

The History of Rock Music: 1976-1989

New Wave, Punk-rock, Hardcore

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Gothic Rock

(These are excerpts from my book ["A History of Rock and Dance Music"](#))

Dark-punk 1978-82

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British punk-rock was flanked from the beginning by a "gothic" movement. The violence and the frenzy of the Sex Pistols were channeled by these "dark punks" into atmospheres and tones that were meant to evoke horror scenes and exoteric rituals. The [Stranglers](#) and [Siouxsie Sioux](#) (1) were among the bands that started the fire. It wasn't much of a fire, and even Siouxsie's most innovative album, **The Scream** (aug 1978 - nov 1978), was mainly a catalog of embarrassing cliches.

Far more abrasive was the sound of [X-Ray Spex](#) (1) on their **Germfree Adolescents** (? 1978 - nov 1978), thanks to the barbaric screams of vocalist Poly Styrene (Marion Elliot) and to the dissonant saxophone of Lora Logic (Susan Whitby).

The more interesting acts of "dark punk" were the ones that sculpted a similarly gloomy and bleak sound but shunned the cartoonish, horror-movie overtones. Notably, the [Cure](#) (3) introduced existential anguish (the kind found in Camus' and Sartre's books) into rock'n'roll. **Three Imaginary Boys** (fall 1978 - may 1979) actually features a deadly cocktail of cynical hyper-realism, macabre expressionism and morbid paranoia. **Pornography** (jan/feb 1982 - may 1982) capitalized on those premises with a philosophical journey to the center of a fragile, romantic soul (vocalist and guitarist Robert Smith). After the pop conversion of the sprawling but inferior **Kiss Me Kiss Me Kiss Me** (? 1986/mar 1987 - may 1987), the Cure reached their zenith of pathos on **Disintegration** (nov 1988/feb 1989 - may 1989), which balances Smith's pedantic preaching with heavily arranged pieces that sound like symphonic poems.

The two albums cut by [Joy Division](#) (2), **Unknown Pleasures** (apr 1979 - jun 1979) and **Closer** (mar 1980 - jul 1980), before vocalist Ian Curtis committed suicide and the band evolved into New Order, coined a new kind of gothic, decadent, futuristic and psychedelic rock, and offered an unlikely mixture of Doors, Kraftwerk and Black Sabbath. Eerie melodies, funereal tempos, electronic arrangements and otherworldly dissonances interpreted the industrial wasteland as a personal nightmare. Their career

ended with *Love Will Tear Us Apart* (1980), which was the beginning of a new genre: synth-pop.

Despite its artistic limitations, the genre found a broad audience. Cavernous sound, icy voice, loud drums, martial pace, distorted guitars became as ubiquitous as the rants of the punk-rockers. Existential boredom and suicidal tendencies moved to the forefront, displacing rebellion as the main attraction of punk-rock. The same morbid sensibility inspired bands as different as the [Passions](#), [Theatre of Hate](#) (who later evolved into Spear Of Destiny), and the [Comsat Angels](#).

Thankfully, other musicians went beyond the "darkness" and coined new musical languages that were no less depressed but far more creative. They twisted the elements of rock music to manufacture a sense of loss and desolation.

The macabre, magniloquent psychodramas of [Bauhaus](#) (1), from the acid-tribal psychobilly *Bela Lugosi's Dead* (1979) to *Lagartija Nick* (1982) via the morbid sound effects of **In The Flat Field** (dec 1979/jul 1980 - oct 1980) and especially via the electronic dance pop of **Mask** (early 1981 - oct 1981), painted the most suffocating atmospheres.

[Killing Joke](#) (2) were less mental and more physical than Bauhaus: the dissonant, tribal, apocalyptic spasms of their early singles, such as *Requiem* (1979) and *Wardance* (1979), and of their first album, **Killing Joke** (early 1980 - aug 1980), were as powerful as Pere Ubu's "modern dance". Like the rest of the gothic contingent, during the 1980s Killing Joke wasted their talent setting their visions to a dance beat, but Martin Atkins eventually refounded and revitalized the band with the thundering and barbaric sound of **Extremities, Dirt & Various Repressed Emotions** (aug 1990 - nov 1990).

The [Psychedelic Furs](#) (1) set the gothic element at the border between Roxy Music's decadent spleen, the Velvet Underground's acid threnodies and Van Der Graaf Generator's futuristic melodrama. The result, particularly on **Talk Talk Talk** (feb 1981 - jun 1981), was sophisticated as well as haunting.

All of this was easily topped by the most eccentric of all "dark" bands, the [Virgin Prunes](#) (2), that hailed from Ireland with a completely different approach to "gothic", an approach that mixed archaic rituals with avantgarde music. Their grotesque Grand Guignol regressed from the grotesque and hallucinated expressionistic theater of **A New Form Of Beauty** (nov 1981 - early 1982) to the demonic rituals of **Heresie** (*live*: apr 1982; *studio*: jun 1982 - nov 1982) to the pagan folk-rock of **If I Die I Die** (jul/aug 1982 - nov 1982).

The idea peaked with the abstract, conceptual, dub-drenched sound of [Public Image Ltd](#) (21), the band formed by Johnny "Rotten" Lydon after the Sex Pistols split up, and featuring bassist Jah Wobble and guitarist Keith Levene. **First Issue** (jul/nov 1978 - dec 1978) announced a new form of music: ponderous rhythm, distorted guitar, demented screams. **Second Edition** (mar/oct 1979 - nov 1979) is the album that turned punk-rock into chamber music. By slowing down the tempo in a vein similar to dilated acid-rock, and sprinkling Lydon's psychotic monologues with deformed echoes of Jamaican, Middle Eastern and African music, the combo injected a disturbing sense of loneliness and fear into their extended, loosely-structured pieces. That praxis reached claustrophobic intensity on **Flowers Of Romance** (oct/nov 1980 - apr 1981), an album featuring Martin Atkins on drums but lacking Wobble on bass. Lydon's muezzin-like invocations played a "call and response" game with an expanded ethnic

instrumentation that felt equally at home with funk syncopation and found noise. The album's funereal lieder roamed Freudian and exoteric labyrinths. Lydon, bard of the psychic depression, set his nihilistic lyrics to a harrowing maelstrom of estranged sounds.

As dance clubs around the country adopted the depressed mood and the freakish look, a more danceable sound was concocted by the new generation of gothic punk-rockers.

The [Sisters Of Mercy](#) (1) were probably the greatest and the most influential of this generation. Their lugubrious, demonic voodoo-billy, inspired by Suicide and Cramps but propelled by panzer machines, had no equals. Coupled with that instrumental frenzy, Andrew Eldritch's Morrison-ian vocals created a tension that was both stately and devastating. The culmination of their career and the culmination of gothic rock was *Temple Of Love* (1983), their most visionary and propulsive ceremony. **Floodland** (oct 1987 - nov 1987) added a futuristic and oppressive sound, courtesy of Jim Steinman.

Other horror bands included: [Alien Sex Fiend](#) (1), whose album **Who's Been Sleeping In My Brain** (sep 1983 - nov 1983) was more demented than macabre rockabilly, the catastrophic [Fields Of The Nephilim](#), the romantic [Gene Loves Jezebel](#), and the savage [Sex Gang Children](#).

Gothic 1984-86

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Ian Astbury's [Cult](#) and Wayne Hussey's [Mission](#) wed the sinister overtones of dark-punk with Led Zeppelin's old-fashioned hard-rock. The former were derivative of AC/DC, Cream, Free, Led Zeppelin, Doors and Rolling Stones, although the symbiosis worked wonders in *Spiritwalker* (1984), *She Sells Sanctuary* (1985) and *Love Removal Machine* (1987).

[In The Nursery](#) (2), i.e. twins Klive and Nigel Humberstone, were unique in that they interpreted gothic in the tradition of classical music and electronic music. The duo mixed Klaus Schulze's cosmic music and Constance Demby's new-age music and progressed, over a number of formative works, notably the EPs **Temper** (? 1985 - oct 1985) and **Trinity** (? 1987 - mar 1987) and the single *Compulsion* (1987), towards a synthesis of old-fashioned musical idioms, such as teutonic romanticism and central European decadence. Their favorite form, perfected and streamlined on their third album, **Koda** (apr 1988 - may 1988), used a synthetic orchestra to emulate Wagner's magniloquence over a martial tempo à la Holst's **Mars**. The music, clearly more inspired by the classical than the rock tradition, had a melancholy, visionary and sometimes nostalgic quality. Their symphonic staccatos, that indulged in horns and strings, were embellished with collages of samples. Further simplifying their compositions, In The Nursery produced more accessible works such as **L'Esprit** (may 1989 - apr 1990), and eventually became a case of pompous synth-pop.

Theomania (end 1987/may 1988 - jun 1988) by the [Cassandra Complex](#) offered vehement psychobilly halfway between Suicide and the Velvet Underground.

While mostly a British genre, dark-punk eventually spread to continental Europe too (for example, [La Muerte](#) in Belgium and Brighter Death Now in Sweden).

The terror expressed by these bands was the other side of the cynical rage of the punk-

rockers. They were two different perspectives on the same vision of life, on the same nervous breakdown. However, "dark punk" focused on loneliness, apathy, claustrophobia, paranoia, and, ultimately, on the need for a cathartic apocalypse.

Gothic hardcore 1980-86

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Los Angeles' punk-rock scene briefly experienced a gothic resurgence which paralleled British dark-punk. While it did not amount to much, bands such as [Urinals](#), [45 Grave](#), Alex Gibson's [Bpeople](#), [T.S.O.L.](#) (True Sounds Of Liberty), [Kommunity Fk](#) dusted off the graveyards visited a few years earlier by the likes of Joy Division and Siouxsie Sioux.

Few albums stood out. One of the earliest gothic bands, the [Flesh Eaters](#) (1), led by the literate and visionary Chris Dejardins (the "Divine Horseman"), recorded **A Minute To Pray A Second To Die** (? 1981 - apr 1981), featuring the Blasters's Dave Alvin and X's John Doe, an album that sounds more like Poe-like poetry set to roots-rock than a punk album.

[Christian Death](#) (1), the sinister creature of vocalist Rozz Williams, penned the arcane, atmospheric ballads of **Only Theatre Of Pain** (? 1981 - mar 1982), which would be influential on the future of gothic rock.

Gothic music was virtually reinvented by [Black Tape For A Blue Girl](#) (13), the brainchild of keyboardist Sam Rosenthal. **Mesmerized By The Sirens** (summer 1987 - sep 1987) was the manifesto of his electronic chamber music, while **Ashes In The Brittle Air** (dec 1988 - mar 1989) signaled Rosenthal's increasing reliance on electronic keyboards. **A Chaos Of Desire** (nov 1990 - ? 1991) was the first full realization of his vision, a magical balance of orchestration and voices, of pathos and contemplation, a cycle of baroque ballads for chamber ensemble and atmospheric electronics that was appropriate for both Freudian nightmares and Greek tragedies. As the music became more ethereal and displayed a stronger neoclassical quality on **This Lush Garden Within** (? 1993 - may 1993), Rosenthal coined an art of mental paintings with the imposing **Remnants Of A Deeper Purity** (jan/apr 1996 - jun 1996). Its melancholy madrigals, set in bleak and desolate landscapes, and performed with the austere aplomb of sacred music, downplayed the litanies and emphasized the drones replacing the sense of eternal damnation with a sense of eternal mystery. The experiment begun with this album's five-movement concerto *For You Will Burn Your Wings Upon The Sun* was pursued on **As One Aflame Laid Bare By Desire** (aug 1996/aug 1998 - jan 1999), which reached even deeper into the human psyche. The sumptuous beauty of **The Scavenger Bride** (nov 1999/dec 2001 - apr 2002) marked a culmination of this program of progressive emancipation from musical conventions.

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