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# **Gothic Covers: Music, Subculture and Ideology**

*Les reprises gothiques : musique et idéologie*

**Charles Mueller**

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# Gothic Covers: Music, Subculture and Ideology

by

Charles Mueller

Florida State University

**Abstract** :In British popular music there is often an ideological component to the way that an artist covers a song that was originally recorded by someone else. Nowhere is this more apparent than in songs that were covered by bands associated with English subcultures. Musical groups popular with the goth movement were particularly adept at remaking songs to reflect their sensibilities and express their concerns.

This study begins by presenting an overview of the British goth movement and its music explaining why the subculture embraced Gothicism during the 1980s and how they used it to articulate their fears and voice their discontent. The article then examines how songs covered by goth artists provide insight into this often misunderstood subculture and musical genre. An analysis of several musical examples illustrates how goth groups used the music of others to breathe new life into punk and glam rock, celebrate British national identity, and assault rock's misogyny and musical conventions. Goth covers of songs by The Beatles, T-Rex, The Rolling Stones, and Brian Eno will be explored, as well as Through the Looking Glass, a collection of covers by Siouxsie and the Banshees.

**The art** of covering and arranging other people's songs has been an important aspect of English popular music since the rise of skiffle in the 1950s and the British blues boom of the 1960s. Covers typically served as part of a musician's learning process, as a way to showcase their interpretive abilities, and to demonstrate that their style was distinct from that of the competition. Performing songs by others was also important to an artist's claim to authenticity, proving that they were legitimate practitioners of styles that originated with a different culture (jazz, blues and rock n' roll), and celebrated American music as a symbol of revitalization in the post-war years. After the 1960s the way that a group or individual artist covered another performer's material continued to have an ideological component, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the music associated with English youth subcultures such as punk, goth, and mod. Youth subcultures thrived in Great Britain from the 1960s through the 1980s, and dramatized and drew attention to a wide variety of social ills and collective fears while providing creative space for young people. Dick Hebdige in his study *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979, pp.122-23) states that subcultures grew and endured because they embodied a sensibility and found a way to say the right things at the right time, voicing refusal and protest through style. For most subcultures expressing concerns through music was an important means of cohesion, and the way in which bands associated with a particular youth movement interpreted the music of others is a window into their system of values. Musical groups and their fans were often sensitive to the sign value that an existing song possessed, as well as its possibilities for appropriation and manipulation.

Recording artists associated with the goth, or gothic subculture, were particularly adept at remaking the music of others to reflect their sensibilities. In this article, I will explore the different ways that goth bands approached the tradition of covering songs by other artists, how this reveals insight into how goth as a musical genre developed, ways that the groups utilized their influences, and how music was a part of their strategies for expressing refusal. Before discussing the music, however, it is necessary to provide a brief discussion of the goth subculture and their music as a distinct style in and of itself.

The *Encyclopedia of Contemporary British Culture* (Bottom, 1999, pp. 233-34) defines gothic as a subculture derived from the punk movement that replaced that genre's anti-establishment

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political rhetoric “with an interest in all things macabre.” This included adopting a menacing style of fashion that imitated bands such as Siouxsie and the Banshees and The Sisters of Mercy.<sup>1</sup> According to my own ethnographic research with over ninety people who participated in goth in Britain during the 1980s (Mueller, 2008), a new and distinct type of haunting, melancholic, but inspiring punk-derived music did form the impetus for the gothic subculture by articulating existing fears and pessimism. It brought together people, primarily from the working and lower middle-class, who were anxious about their future, affected by the social and economic turmoil of the Thatcher-era, and fearful that the Cold War would escalate. Abuse by peers, illness, abandonment by family members, loneliness, unemployment, and the boredom and monotony of suburban life were additional reasons cited by my informants for their attraction to goth.

Mick Mercer (2005), the only music journalist to consistently cover the goth scene from its inception, states that goth bands and their followers were, at first, simply considered to be a part of the punk movement, but gradually acquired the label “goth,” or “gothic” after the British music press began applying the adjective to the music and image of bands associated with the subculture such as Siouxsie and the Banshees, Bauhaus, The Danse Society, The Sisters of Mercy, and others. Some of these artists also described their music as gothic in interviews, and related that they often drew inspiration from the work of Edgar Allen Poe, Vincent Price, and early expressionist horror films. (Paytress, 2003, p.107). Mercer (2005) relates that goth bands and their followers simply came to view punk music’s aggression and overt political commentary as one-dimensional, rapidly becoming a cliché. They were hungry for music with more emotional depth. By the early 1980s punk and goth groups were drawing different crowds and it was clear that each had a different approach and sensibility.

Music that is now categorized as goth was a distinctly English, largely underground genre that was separate from both punk and new wave, but maintained some similarities with both those styles. For example, goth retained punk’s veneration of musical amateurism and its pessimism, as well as new wave’s use of synthesizer technology, drum machines, and dance rhythms. What set goth music apart was its dark affect, ranging from sentimental melancholy to despair to abject terror. Goth lyrics typically focused on disappointment with society, cruelty in everyday life, child abuse, themes from literature and films, and personal anguish. The texts were sung with

a theatrical intensity and set to atmospheric music that showed the influence of film scoring rather than blues-based rock. Ostinatos, extended techniques, the manipulation of timbre and texture, the creative use of drum machines and guitar effects, expressive harmonic suspensions, and powerful bass lines were all employed to capture the dark mood of the lyrics. The music's unrelenting ominousness and its exploration of negative emotions were truly worthy of the gothic label. The music, however, was usually not crushingly dissonant, and the word that most of my goth informants used to describe their music was "haunting" or "beautiful" (Mueller, 2008, p.114). The artists used Gothicism to sharpen and expand the scope of punk's social criticism and clearly felt that gothic aesthetics were the most appropriate means to articulate their concerns. Gothicism was also an ideal way to build upon punk's legacy of anti-establishment expression since horror films have historically been considered subversive and a particularly dangerous form of escapism in the United Kingdom (Kermode, 2002, p.11).

There are three other aspects of goth that should be mentioned before discussing the genre's approach to covers. First, goth was known as a subculture that was especially popular with women. Female musicians were celebrated and the bands featured more gender diversity than one would find in other types of rock. Masculine conventions of rock authenticity, such as blues-based riffs and song structures, showy guitar solos, and misogynistic lyrics were either shunned by goth bands or used in an ironic mocking way. The genre celebrated femininity as a seductive, subversive sign.

Second, goth's dramatic visual and music style is based on a complex intertextuality. Although it developed from Britain's punk movement, goth bands generally had more in common with the more intellectual and experimental bands from New York such as The Velvet Underground, and Television. These groups were distinguished by their complex arrangements, dissonant harmonic language, and lyrics that dwelt on the dark aspects of decadence. In fact, goth was open to appropriating elements of virtually any form of culture associated with decadence and decay. Female goth performers owed a measure of their image to the vamps of early film. The stark, mannered expressionist horror films from Weimar-era Germany were tremendously influential

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to goth both in terms of image and musical aesthetics. Weimar cabaret influenced the lyrics and declamatory vocal style of goth singers.

One of the primary motivations of goth musicians seems to have been a desire to update another style associated with decadence -1970's glam rock. Throughout most of their careers goth bands were continuously compared to David Bowie by the British music press as a way of dismissing or marginalizing their work (the gothic adjective was used for this purpose as well) (Burchill, 1978, p.45) Goth artists were attracted to Bowie's sophisticated, William Burroughs-inspired, apocalyptic lyrics, the important role of timbre in his music, as well as his skilful balance of harshness and beauty. They were clearly fascinated with the grotesque eclecticism of albums like *The Idiot* by Iggy Pop and Bowie's *Aladdin Sane*. In goth music, appropriating elements from Bowie appears to have been a symbol of depth, introspection, and fatalism. But above all, goth bands were attracted to how glam rock parodied masculine blues-based rock conventions.

Third, goth bands often made extensive use of camp, both musically and visually. Although frequently not defined in dictionaries, the term typically signifies a mode of expression that combines tackiness with glamour and the ephemeral. The adjective has been used to describe gothic artwork from all historical periods. Mark Booth (1983, pp. 85-99) in his extensive academic study describes camp as complete insincerity, brutal cynicism, delighting in caricature, and reveling in powerlessness. He describes art that is overly mannered, clichéd, and created from elements that do not blend well together.

In goth creating works that are attractive and expressive, but developed from elements that are hackneyed or clichéd is a sign of authenticity. Camp works validate the feelings of people considered marginal or unworthy of being taken seriously. Camp, with its emphasis on the ephemeral and the hysterical, represents an assault on masculine values. Neutralizing or subverting masculine power is one of goth's primary objectives.

## Goth Artists and their Approach to Covers

Goth music was an often misunderstood genre. At the time, music critics did not comprehend the music and record companies did not know how to promote it effectively (particularly to audiences in the United States). This contributed to its underground appeal as a style for those in-the-know. Much can be learned about goth music by examining their approach to cover songs, particularly the way goth groups built upon the work of their influences. Intensifying the elements of the original music that they found to be the most effective is a primary feature of songs covered by goth bands. It is perhaps surprising that brutal satire was not typically a part of the goth approach to reworking songs since goth was derived from punk and also because defiling established conventions is a major part of the gothic aesthetic.<sup>2</sup> In this genre, artists covered songs with one of the following aims in mind: to demonstrate the continued importance of glam rock by sharpening the subversive aspects of the genre, to bring a dark intensity to camp and kitsch, and to reinterpret iconic English rock music by turning it into studies in color and atmosphere. Goth bands also sought to appropriate the sign value of their influences and disarm misogynistic music that could appear threatening from the female perspective.

### *Homage and Appropriation*

I want to begin my discussion of representative examples of the above approaches by discussing songs that remained faithful in most respects to the original music. With these covers, goth artists were positioning themselves as the musical heirs to those predecessors whose work they admired and that was complementary to their ethos. Songs that illustrate this approach can be found in the work of Bauhaus, a Northampton-based group whose music was perhaps the most gothic of all in spirit. Their debut album, *In the Flat Field* from 1980, featured two of their most celebrated covers; “Ziggy Stardust,” by David Bowie, and “Telegram Sam” by Marc Bolan. The group took many liberties with their cover of Bolan and this will be discussed in the next section, but with “Ziggy Stardust,” the group admitted that they chose to faithfully cover Bowie’s signature song not only to pay homage to their biggest influence, but also to bait and irritate the press who constantly accused them of being unimaginative imitators of the glam rock from



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the previous decade (Sutherland, 1982, p.24). Most goth bands faced this problem but Bauhaus more than most on account of their theatrical performance style, and vocalist Peter Murphy's resemblances to David Bowie. Bauhaus also opened their 1982 album *The Sky's Gone Out* with a near faithful reproduction of Brian Eno's "Third Uncle," the ambient composer's most accessible and nonsensical song. The primary goal of this cover was for Bauhaus to associate themselves with the artsy sophistication of Eno's music and his reputation as the most important figure in ambient popular music, a master of atmosphere, which goth artists necessarily aspired to be. Covering "Third Uncle" may also be interpreted as an invitation by the band for audiences and critics to evaluate their music with a different mindset than one would have when listening to established punk music or metal bands like Black Sabbath, with whom they were initially compared (Gill, 1980, p.32).

Another example of a near faithful cover is from Christian Death, the only American band associated with the English goth movement. The band selected "Gloomy Sunday," the most lugubrious piece in the vocal jazz repertoire as their sole cover. The choice is not surprising perhaps, since goth artists were keen to appropriate visual and musical signifiers associated with beauty, femininity, and death. Recording the song allowed the band to rapidly accumulate an abundance of sign value. Composed in 1933 by Rezso Seress, "Gloomy Sunday" has been the focus of urban legends that claims that the music prompts listeners to commit suicide (Anon, 1968, p. 84). The song is primarily associated with Billie Holiday whose name invokes connotations of deep sadness, drug addiction, glamour, and self-destruction. A former prostitute, Holiday appealed to the goth subculture because she demonstrates the value and potential of people that polite society might dismiss as gutter trash. She is also a symbol of female greatness in music.

The only liberties that the group took with the composition were adding sampled sounds from an urban street: the rustle and commotion of passing crowds, sirens, breaking glass, etc. Gitane Demone's singing is heartfelt, but necessarily mannered in order to recontextualize the jazz standard for a goth/punk audience.

*Intensification and Transformation*

Another way that goth bands approached covers was to re-interpret the original, intensifying any subversive or grim aspects already present in the work to a grotesque extreme. Bauhaus' version of Marc Bolan's "Telegram Sam" is an example. In its original form "Telegram Sam" is a study in the ridiculous with nonsensical lyrics describing a cast of colorful characters with humorous rhymes. The accompanying music (A pentatonic) represents R & B stripped down to its most basic elements, with a catchy, tuneful melody, an infectious rhythmic drive in the verses, and an absurdly sentimental chorus based on the harmonies VII and minor i. The song became a popular single in 1972, but many critics picked up on the fact that underneath the superficial comic and cheerful affect that the track projects, it was a sad self parody, an "artistic collapse" in the words of the *New Musical Express* reviewer (Shaar Murray, 1972, p.54). "Telegram Sam" is a cynical exercise in trash culture with Marc Bolan perhaps testing boundaries to determine just how nonsensically he could compose and still be accepted by fans and the industry.

In the version recorded by Bauhaus, the group demonstrated that they recognized the cynical nature of the song and carried this quality to disturbing extremes. The group's interpretation also plays upon Marc Bolan's death in an automobile accident three years earlier by using the ephemerality and deliberate trashiness of his music as a death symbol. Based on the success of the song, most audiences seem to have uncritically accepted "Telegram Sam" as an unpretentious, lighthearted and enjoyable piece of rock music, or perhaps even a guilty pleasure. The Bauhaus interpretation assaults such beliefs about the song, defacing every aspect of the music in typical gothic fashion, leaving the listener no sense of sanctuary. The band was clearly demonstrating that they had the artistic prowess to transform even the most innocent and lighthearted composition- a piece of humorous nonsense- into an experience of overwhelming anxiety.

In the Bauhaus cover, the all important groove of the original song is completely destroyed as vocalist Peter Murphy delivers his lines in erratic free time and startlingly off key. The band punctuates his phases with the guitar riff from the original, played with power chords a major 6<sup>th</sup> lower and with a neurotically brisk tempo that strike the listener with the sensation of frantic anxiety. The distortion and fundamental sound of the guitar is tightly focused rather than

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open and resonant. This gives the guitar riffs, even in their low register, a disturbing, physical slashing quality reminiscent of the violin parts in the soundtrack to the famous shower scene in *Psycho*.

Murphy's declamatory singing on "Telegram Sam" is just as disturbing. The lyrics describe a series of colorful people, and the vocalist seems to interpret this aspect of the song as a metaphor for schizophrenia. The phases are sung with an unpredictable stress given to random syllables. Murphy sings forcefully, then leisurely, sometimes shrieking, or with clenched-teeth anger, or sometimes in the manner of a silly child. During the chorus, in contrast to the verses, Murphy sounds lifeless, ambivalent. As one might imagine all of the deliberately schmaltzy, saccharine elements of Marc Bolan's original song such as the string arrangements and backing chorus are absent in the Bauhaus version; replaced with jarring dissonant feedback.

Tricia Henry (1990, p.33) in her book *Break All Rules* asserts that glam rock was "about putting catastrophe in listenable song structures," and was for "rebels who wanted commercial success." But this is an oversimplification that ignores a large part of what the artists were trying to show—the hollowness of success and the style over substance mentality of the music industry. This is why James Hannaham (1997, p113) mischaracterized goth when he wrote that the style over substance aesthetic that groups like Bauhaus appropriated from glam was "an albatross" around the neck of the goth subculture.

One of the most popular artists associated with the goth genre were The Sisters of Mercy, formed in Leeds in 1980. Admired for their wit, danceable grooves, beautiful harmonic progressions, and the ominous baritone of singer Andrew Eldritch, the band's two covers both appear on *Some Girls Wander by Mistake*, a collection of roughly produced demos from 1980-1983. Their cover of "1969" by Iggy and the Stooges is a reproduction of the vulgar American punk rock admired by goth bands for its street-wise cynicism and connotations of being music by white-trash for white-trash. The Sisters of Mercy's cover of The Rolling Stones' "Gimme Shelter" however, represents another approach that goth bands took to covered material- transforming English blues-based rock music into works of dark ambience. Remaking a song by The Rolling Stones might seem like an odd decision for a goth artist since The Rolling Stones are associated with

misogyny and masculinity. But The Stones are also associated with androgyny, decadence, and the occult, due to songs such as “Sympathy for the Devil” and the album *Their Satanic Majesties Request*, and are English icons of deviance. Youth subcultures such as goth represented an alternative form of the English nationalism that swept Britain during the 1980s, when celebrating the national heritage was part of the vogue.

The Sisters of Mercy were probably attracted to the sentiment of the words to “Gimme Shelter” with its vivid similes (streets burn like a red coal carpet) bluesy flood metaphors, as well as dire warnings of impending disaster. The eerie calm-before-the-storm-atmosphere of the song’s introduction would also have appealed to musicians fascinated with ambience. It features a descending c-sharp major- b major- a major progression animated in the manner of R&B players,<sup>3</sup> but made mysterious and ambiguous through the flickering, pulsating vibrato effect from their Fender amplifiers. As the guitars form an aural metaphor for simmering social unrest, Mick Jagger hums a haunting c-sharp minor melody that creates tonal ambiguity that only adds to the mystique.

In their version, The Sisters of Mercy wanted the eerie atmosphere of the introduction to permeate the rest of the song. They began by transposing the song from c-sharp major to c-minor, which results in a darker, richer sound. But c-minor is still a key that allows for no open strings and results in a tension or tightness to the sound, which the affect of this cover requires. The R&B-style guitar picking of the introduction is replaced in the cover by expansive arpeggios that linger on the tension of the VII, as shown in Example 1 a. In other parts of the song the harmonic motion of the original remains intact. For example, the verses that stay on a static tonic, and the i-VII-VI descending progression of the chorus, which is so important to the effect, however, during the verses, the chugging, full-bodied strumming of Keith Richards is replaced by distorted power chords drenched in reverb that provide a threatening ambience.

An important way that the mood of the introduction is maintained throughout the song is that the haunting minor-key melody hummed by Jagger in the original is played in an embellished form on the guitar (Example 1 b), and a snippet from that melody is used to punctuate every line of the vocalist shown in Example 1 c.

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The Chess-inspired sound of the rhythm section in the original becomes the disturbingly monotonous pulse of a drum machine (an effect probably inspired by the drumming of Maureen Tucker of The Velvet Underground, whose unnervingly mechanical performances contributed to the unsettling nature of the band's music). The drum machine is the sole source of the cover's rhythmic energy. While in the original version the rhythm of the words and Jagger's sensitivity to it all contributes to the groove. Every line of the text is, with few exceptions, set in an iambic meter and with spondaic accents on "War! Children!" There are caesuras after each of the lines which alternate between short and long phrases. This rhythmic alternation is emphasized by Jagger's vocal line, which is more declamatory than melodic and rises on the long lines and falls on the short. In the cover, Andrew Eldritch purposefully sings with little regard for the accent of the words and without the melodic rise and fall of the original version thus negating an entire layer of the rhythmic drive.

Jagger brings a great deal of character to his performance singing in a street-wise, street jiving manner, alternating between an intense and a relaxed delivery with a knowing laugh at the end of each phrase. During the chorus, "War! Children! It's just a shot away" Jagger is dramatically joined by female backing vocalists in R&B fashion. In the cover Eldritch's delivery is deliberately lifeless, a disturbing monotone not unlike that of Nico. The chorus of background singers is absent, but Eldritch compensates for their absence by emphasizing the words slowly in his deepest range and most sinister tone. This interpretation strips away any trace of blues or R&B from the song and instead recasts "Gimme Shelter" as a study in gothic text setting. The cover was an early effort and could have been more effective with better recording and mixing. The Sisters of Mercy did make the song a part of their live performances, and it provides an early example of what would become known as the goth genre of popular music. Additionally, the cover set a precedent for other goth bands to cover The Rolling Stones in a similar way. The Danse Society's version of "2,000 Light Years From Home" from 1984 is an example.

*Color, Surface, and Reinterpretation*

The richest source of cover songs from the goth genre is *Through the Looking Glass* by Siouxsie and the Banshees, an album consisting entirely of reworked material from other artists and released in 1987. Formed in Bromley by vocalist Susan Ballion and bassist Steven Severin, Siouxsie and the Banshees were the first band associated with the goth subculture to gain notoriety; in fact, their sound and image was largely responsible for the development of goth as a distinct genre of popular music. With their vivid atmospheric settings, lyrics inspired by Edgar Allen Poe, and dramatic approach to instrumental color, the group proved to be extremely influential. Their portrayal of the world as a place of unrelenting danger and risk was the epitome of the gothic sensibility, and Ballion's powerful, beautiful voice and imposing presence as the group's front woman was an important reason why females were particularly drawn to goth.

The band claims that they decided to create an album of covers because they were inspired by David Bowie's 1973 album *Pin Ups*, which consists of exaggerated parodies and satires of celebrated rock and R&B songs from the 1960s (Paytress, 2003, pp 158-60). The band has never, to my knowledge, explained if *Through the Looking Glass* referred to Lewis Carroll's sequel to *Alice in Wonderland* or to the way that the Banshees changed the identity of the covered songs through color and surface elements. Carroll's book is typically considered to be a work of extravagant absurdity and meaninglessness, a virtuosic display of the literary manipulation of time and perspective. Siouxsie and the Banshees's album is similarly capricious in nature and their most accessible work; however, their skill in capturing the mood and atmosphere of the lyrics, an ability to which they have few peers in popular music, remained consistent.

*Through the Looking Glass* contains covers of songs by artists who clearly influenced the band. Their selection displays the stylistic lineage of goth music: high camp and ephemeral trash (Julie Driscoll, and Sparks), somber synthesizer-based ambient music (Kraftwerke), musical signifiers of seduction ("Trust in Me" from *The Jungle Book* soundtrack), musical signifiers of subversion and female artistic achievement (Billie Holiday), ambience and sensuality (The Doors), glam rock (Iggy Pop, and Roxy Music), and experimental New York punk (Television).

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One song that suggests that the band may have been referring to Lewis Carroll with the album's title is their cover of "Lost Little Girl," one of The Doors's most melancholy pieces. In the original version the sparse text describes a girl in a hopeless situation who is given an opportunity for redemption. The setting is seductive, because we know little about the circumstances. The constant alliteration of "lost" and "little" clearly portrays the female in a vulnerable position, but the gravity of her situation is conveyed entirely by the music. For example, the way that Jim Morrison delivers the verses slowly and despairingly piecemeal with suspenseful pauses and a brooding descending bass ostinato that repeats through the verses. Robby Krieger's accompanying guitar forms another ostinato layer. It consists of attractive melodic figuration that alternates between the lush e-minor tonic and c-major. The alternation between i and VI has traditionally functioned as a symbol of sentimentality, sadness, and despair in popular music (and a progression frequently used in goth music as well) shown in Example 2 a.

During the song's chorus the lyric persona an unseen narrator states, "I think that you know what to do," thus indicating that the female is being presented with a means of escape from her despair. The music appropriately responds to the emotional change in the text as the walking bass begins to skip up and down rather than descends. The music crescendos through an increase in density with the entrance of the drums and organ, also Morrison's vocal line is doubled in this section to emphasize the importance of the words. The melancholy i-VI progression modulates to I-iv-I in d-major and also briefly touches upon the IV-vi-bIII-V. The modulation provides a burst of energy, but the overall affect remains reflective and somber due to the imposition of a non-diatonic minor chord into the major progression. The chords were created by using the d blues scale and mixolydian mode in hybrid form, a technique in rock and blues when a major or major pentatonic mode might be considered too conventional to adequately express heightened emotions. If the guitar was the instrument most responsible for generating despair in the verses, then the organ represents optimism in the chorus. The Doors made the sound of the VOX Continental organ an integral part of their sensual, psychedelic style. Here, the group was playing upon the organ's religious connotations, giving the chorus the air of a spiritual epiphany.

Siouxsie and the Banshees motivations for remaking “You’re Lost Little Girl” are not clear. Although The Doors were not associated with misogyny nearly as much as other bands of that era, the song does depend for its effectiveness on stereotypes of feminine weakness and Jim Morrison’s patriarchal position as narrator. Did Susan Ballion wish to neutralize the song’s threatening quality for women? Or was Ballion attracted to the song’s sympathetic portrayal of the female and her ability to control her own destiny? I would argue that the song’s melodic and harmonic beauty and its remarkable evocation of despair and redemption make a case for the latter. Morrison’s affective vibrato and the nuanced dynamic shadings of his lines also suggest empathy for the girl that he describes.

Nevertheless, Siouxsie and the Banshees completely reworked the song dispelling the menacing, melancholy mood. Due to the somber heaviness of the original we assume that the female is mature, facing challenges of considerable importance; however the surreal, enchanting quality of the Banshees’s cover (and the album’s title) make the listener feel that the girl in the song is a child and that Ballion’s narrative voice is maternal. Songs about the dangers and terrors of childhood were a central focus of Siouxsie and the Banshee’s music, a characteristic that other bands picked up on and made a distinct feature of goth. Here the affect is one of mystery and disorientation rather than danger. The group transposed the song up a perfect fourth to a-minor making the bass line and harmonies less deep and ominous. The plodding common time of the original was changed to carnivalesque triplets in 12/8 meter. The fatalistic bass line was reinterpreted with sprightly dotted rhythms that, when taken with the line’s descending nature, produced a capricious, diabolical effect (Example 2 b).

The guitar, often treated as a contemptible signifier of misogynistic rock by the Banshees, is absent from their version. Instead, a synthesizer set to mimic the sound of a piano momentarily sounds, in oomph-pa-pa rhythm, an enticingly vague a9 sonority that is missing both the third and the seventh. It is answered by a second inversion a-minor triad in the extreme upper register sounded on bells (Example 2 c). Other verses feature a-minor chords played with voicings and in registers that sound equally grotesque and hollow, and creaking sound effects played on string instruments with extended techniques. The constant meter changes, flashes of color



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and harmony that jump out at the listener, and the reverb effect on the instruments give the impression of being lost in the literal sense. The band plays with the manipulation of time and space just like Carroll's narrative.

The surreal atmosphere of the verses continues into the song's chorus as the ooph-pah-pah triplets abruptly and astonishingly give way to the sounds of Motown. As was typical in that style, the drums accent every beat of the 4/4 rhythm. The synthesizer imitates the lush fundamental of strings and plays the same harmonic progression as in the Door's original, however, the way the chords are voiced, and the manner in which they punctuate the lines of the singer sound remarkably like a chorus sung by The Supremes. The entire chorus resembles "Stop in the Name of Love" in nearly every respect. In the Doors's version the chorus depicted a transcendent moment for the female subject, but in the cover the rapid schizophrenic effect of the changes in style, instrumental color, volume, and density is surreal and disorientating.

The most drastic departure from the original version is the replacement of Robby Krieger's contemplative jazz-inspired guitar solo with a nightmarish interlude of grotesquely shrieking and wailing voices over a carnivalesque hurdy-gurdy accompaniment. The a-minor to c-sharp-minor alternation during this section was clearly inspired by the clichéd I-III-I Lydian progressions that film composers use to accompany dreams or childhood flashbacks.

Finally, Ballion's singing on "Lost Little Girl" warrants mention. The vocalist faithfully respected the melody and even mirrored Morrison's vibrato and inflections on every note just as she does with most tracks on the album. The vocal melodies and the singer's performances are treated as the song's essence, but the setting of the words is an ephemeral colorful costume.

The concept of taking threatening or misogynistic music or pieces expressing violence and effacing their aggressive nature with color, artifice, or dance rhythms was employed on other songs in *Through the Looking Glass* as well. The cover of "Gun" by John Cale is an example, as is "Hall of Mirrors" by Kraftwerke.

Goth artists used colorful instrumentation and danceable rhythms to achieve other effects as well. To goths, symbols of glamour, beauty fame, and ephemerality were signifiers of death and

decay. Turning famous songs by iconic artists into lifeless, beautiful, but unnerving pieces of artificiality was another method that goth artists took when covering the work of others. “Dear Prudence” by The Beatles was utterly transformed by Siouxsie and the Banshees on the 1984 album *Hyena*, one of the group’s most macabre recordings. “Dear Prudence” was not the first time that the Banshees had covered a Beatles song; their debut album *The Scream* from 1978 contained a harsh, cacophonous cover of “Helter Skelter.” In that instance the band was probably attracted to the song because it was already an exaggerated parody of the heavy blues-influenced rock that Ballion and her companions despised (MacDonald, 1994, p239), also, the Manson-family murders imbued the song with gothic sign value.

“Dear Prudence,” was reportedly written as a token of friendship for Mia Farrow’s sister who was ill and studying meditation alongside The Beatles in India (MacDonald, 1994, 248). The music was personal and intimately tied to a specific occasion, time, and place. Siouxsie and the Banshees’s cover is free of any of these connotations, as the band played upon the song’s status as a super-sign from The Beatles’ revered *White Album*, generally considered one of popular music’s greatest achievements.

Lennon and McCartney’s poetry is simple and symmetrical in every respect creating a mood of gentle playfulness. The spirit of the lyrics is reflected in the original music, which resembles a Dylan-like acoustic ballad. For most of the song, George Harrison plays an ostinato of perpetual motion arpeggios on a detuned guitar that kaleidoscopically change through a descending bass line from I-I 4/2-IV6-IV in d-major. A chorus of voices, ad-libbed electric guitar licks, and changes to the drummer’s rhythm pattern all playfully work to entice Prudence.

In the Banshee’s cover, “Dear Prudence” becomes a lifeless, glamorous sign, the musical equivalent of Warhol’s silk-screened Marilyn Monroes. Ballion’s singing is passionless, and the characteristic bass line descends rigidly without the syncopations of the original. The guitar arpeggios sound mechanical, the music has no dynamicism, and the electric instruments are so heavily processed with effects that there is nothing organic about their sound. This is not unlike Warhol’s colors, which are unnatural with no pigmentation. Only the drumming has spirit, which was necessary in order to make the song a parody of a super single. The adlibbed guitar licks, vocal

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chorus and rhythmic changes in the original are all absent from the cover as the band preserved only those musical characteristics that were necessary to maintain the song's identity, musically stripping the song down into two-dimensional form with little character. The Banshees also added Beatle-esque gestures to the song indicating that they intended the piece to be an exercise in sign play. For instance, during the introduction as well as the verses the guitar parts are doubled by a marimba introducing an uncharacteristic color into a rock song. The instrument was either treated with heavy reverb effects or was multi-tracked in such a way that the notes shadow themselves imperfectly, sounding out-of- sync. This was clearly in reference to the artsy studio techniques that helped shape the sound of The Beatles ( Hjort, 2007, p.194).

The most significant characteristic of this cover was the spectral, mysterious-sounding way that elements of the music were blurred and undefined. The vocal lines always sound weak and distant in the mix with considerable reverberation added, which give the voice a haunting ghostly quality. Ballion's singing resembles that of a spirit of temptation more than a welcoming voice of encouragement. The use of a flanger is pronounced on the guitar, and, at times, the other parts as well. The effect smears all the notes and timbres into one another and adds a silvery unnatural gloss to the sound.<sup>4</sup> During the song's bridge "Look around round round" the flanging is so intense that it musically simulates vertigo.

The Banshees's treatment of the harmonies also contributed to the song's mysterious quality. The descending bass line and ostinato guitar figuration of the verses remains the same, but are slightly altered and simplified by being transposed to c-major and creating a I-I 4/2-vi7-I aug pattern as the bass line falls as shown in Example 3. Essentially, the guitarist was holding down a c-major arpeggio and changing the bass note on every beat. The ear does not really register the change in harmonic direction. With the flanging effect on the guitar's signal it simply sounds like a c-major sonority is being blurred with passing dissonances. During the chorus guitarist Robert Smith multi-tracks distorted power chords that he superimposes over the ostinato progression with the root of each distorted chord corresponding to the notes of the bass line. This leads to harmonic ambiguity that is only increased by the flanging effect.

*New Musical Express* interpreted Siouxsie and the Banshees's glamorous lifeless arrangement as "reverential" (Snow, 1987, p. 30); however I feel that the group was expressing sentiments similar to Jean Baudrillard's Warhol-esque statements concerning fame and its effects (1979, pp. 96-97), "The death of stars is merely punishment for their ritualized idolatry. They must die, they must already be dead- so that they can be perfect and superficial, with or without their make-up. But their death must not lead us to negative abreaction. For behind the only existing form of immortality, that of artifice, there lies the idea incarnated in the stars, that death itself shines by its absence, that death can be turned into a beautiful and superficial appearance, that is itself a seductive surface."

Ironically, Ballion claims that she wanted to make the song even more disfigured, "It didn't seem subversive enough and was far too damn catchy." (Paytress, 2003, p. 137). Nevertheless, "Dear Prudence" turned out to be the Banshee's most successful single. On *Through the Looking Glass*, the band's covers of Iggy Pop's "The Passenger," "Little Johnny Jewel" by Television, and Julie Driscoll's "This Wheel's on Fire" (itself a Bob Dylan cover) were altered in a manner similar to that of "Dear Prudence."

## Camp and Kitsch

The last approach that I would like to discuss concerning goth artists and their covers is the genre's predilection for expressing extreme horror or melancholy through camp and kitsch. For this example, I would like to return to Siouxsie and the Banshees's *Through the Looking Glass* album, and their interpretation of Lewis Allan's "Strange Fruit." The song, which graphically depicts the lynching of African-Americans, is forever associated with Billie Holiday (previously I explained why the great jazz vocalist appealed to the goth subculture). But covering "Strange Fruit" gave Siouxsie and the Banshees even more sign value to appropriate. According to David Margolick (2000, p.20), "Strange Fruit" is a unique example of the avant-garde in popular music, too sophisticated to be classified as blues or folk music and too political and polemical to be called jazz. Unlike most popular music it is stark and difficult to listen to, certainly not the

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type of music associated with female singers during the 1930s. The gothic aesthetic embraces this type of boundary violation, the ability to make audiences uncomfortable, and celebrates the involvement of women in the avant-garde. “Strange Fruit” and Billie Holiday were both associated with Café Society, a left-leaning New York nightclub that featured political cabaret blended with Harlem jazz (Margolick, 2000, p.40), and leftist cabaret singers were the type of artists that goth musicians aspired to be.

The terms camp and kitsch are sometimes used interchangeably to describe works that rely on exaggeration for their effectiveness and revel in bad taste; however, Mark Booth (1983, 23) feels that there is one important distinction: kitsch has honorable intentions while camp does not. I believe that the Banshees’s cover of “Strange Fruit” belongs to the former category since I do not feel that it was the group’s intention to mock the song, or present the music in an insincere way. The recording has pathos; however, the extreme mannerism and stylization and sardonic sentimentality that the group used to capture the affect of the lyrics are marks of camp and kitsch (Booth, 1983, pp. 97-112).

The most obvious examples of stylization and bad taste in this arrangement are the sound effects of blowing wind and creaking ropes that begin the song the tolling bells during the second verse and the New Orleans funeral march, complete with a brass section, which serves as a bridge. Such devices would be considered corny in any conventional aesthetic, but are right at home in Gothicism, which values not only the grotesque, but also any technique, no matter how trite, that contributes to a sense of atmosphere. Two other characteristics that can be found in the cover that Mark Booth (1983, p.29) cites as key elements of camp and kitsch are deliberately composing with pseudo high-art pretentiousness and a limited number of stylized gestures. The former can be observed in the scoring, where Ballion is accompanied for most of the song by a string quartet performing in an exaggerated high-romantic style with tasteless excessive vibrato. Additionally, the mannered, descending sequences in the inner voices create a saccharine weepy effect. An example of the latter is seen in the melody, which differs considerably from Allan’s composition. In the original score the most expressive melodic gesture are the leaps down a perfect fifth, then up a perfect fourth on the words “blood on the leaves” (g down to c and up

to f, the tonic minor in the Holiday recording). Ballion (singing in c-sharp minor) focuses on the descending gesture and repeats the d-sharp-e-a snippet continuously as the primary part of the melody shown in Example 4.

Booth (1983, p.29) observes that camp and kitsch works are determining facile, a characteristic shown in the harmony of the cover as Allan's chromatically rich, continuously unfolding progression is replaced by an ostinato i-iv-v-I, all in root position. The effect is mannered, but the minor v does provide a small measure of the poignancy of Allan's chromaticism with minimal effort.

The effect that the cover has on the listener also supports many of Booth's conclusions on camp and kitsch (1983, p.84). He states that camp people show little concern for politics and social problems and are constantly trying to draw attention to and away from themselves simultaneously. The Banshees' arrangement with its emphasis on special effects of scoring was unlikely to inspire serious reflection on racial issues, particularly as late as 1987. Ballion's performance is heartfelt and surprisingly restrained. But unlike Holiday's elegant subtle performance, which allowed the words of the song to speak for themselves without an indulgent interpretation, Ballion's restraint simply focuses the listener's ear on the surface effects; one only absorbs the words in order to get enjoyment from the novelties in the arrangement. Similarly, the historical importance of the song draws attention to Ballion, but the sentimentality of the interpretation deflects attention away from her as well since those who respond favorably to sentimentality in music are self-absorbed with their own emotional reactions rather than on features of the work (Goldman, 2004, p.106). To the British goth participants who I interviewed, "Strange Fruit" was a remarkably effective cover. For admirers of goth music sentimentality and melodrama are never defects. The emotional responses that such devices invoke help fans to feel alive and significant, primary reasons for the existence of subcultures.

Like most recording artists from the 1980s, groups associated with goth wrote most of their own material, and covers made up only a small percentage of their repertoire. Still, from listening to their covers it is possible to appreciate not only goth artists' skill at text-setting, but also how they developed a new genre largely by attempting to breathe new life into glam and punk. Although the "goth" label may have begun with journalistic hyperbole, these bands were worthy

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of the gothic adjective, although one must look more at their original music than the songs that they arranged to perceive it fully. Gothicism is characterized by examining dark emotions, atmospheres that create fear and dread, and the generation of intense feelings through shock and surface effects. The music of goth bands possessed those qualities in full-measure. Through their approach to covers we can see that celebrating the feminine and English national identity were equally important components of the genre and its accompanying subculture. This demonstrates that examining covers can often reveal the less obvious qualities that make the music of a specific artist or genre effective enough to inspire a subculture.

## Footnotes

- 1 For a more complete list of bands from the 1980s that were considered part of the goth genre see Mercer (1991) or Mueller (2008).
- 2 The Lords of the New Church did record a scathing parody of Madonna's "Like a Virgin" but this was not typical for goth covers.
- 3 Guitar accompaniments in R&B are typically characterized by two and three voices moving in parallel 3rds or 4ths, and alternating with arepggiated chords and melodic fills. The playing of Curtis Mayfield and Ike Turner are examples.
- 4 Like other pitch modulation effects such as chorus, and phase, flanging is produced by combining an instrument's original signal with a delayed copy. Flanging distinctly saturates the notes of a guitar, keyboard, etc. with an oscillating whooshing sound, not unlike that of jet aircraft. Goth artists frequently used the effect (and many others) to give their parts a mysterious, spectral, ambiguous quality.

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## Musical examples



Example 1. The Sisters of Mercy, "Gimme Shelter" a. introduction.



b. guitar melody from the introduction (derived from Jagger's vocal line)



c. snippet from the guitar melody

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Example 2. The Doors, “You’re Lost Little Girl” a. guitar accompaniment

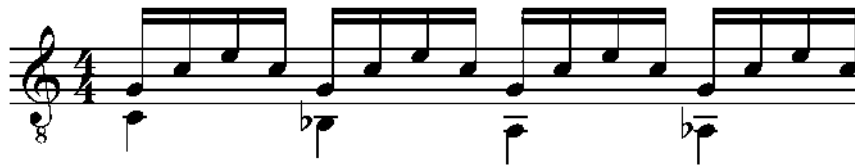


b. bass line from cover



c. accompaniment for the verses

Charles Mueller



Example 3.



Example 4. Siouxsie and the Banshees, "Strange Fruit"