from the similarly pale-faced, apocalypse-obsessed Norwegian black metal church burners, emo wrist-cutters and anyone else wandering back alleys in cloaks after dark. If you truly want to understand us, you need to participate in the ongoing dialogue about What Is Goth. So why hasn’t all this (pierced) navel-gazing translated to the world at large?

It’s fair to say that Goths aren’t too keen to talk to outsiders about this lifestyle. Perhaps because the conversations so often begin with “Why do you wear black?” — a question to which most of us truly have no



answer. Or perhaps because no matter what we say in interviews the media always spits out the same shallow stereotype. For every bang-on interpretation (*Saturday Night Live*'s "Goth Talk" or the Goth Kids of *South Park*), there are many more network crime dramas or daytime talk shows that get it completely wrong — all blood drinking and Satanic Bible toting. Granted, it's hard to blame them. If we can't even define ourselves, how is a TV writer (who probably works in a state where it's sunny all the time) supposed to get it right?

Once upon a time, being misunderstood was not actually a big deal. It made us laugh, a somewhat welcome affirmation of our outsider status. Then came the Columbine massacre in 1999, wrongly attributed to teenage Goths, and a shitstorm of panic rained down on trench coat-clad kids everywhere, especially in Middle America. Suddenly, the fact that the public at large had no clue what Goth was became a pretty big problem for a lot of people. Goths had joined the ranks of heavy metal music fans as alleged devil worshipping threats to The Children. We were victims of ignorance heightened by hysterical media stories and gossip.

And that is one reason I wanted to write this book. Beyond my word nerdiness and my passion for documenting subculture, I wanted to do my best to counter the notion that Goth is about violence, about self-harm, about depression or destruction or evil. I knew that it was about music and fashion and art and history and the appreciation of nature. (Well, at least bats.)



And I determined that in order to define this thing we call Goth — for myself, my fellow Goths and the world at large — I must actually define the entire Gothdom. (Yes, that's a word. You can look that one up too.) And so here it is, a compilation and celebration of our obsessions, our heroes, our humour — and our hairstyles. Whether you're a Goth word geek like me, a friend/lover/parent of one or even just a writer trying to make characters more authentic, I hope this will be your guide to truly understanding this culture.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

You'll note right away that this book has been organized alphabetically. That's because it's an encyclopedia. It contains more than 600 words and phrases used by Goths, covering what we listen to, watch and read; what we wear; where we hang out; what we talk about and much more, including more than 200 entries on influential Goth artists and personalities. Like all such books, it takes words very seriously. The list was prepared first and foremost through a lifetime of talking to, listening to and reading about Goths. Terms were cross-referenced with zines and books, websites and blogs, then tested on real live Goths to ensure accuracy and currency. That commitment to detail doesn't mean we can't have fun, and you'll certainly find snarky, melodramatic commentary, another hallmark of Gothdom. You are welcome to read it from A to Z but it is my hope that you'll simply



dive in, perhaps with a favourite word, or one you've always been curious about. You'll notice that some parts of the descriptions are typeset `DIFFERENTLY`; this indicates a word or phrase that has its own entry for ease of cross-referencing. No doubt Goth readers will have fresh ideas of their own that I have overlooked, or perhaps even an argument for an error. I welcome such suggestions for potential future editions; write to liisa@encyclopediagothica.com. Meanwhile, I pray you will not read this book like an assignment, rather that you simply immerse yourself in it and delight in the black humour and decadent language that, truly, is What Is Goth.