

The History of Rock Music: 1989-1994

Raves, grunge, post-rock

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Gothic Rock

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

Nordic gothic

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The gothic brand of punk-rock ("dark-punk"), that had seen the light in the heydays of the new wave, redefined gothic rock as a deeper and stronger mood than the one originally served by Black Sabbath and Alice Cooper. Gothic rock was, first and foremost, an attitude, and remained such during the 1990s. In the 1990s, that attitude was refined by a generation of musicians that could take advantage of improved studio technology and electronic instruments.

Somewhat surprisingly, the leadership moved from Britain to the United States. Britain's gothic was limited to late purveyors of apocalyptic folk such as Rose McDowall's [Sorrow](#), for example on **Under The Yew Possessed** (1993), and Michael Cashmore's [Nature And Organisation](#), for example on **Beauty Reaps The Blood Of Solitude** (1994).

Germany's gothic school was far more imposing. [Aurora](#) (11), formed by Project Pitchfork's members Peter Spilles and Patricia Nigiani, crafted two of the eeriest and most powerful works in the genre: **The Land Of Harm And Appletrees** (1993), typical of their bleak and majestic overtones, overflowing with memorable melodies and eclectic arrangements (symphonic, acoustic, danceable, dirge-like, and so forth). The apocalyptic lieder of **Dimension Gate** (1994) covered an even broader territory, evoking both medieval religious music and ancestral tribal music, mimicking at the same time cosmic, techno and new-age music, sounding like a meeting of Popol Vuh and Dead Can Dance in Sven Vath's studio.

[Das Ich](#) (1), i.e. vocalist Stefan Ackermann and multi-instrumentalist Bruno Kramm, composed **Staub** (1994), a symphonic work of heroic

proportions.

However, it was Sweden that came to rule European gothic. Roger Karmanik, the mastermind of [Brighter Death Now](#) and the founder of the Cold Meat Industry label, was the inspiration behind Sweden's gothic scene. [Deutsch Nepal](#)'s **Deflagration Of Hell** (1991) was still under the influence of industrial music (the genetic source of this scene), but soon Scandinavia coined an original language: the "sound constructivist" school, that merged elements of ambient, gothic and industrial music, and, in general, relied on atmospheric keyboards and sometimes classical instruments to create terrifying visions of the otherworld; a genre that often sounded closer in spirit to classical music than to rock music. The works of [In Slaughter Natives](#), such as **Sacrosanct's Bleed** (1992), were feasts of excesses, relying on heavy-metal guitar and stormy beat-boxes as well as Gregorian litanies, Wagnerian choirs, martial drumming, etc. [Love Is Colder Than Death](#)'s **Teignmouth** (1991) bridged the ancestral and the modern, the middle ages and cybernetics, ecstasy and hedonism, via a sequence that led from monk psalms, funereal tempos and organ drones to disco beats and bombastic arrangements. [Mortiis](#) (1), the brainchild of Emperor's bassist Haavard Ellefsen, transposed Klaus Schulze's symphonic grandeur and Brian Eno's majestic ambient ecstasy into gothic music, particularly with the two lengthy suites of **The Songs Of A Long Forgotten Ghost** (1993). [Ordo Equilibrio](#) (1), the project of multi-instrumentalist Tomas Pettersson, specialized in the glacial, desolate electronica first pioneered on **Reaping The Fallen** (1995). [Arcana](#) (1) refined the neoclassical, symphonic style on **Dark Ages Of Reason** (1996). The most abstract project was [Morthound](#) (Benny Nilsen), who sculpted the electroacoustic suites of **This Crying Age** (1991).

The master of nordic landscapes was Peter Andersson, known as [Raison D'Etre](#) (2), who experimented with both the "industrial folk" style of **Prospectus I** (1993), a set of psalms for string section and percussion instruments, and the "dark ambient" style of **Within The Depths Of Silence And Phormations** (1995), his most daring collage of samples, drones, monk-like chanting and futuristic electronics; a progression that led to the six neoclassical and mystical suites of **In Sadness Silence And Solitude** (1998).

Swedish composer Henrik "[Nordvargr](#)" Bjorkk was an original founder of [Maschinenzimmer.412](#), or MZ.412, an outfit that helped define metal-industrial music with works such as **In Nomine Dei Nostri Satanas Luciferi Excelsi** (1995). Violence remained the common denominator of his subsequent projects: [Folkstorm](#), best represented by the brutal sound of **Information Blitzkrieg** (1999); [Toroidh](#), that debuted with the "European Trilogy", each episode being a romantic collage of wartime soundbites, notably **Europe is Dead** (2001); and [Hydra Head 9](#), whose devastating wall of noise **Power Display** (2002) topped anything he had done before. The bleak electronic works released under his own name, [Henrik Bjorkk](#), such as **I End Forever** (2004), **The Dead Never Sleep** (2005) and **Vitagen** (2005), on which he mastered the techniques of musique concrete, applied the same philosophy of terror to post-industrial droning music.

Swedish duo [Abruptum](#) (Marduk's multi-instrumentalist Morgan

Haakansson and vocalist-guitarist Tony Sarkka) specialized in exhausting improvised meandering trance-metal pieces such as the 51-minute **Obscuritatem Advoco Amplexere Me** (1993), that leaned towards abstract cacophony, and the hour-long **In Umbra Malitiae Ambulabo In Aeternum In Triumpho Tenebrar** (1994), that leaned towards droning gothic ambience.

American gothic

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In the United States, gothic rock was anchored around the label Projekt, founded by Black Tape For A Blue Girl's mastermind Sam Rosenthal, which mainly recruited bands in Arizona and California and promoted a similar, "classical-oriented" approach to atmospheric music.

[Lycia](#) (22), the brainchild of guitarist and vocalist Michael Van Portfleet, achieved a solemn and profound synthesis of cosmic electronics, synth-pop, psychedelic-rock, and industrial music. **Ionias** (1991), featuring Dave Galas on keyboards, coined Van Portfleet's favorite setting of ghostly vocals floating in a soundscape of electronically-processed guitar tones and glacial orchestral counterpoints. A heavily-layered instrumental backbone sustained the emotional tension of the formally impeccable **A Day In The Stark Corner** (1993): on one hand, a lyrical, idyllic, dreamy undercurrent that percolated every fibre of the music; and, at the same time, a haunting and harrowing sense of despair, hinting at inescapable supernatural forces. The monumental **The Burning Circle And Then Dust** (1995), with Tara Vanflower on vocals, completed the moral Calvary of the previous works: a less catastrophic atmosphere revealed an ocean of somber melancholy, a foreign sense of beauty that underlined a process of self-discovery. This album codified Lycia's message, halfway between a philosophical treatise, a religious prophecy and the last thoughts of a dying man. By now free of the semiotic burden of his two masterpieces, Van Portfleet proceeded to sculpt the abstract ballads of **Cold** (1996), in a vein that evoked Dead Can Dance and that amounted, de facto, to a repudiation of his gothic roots.

Arizona's contingent also featured: Michael Plaster's [Soul Whirling Somewhere](#) (1), whose **Everyone Will Eventually Leave You** (1995) was a cosmic and neoclassical update of Dead Can Dance's sound, a fragile polyphony of ethereal madrigals bridging Constance Demby's symphonic new-age music and Harold Budd's celestial ambient music; [Lovesliescrushing](#), whose **Xuvetyn** (1996) bordered on ambient music; Julianna Towns' [Skinner Box](#), also influenced by Dead Can Dance on **The Imaginary Heart** (1991).

Remnants of the army that followed Christian Death in Los Angeles included [Faith And The Muse](#) and [Cradle Of Thorns](#) (1), who penned the barbaric psychodramas of **Feed Us** (1994), woven around the contrast between the death-metal growl of a male singer and the operatic contralto of his female counterpart (Ty Elam and Tamera Slayton), and propelled by a mixture of disco-music, punk-rock and industrial rhythms.

Johnny Indovina's [Human Drama](#) (1) rose above the gothic scene of Los

Angeles. A mostly-acoustic work, **The World Inside** (1991), introduced not only fairy-tale atmospheres and neoclassical passages but also the archaic undercurrent that resurfaced on **Songs Of Betrayal** (1995), a philosophical meditation that achieved anthemic overtones as well as plunged into suicidal dejection. These works were so heavily arranged that each song sounded like a symphonic poem, when it was not as spare and austere as a chamber sonata.

Offshoots of that school were to be found in Chicago, such as Padraic Ogl's [Thanatos](#).

In San Francisco, the gothic clubs of SOMA reveled in the music of [Switchblade Symphony](#), and especially [Children Of The Apocalypse](#) (1), who recorded the exoteric **Ta 'Wil** (1997).

In Australia, Darrin Verhagen's [Shinjuku Thief](#) (2) assembled collages of industrial, ambient, jazz and dance elements on **Bloody Tourist** (1992) and achieved the magniloquent orchestral gothic of **The Witch Hammer** (1993).

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