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The Behrend Beacon

MATIONAL CAMPUS NEWS

Friday, January 24, 2003

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Underground Goth cult rising to surface

> by Nara Schoenberg Chicago Tribune

Maybe the turning point came when Virgin Megastores started selling those cute little vampiregirl lunchboxes, or when suburban kids started buying their spiked collars at the mall, or when Kmart trotted out corset-inspired T-shirts.

Maybe it came at last year's Oscars, when Gwyneth Paltrow donned a gown that would have made Morticia Addams proud.

But by late fall, when fashion magazines flirted with ghoul-chic and stores offered clunky cross jewelry and faux-vintage black lace, there could be no doubt.

Goth culture - long the exclusive domain of selfstyled misfits and defiant outcasts - is bubbling up into the mainstream, making the black-clad, kohl-eyed Goth faithful who have endured the taunts of the "normals" for more than two decades something of a hot new thing.

"It's kind of something that snuck up on us," says Thom Svast, the sales manager at the Guess? store in Chicago. This fall his store showcased an array of Goth fashions, including black bell-sleeve shirts and flowing crushed-velvet coats.

The irony of pop culture's cool kids embracing outcast fashion is not lost on the small but vital Goth underground, whose response to the societal thumbsup has mostly ranged from apathy to dismay.

At Web sites, Goths rail against exploitation and consumerism or worry that "poseurs" with their judgmental cliques will ruin an underground club scene that has long regarded itself as a last refuge for those

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who are too creative, original or just plain strange to fit in anywhere else

John Wirtz, 27, of Riverside, Ill., a librarian and member of the Chicago Goth-punk band Anarchy (Butt) & the An-R-Kids, says that, for true believers, Goth offers a rich alternative lifestyle, complete with its own music and literature.

To reduce Goth's many elements to a mass-produced fashion statement, he says, "cheapens its meaning."

"I've seen people get really upset over it," says Wirtz, who recalls one friend tore out a pile of pseudo-Goth fashion spreads from mainstream magazines and used them as fireplace kindling. Wirtz's friend reserved special treatment for an image of pop princess Christina Aguilera in a corset and leather.

"He lit her face on fire, and used that to light the rest of it," Wirtz says.

Initially associated with bands such as Siouxsie & the Banshees and Bauhaus, Goth grew out of the punk movement in the late 1970s and is often viewed as punk's darkly romantic kid sister. Like punk, it celebrates individuality and rejects the conformity of mainstream society, but where punk was political, Goth is artistic, where punk was disgusted, Goth is amused.

Best known for its over-the-top fashion statements -Count Dracula capes, black lipstick, fishnet stockings - Goth is rooted in an appreciation of the melancholy, the sinister and the forbidden. On the most basic level, anyone who has shuddered with delight at a horror movie or taken perverse pleasure in wallowing in a bad mood has caught a Goth vibe.

But Goth also claims a noble literary tradition, with Gavin Baddeley, author of the new book "Goth Chic," tracing the movement back to the passionate - and sometimes macabre - non-conformity of the 19th century romantics.

When poet Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote, rapturously, "I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!" he was having a Goth moment.

Those who seek to explain the current popularity of Goth fashion point to a number of factors, from the recent fin de siecle gloom to the rise of Marilyn Manson, a shock-rocker disavowed by many Goths.

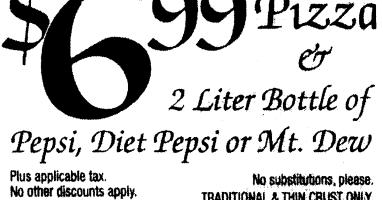
It's also interesting to note that the Goth mini-trend comes at a time when corporate America has gotten into the habit of raiding the counterculture's closets. With hip-hop clothes, extreme sports gear and ravewear available at the local mall, could Goth be far behind?

Even the Columbine High School shootings in 1999, which were carried out by students who wore Gothic trench coats, may have contributed to the trend. While the initial bad press was devastating to Goths, it also galvanized some, leading them to explain their movement to the "normals" and to publicly disavow the shootings and violence in general. Among the more interesting Goth-Ed projects to have surfaced post-Columbine: a young adult book, "Everything You Need to Know About the Goth Scene," which "goes far to debunk negative stereotypes," according to Booklist. Today, the Hot Topic Web site (hottopic.com) and mall stores offer kids from the suburbs the chance to buy fishnet stockings, studded collars and spooky medieval gowns. Among the items marketed by the company: the bondage-friendly Multi Ring Choker. "It's a classic!" the Web sales copy says. "This black leather choker has multiple metal rings all the way around. Buckle closure." Meanwhile, "Emily the Strange" lunchboxes, T-shirts and accessories make the red and black aesthetic accessible to the bubble-gum set. Chicago Goth disc jockey Scary Lady Sarah, 35, says she recently picked up two Goth-appropriate shirts at Kmart, a corset-style lace number and a crocheted black top. "I was very, very surprised," she says. Not all Goths are opposed to the marketing of Goth products by corporate America. "I think it's great because it means people are dressing better," says Scary Lady Sarah. "Maybe it will make mainstream people less likely to criticize or harass someone dressed Goth, if they think, 'Oh, I've got that same dress." But in the eyes of many Goths and observers of the scene, mainstream interest is, at best, a mixed blessing. "We (in the underground) advocate just a real individualism. To be accepted by the mainstream is to lose credibility," says Mick Levine, co-owner of the Gothfriendly clothing store 99th Floor in Chicago. And even for an underground subculture, Goth's concern with authenticity is unusually strong, with insiders bemoaning the presence of insincere weekend Goths or debating endlessly _ and, to be fair, often humorously _ what makes for a genuine Goth. Among the more amusing examples of the Gother-than-Thou aspect of the subculture: the "Goth or Not" Web site, where you can rate the authenticity of aspiring Goths on a scale of from 1 to 10. Other factors that make Goth a poor candidate for cheerful cultural assimilation include the Goth mindset itself. On the most basic level, Goth is about taking the path less traveled, seeing beauty in what others dismiss as ugliness, finding value in what most "normals" consider pointless gloom. "I think it's better to sort of embrace your depression, and admit that it's a feeling, just like any other human feeling, rather than trying to discard it or dope it up, which is what mainstream society likes to do," Wirtz says.





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