



The Dark Reign of Gothic Rock: In The Reptile House with The Sisters of Mercy, Bauhaus and The Cure

By Dave Thompson

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From Joy Division to Nine Inch Nails and from Siouxsie and the Banshees to Marilyn Manson, gothic rock has endured as the cult of choice for the disaffected and the alienated. The author traces the rise of '80s and '90s goth from influences such as Hammer House of Horror movies and schlock novels, through its post-punk origins into the full-blown drama of Bauhaus, The Cure and the hugely popular Sisters of Mercy axis of bands.

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Editorial Review

From the Publisher

Finally a book that documents the long and twisted story of the dark strain of goth that culminated in the stupendously great Sisters et al.

About the Author

Dave Thompson is a British freelance journalist based in Seattle. He contributes regularly to a variety of magazines including Mojo and Goldmine. He has also written a number of well-received books including the first biography of Kurt Cobain, Never Fade Away.

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proclaimed the best the band had ever played. Another new single, the Reptile House EP, brought the band their third successive Single Of The Week award, this time from the New Musical Express; hindsight, however, insists that the record deserved (and continues to deserve) even greater recognition than that. Hitherto, the media's growing insistence on a Gothic Rock movement had been firmly hidebound by its inability to actually single out a specific Gothic sound. The Reptile House did the job for them, from the deliciously slow-building three-and-one-half minute instrumental passage that resolves itself into the grinding 'Kiss The Carpet,' to the mephitic intensity of 'Lights' and 'Valentine,' and onto 'Burn,' a piece salvaged from total desolation only by the ethereal backing vocals. All that Gothic Rock would ever become is captured on this one EP; all that a hundred, a thousand, bands have tried to recapture in their own variations was blueprinted across those four (five if you count the reprise of 'Kiss The Carpet') songs. It is to the Sisters' own enduring credit that they would not be counted among that number. As the Sisters drove towards the future, Specimen continued subverting the present, subsuming some of London's most hallowed – literally – venues beneath a sea of rampant black. Joined now by synthesiser player Johnny 'Slut' Melton, a Batcave regular who rapidly transformed into what Klein affectionately dubbed 'the evil face of Specimen' (and layered the whisperingly foreboding 'Hex' with its synth-invocations of a seriously sinister Ultravox), the band played major shows at Heaven and, opening for rockabilly heroes The Meteors, the Lyceum, before taking over St Paul's Church in Hammersmith for what the handbills christened Blasphemy, Lechery and Blood – Burning Martyrs Night. Needless to say, the show lived up to that billing with fiery passion. From there, the circus travelled to the USA for a two night residency in the basement of New York's Danceteria, before spreading the madness further, with gigs at CBGBs and Philadelphia's Eastside Club. Then, returning home, Specimen finally signed the major label deal they had been threatening for so long, linking with London and unveiling their debut single, the stirringly guitar riffing 'The Beauty of Poison' – cut, incredibly, with members of the London Philharmonic Orchestra. Plans were also advanced for a full-length Batcave album, a collection to be headlined by Specimen and Alien Sex Fiend, but also serving up a vivid snapshot of all the tastes that the Batcave catered for. Sex Beat and Meat Of Youth (another brief flicker ignited by Abbo) joined the 141?headliners in conforming to at least an approximation of the Gothic archetype. Other inclusions, however, purposefully shattered the mould. Test Department was clattering atonality, a chanting shipyard of metallic clangs and brutal bangs; Patti Paladin offered up a weird Bowery approximation of early Lene Lovich; reformed Punker Jimmy Pursey spat poetry over a blistered drum track; Brilliant served up a scabrous funk fully informed by Public Image Ltd and old Killing Joke; and Marc Almond's Venomettes backing band wrapped things up with a keening chamber instrumental, all frightened violin and tentative tapping. So, Young Limbs And Numb Hymns did not emerge the Batcave Be-all and End-all that the Gothic imagery led outsiders to expect, but of course it wasn't intended to. 'Look past the slow black rain of a chill

night in Soho,' advised the liner notes. 'Ignore the lures of a thousand neon fireflies. Fall deaf to the sighs of the street corner sirens. Come walk with me between heaven and hell. Here there is a club lost in its own feverish limbo. For some, the Batcave has become an icon but, for those in the know, it is an iconoclast. It is the avenging spirit of nightlife's badlands, its shadow looms large over London's demi-monde. It is a challenge to the false idol. It will endure.' Neither was Young Limbs the sole long-playing celebration of the movement to be released that year, as Dave Roberts, guitarist with Sex Gang Children, set about organising his own collection of the weirdest sights and sounds, the album *The Whip*. Featuring the Sex Gang's own 'Oh Funny Man' and, reconfirming the movement's mainstream possibilities, a duet between Andi and Soft Cell's Marc Almond, the caterwauling compulsion of 'Hungry Years,' *The Whip* started life, insisted Roberts, as 'just some stupid idea I had in a club one night.' But it touched a pulse regardless, drawing in contributions from as far afield as Play Dead and Brilliant (again), plus a pair of Damned spin-offs, the first and only solo performance by Dave Vanian, 'Tenterhooks,' and the entire band's Naz Nomad & The Nightmares garage-psych alter-ego. A more conventional collection than Young Limbs, and certainly a lot less bewildering, *The Whip* went Top 3 on the Indy chart in May 1983, and even spun off a hit (the title track) for Carcrash International, a side project that Roberts, together with Crisis' Lester Jones had been nursing since 1981. The Batcave was in the shops. Now it needed to get out on the road. In June 1983, Specimen and Alien Sex Fiend set off on tour with all the accoutrements of the Batcave affixed to their entourage. Night after night, clubs across the UK would be descended upon, darkened and decorated, and then unveiled as a taste of the grave that everyone was raving about, a sensational outing that, even the wearily seen-it-all organisers had to admit, brought some of the most dazzling Goths they'd ever seen out of the closet.

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