

Don't Be Afraid of the Dark

They are called Goths, and they prefer black clothes and darker emotions. You may not know these people, but they are in your city tonight. Pray that somebody—maybe you?—will reach them.

A young woman is checking IDs on a Saturday night outside the Kitchen Club in Miami. In the glow of moonlight, her wan face radiates against the coal black of her lips, eyeliner, hair and clothing. Darkly accented patrons drift by her to be frisked before vanishing into this Goth club situated along a main street of the tropical city.

Everywhere inside the cave-like club there is black—on the floors, the walls, the ceilings. Jet black clothing shrouds hundreds of Gothic allies of the night who are here after midnight. They are adorned in capes, hoods, wings, spikes and chains or veiled with leather, lace, wool, fishnet, vinyl and velvet.

A young man and woman—slim, androgynous and decorated by huge shimmering fairy wings on their backs—glide like a pair of Gothic pixies along a twisting bar tempered by dim ruby light and draped with scarlet curtains. Beyond, it's so dark you can't see your feet.

Wham! wham! wham! goes a strobe light against the eyes, stabbing the blackness of the dance floor with thrusts of white. Figures caught in its eerie flash go jerking by—appearing, vanishing, reappearing.

"The bats have left the bell tower / The victims have been bled / Red velvet lines the black box / Bela Lugosi's dead /

Undead! Undead! Undead!” cries a song from the P.A.

Like one fluid form, a black mass of people move to the music in a dramatic underworld exhibition of how the “dead” can dance.

A young woman snakes with arms held high in the ethereal atmosphere. Black lace-up boots reach above her knees, and she wears a shiny black-vinyl miniskirt. She is shirtless, and only black tape shaped like Blair Witch crosses covers a scant portion of her upper torso. Nearby, a young man dances in a tight black skirt that hugs down to his ankles, and a woman in a black top and clear miniskirt pushes through the crowd.

Wham! wham! wham! against the senses goes the unceasing strobe, and the music cries again above the macabre regale: “The virginal brides file past his tomb / Alone in a darkened room / Oh, Bela / Bela’s undead!”

Celebrating Darkness

If you think the kind of Saturday night fever found in Miami’s Kitchen Club is uncommon, guess again. From Bondage A-Go-Go in San Francisco to Straightjacket in New York City to Release the Bats in Germany to The Blood Coven Bar in Brazil—similar scenes are everywhere.

Welcome to Goth culture.

Today, students from the country’s most elite universities gather at Goth nights called “The Crypt” and “The Fuse” in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the sprawling ManRay Club only a

few blocks from Harvard and MIT. They hang out below a giant mural of bats that covers an entire wall lit by black lights.

They dance to Gothic, industrial and synthpop music within spider-web partitions made of chains. They shoot pool and drink while bloody vampire movies play on ceiling-mounted televisions.

Such clubs are a fixture—but only one—of the subterranean Goth culture that has emerged in the United States in recent years. Goths tend to see beauty in what society considers morbid—a pallid look, skull and skeleton designs, coffins, graveyards. Their tastes lie outside the mainstream—and that's how they like it.

Beyond the glint and glare of everyday society the Goth subculture has spawned its own music, arts, fashion and distinctly alternative way of thinking. Since the 1970s, "Gothdom" has grown from its British grassroots into an international taproot for counterculture youth.

Bands old and new such as Christian Death, London After Midnight, The Electric Hellfire Club, Alien Sex Fiend and many others power the important musical side of the scene. They can be found in assorted record stores or in extensive catalogs such as the U.K.'s Nightbreed Recordings.

Contemporary novelists Anne Rice (Interview With the Vampire) and Poppy Z. Brite (Lost Souls) as well as 19th century dark muser Edgar Allan Poe are but a few literary favorites. Some Goths prefer comic-book series, such as The Sandman (Neil Gaiman) or Johnny the Homicidal Maniac (Jhonen Vasquez).

Gothic films hawking the imagery abound: *The Crow*, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Nosferatu the Vampire* (1922) and a slew of other vampire films. A staggering Gothic network exists on the Internet with newsgroups, listservs and chat rooms.

You might spot Goths by their dress—a classical Renaissance style with elaborate medieval-style shirts, gowns and topcoats—clothing that many of them make themselves—or the sharper-edged look of vinyl, PVC polymer, latex, or black leather fixed with metal studs or spikes. At The Inkubus Haberdashery in Miami's eclectic Coconut Grove district you can pay \$300 for a black trench coat made of PVC, \$120 for a latex miniskirt, or \$200 for a fierce-looking "armor" ring of silver and turquoise shaped like a talon.

Today's Goths, who generally tend to be in their teens and 20s, have nothing to do with the Germanic Visigoths of Europe in the third and fourth centuries A.D.

Instead, they derive their cultural identity from bands such as Bauhaus, Siouxsie and the Banshees, The (Southern Death) Cult, The Cure, Ministry, and Sisters of Mercy, some of whom revolved around London's Batcave Club during the late 1970s and early 1980s. These musicians launched what became known as a "darquewave" musical style that originated in punk music but stood out as a campy response to the happy image of disco that was popular at the time.

British band Bauhaus, named for the German architectural design school whose credo was "less is more," is considered a progenitor of the subculture. Formed in Northampton, England, in 1978, Bauhaus debuted in 1979 with its spooky single, "Bela Lugosi's Dead," and the gaunt atmospheric guitars and creepy

Buddy Holly-like vocals raised a generation out of the shadows.

Says Todd Mayville, 36, of Northampton, Massachusetts, a high-school teacher who's been a Goth since 1984: "In college I saw David Bowie's *The Hunger*, and it opens up with Bauhaus singing 'Bela Lugosi's Dead,' and I just got chills. I was like: 'Oh, what is this music? I need to have all of it!'"

Who Are These People?

The growth of the Goth movement in the last two decades has spawned a few misconceptions and misguided stereotypes—specifically, that the Columbine killers were Goths, that Goths worship Satan and that they all believe they're "vampires" who must drink blood.

Goths bristle when it's suggested they hold the same beliefs that prompted the killing spree at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in April 1999. Anders Mar, an administrative assistant in his 20s who lives in Portland, Maine, blames the stereotypes on posers who don't authentically represent the subculture.

"I can speak for the true Goth population as a whole: The fact that these fakes have ruined our good name is a source of great anger to us," he says.

"Each group has its bad seeds," says Seth Gooch, 24, of Kalamazoo, Michigan. "Columbine doesn't represent Goths as a whole."

"We've really gotten a bad rap because of the Columbine massacre," says Julie Peterson, 29, of Madison, Wisconsin. "Those who don't conform are stereotyped as bad."

David Hart, 51, a former concert promoter in Southern California for Christian artists ranging from Amy Grant to Stryper, has been a pastor to Goths in San Diego for close to 15 years. He says they are more likely to be passive and artistic than aggressive, more the type to sit in a room with candles and talk about literature.

"Their parents tend to be the opposite," Hart says. "Goths tend to come from homes of two-career parents who are aggressively pursuing the American Dream. If anything, Goths are more likely to be suicidal than homicidal. Many are from families where they were parented from the philosophy of: 'I'm too busy. Here's \$50. Go to the mall and let me work.' The kind of thing that was going on with the Columbine killers."

But surely all that black garb Goths wear means they're evil. After all, the Columbine killers wore black trench coats.

And Goths are Satan worshipers, aren't they? Most Goths scoff at the notion that they worship the devil.

Mayville grew up in the Episcopal Church and was an altar boy. His DJ name, D'Arcangel, is a play on the term "dark angel" or "the archangel."

"My baptismal name is Michael. My DJ name is an homage to Michael the archangel. So I find it ironic with these Christians going off on me, saying you must be a devil worshiper."

He also has to defend himself, as many Goths do, against accusations that his dark clothing means he's evil.

"People will say: 'You dress in black. Do you worship the devil?' And I'll say: 'Well, priests dress in black and so does Johnny Cash. How come I can't?'"

Peterson echoes: "I've never in my life met anyone who worships the actual being, Satan. Satanism is, in fact, humanism—the worship of self."

Also exaggerated, Goths claim, is their shadowy reputation as "vampires." Most members of the subculture are quick to say vampirism is a sideline interest or a fetish embraced by a minority within their ranks and that it is practiced nonviolently.

Those who do engage in it sometimes do so through a "live-action role-playing game," or a LARP. Some players use a guidebook titled *Vampire: The Masquerade*, a sophisticated volume of genealogy and role-playing that reveals how to play a vampire or victim. Players at times will share blood in a ritual called a "Vauldrie," which is used to create covenants or allegiances.

Frankie Guell, 23, of Miami, has witnessed the exchange of blood between friends on several occasions. He has never participated in the act, but he has been intrigued by vampire lore he says since his childhood when actor Bela Lugosi, who played one of the first Count Dracula roles in film, appeared to him in a dream.

"I've seen people cut with razors or using syringes—consenting partners—never nothing that would hurt another person," he says. On such occasions, blood would be put into cups and shared, he adds.

"There is something very sexual about it," he says. "It's almost like you're sharing yourself completely because your essence is going into someone else."

Yet, deep below their outer trappings of music, fashion or fetish, Goths define themselves primarily as being those who possess the "soul" of a Goth.

"Most [of us] consider it internal," says Steven Bensinger, 18, of Kalamazoo, Michigan, who works for a national Gothic retailer called Hot Topic. "I don't dress strictly Gothic. If I did, I wouldn't be a Goth if I didn't have my clothes on."

Though Guell initially was drawn to the scene by a fascination with horror, the friendships and acceptance he found appealed to him more. The desire for relationships, Mayville notes, is a greater key to the subculture's attraction than its mysterious side.

"One of the universal aspects of the Goth subculture is that we're very accepting as long as you're being true to yourself," Mayville says. "We don't care if you're a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim or a pagan. It doesn't matter if you're gay or straight. Be who you are, and we'll accept you for who you are."

Some Goths believe they are born with distinct Gothic personalities. Peterson believes that a person is born with an

affinity for the subculture but chooses to embrace its dark aesthetics.

Hart has counseled many Goths who have been abused verbally, emotionally, sexually or physically. He says the “Gothic personality” tends to bury emotional suffering and that the style of dress sometimes is meant to reflect inner pain.

“Goths tend to be intelligent, sensitive and deeply introspective. They tend to hold their pain inside for a really long time and let pain define their lives—which is why some of them dress the way they do. They see their lives and their souls as tattered and dark, and they dress accordingly.”

“We are misunderstood and need an outlet for our intellect and creativity,” Hannah Syfritt, 25, a wife and mother in Phoenix, says of her subculture. “We need to be accepted for our emotions and style of learning and not just put on medication.”

Running From the Truth

Goths are outcasts who are desperately seeking acceptance, and they are running from established Christianity into the arms of Wicca, a neopagan religion of witchcraft and nature worship. Most Goths already have given up on absolute truth and are atheists. But the majority of the rest of them are Wiccans—most of whom were reared in Christian churches.

“A large percentage of Goths have come out of highly ritualized churches—Catholic, Episcopal, Presbyterian,” Hart says. “Because of this many are predisposed to the ritualistic nature of Wicca.”

Despite what they believe about God, Goths tend to be very spiritual, and sometimes this leads them to religions other than Christianity that promise power, something many Goths have lacked in life, Peterson says.

How then has the church lost such a sizable portion of its youth to the lure of unbelief, dark aesthetics and romantic paganism? Some say it's because too many Christians aren't willing to change with the surrounding culture.

"Culture changes, but the Scriptures do not. Yet the mainstream church's mentality is: 'I want you to have my cultural experience of Christianity,'" Hart says. "Goths come from a different framework and won't have it."

Bruce Wright, 40, a former Youth for Christ staffer and pastor of The Refuge in St. Petersburg, Florida, goes a step further. He thinks youth subcultures such as the Goths have no taste for Jesus because the U.S. church has diluted the Word of God.

"The Bible is sanitized and sounds like fairy tales to them," he states. "They perceive that life is easy and that Christianity is a lifestyle that is prosperous and has no struggles."

"They expect those who know Jesus to be unselfish, but they see the church as a politically right-wing, elite social club who call themselves pro-life yet won't help the poor."

Horrific as the visage of Gothdom can be, there are some Christians who aren't afraid of the dark. Outside the glint and glare of everyday Christianity they have spawned their own

muisc, Internet life, and evangelism for Goths. They can be found in Christian Goth bands, on Christian Goth Web sites and even in churches for Goths, such as the First Church of the Undead in Orange County, California.

Most of them are just everyday Christians—such as Melody Bailey, who attends an Assemblies of God congregation in Slidell, Louisiana. Besides being a greeter at her church and a leader in her youth group, she reaches out to non-Christian Goths with friendship.

She's also one of several people Charisma interviewed who became Goths after they became Christians. Bailey did, in part, because she "always liked to be different" and because Goths "were way nicer to me than other people," she says.

Dan Chick, 26, of Minneapolis, an Internet database developer, was a Christian when he became a Goth two years ago while attending the Cornerstone Christian music festival in Illinois, where he met Christian Goths.

"When my life started falling apart a few months later it was the Christian Goths who were there for me when none of my other Christian friends were," Chick says.

Peterson is a Christian stay-at-home mom who homeschools her four children. She attends a nondenominational church in Madison, Wisconsin, and is taking a hiatus from a ministry she started for Goths called Ex Nihilo.

In the meantime, she leads an Internet ministry called Xnetgoth that provides a way for Goths to network with one

another and fellowship online. Like those she ministers to, Peterson is unashamedly Gothic.

“People stop and stare when I go grocery shopping with my kids. I wear all black. I wear dog collars and lots of silver jewelry,” she says. “I love to sit in the graveyard and contemplate life. I like to light all the candles in the house and dance to The Cure in my living room.”

Syfritt, who attends a house church in Phoenix and whose parents are former Foursquare pastors, says Christians need to learn to embrace more than “just the happy people staring at the back of your head every Sunday morning. It boils down to this: We are here to love God and love each other. If we do we do not know the heart of God.”

Syfritt and a growing minority of unorthodox Christians apparently have decided that if young people in the Goth subculture are going to hear the gospel, then believers must be willing to light a candle in the dark to reach them. *