

# IN DARKNESS, TRUTH

## The Black Metal Invasion of the United States

Every American teen of the 1970s remembers how Ozzy Osbourne made Satanism a household term and forever linked anti-Christian themes to Heavy Metal music—whether they belonged there or not. I was too young to comprehend the controversy surrounding Ozzy's solo career as it was happening, and I didn't discover the power of Black Sabbath until I was a musician myself and playing in rock bands in the 1990s. All I remember about Ozzy from my childhood is that my parents—my Catholic mother in particular—hated him. Notorious for onstage antics involving bats, doves, and copious amounts of fake blood capsules, Ozzy terrified parents across Europe and America and delighted a whole generation of rebellious, riff-starved youths. Much as Punk Rock's anti-establishment attitude appealed to kids, Heavy Metal's promise of an alternative to stringent Christian morality intrigued fans and burgeoning artists alike.

Images of the occult, paganism, and "devil worship" became integral tropes for many Metal sub-genres in the 1980s and 90s, but no movement's creation myth was more authentically and more violently anti-Christian than that of Norwegian Black Metal. The most infamous events in that insular music community in Oslo took place more than 20 years ago, but they left behind a wake that continues to emanate like ripples in a black lake, striking awe, fascination, and often an impressed sense of disgust among each new generation of Metal kids. Today the United States has its own stable of Black Metal bands, but the fact that these American artists refer to themselves that way is a point of contention among many Metal aficionados. While some would call it American Black Metal, or United States Black Metal (USBM), many European Metal artists and fans insist that Black Metal can only exist in Norway.

Geography notwithstanding, there are a plethora of musical and stylistic considerations that inform the Black Metal genre and set it apart from other various metal sub-genres, like Thrash, Death, Speed, Grindcore, Doom, etc. In a purely sonic sense, stipulations for the musical style include distorted guitars played with tremolo

picking, fast tempos and the use of a double bass drum with "blast beat" drumming, shrieked or growled vocals, and purposefully raw or lo-fi recording styles. Even with these criteria in mind, there is plenty of room for artistic diversity, especially since the music has been steeped in what might as well be a witch's cauldron of metallic lore for more than two decades. No less important than the aural spectacle of Black Metal is its ritual and pageantry. Members of different musical subcultures usually have a distinctive style; and the more underground the culture the more far-out the uniform. In its earliest stages, Black Metal was not about clothes, props, or make-up, but soon the image of a long-haired barbarian in leather, spikes, and corpse paint (their preferred term for what amounts to theatrical make-up) became inextricably linked to the genre.

Although it grew out of an eclectic European mix of Thrash Metal bands (Venom from England, Bathory from Sweden, and Celtic Frost from Switzerland), the so-called "Second Wave" of Black Metal was comprised almost exclusively of Norwegian artists. This coterie of bands championed exclusivity, elitism, and (in more than one unfortunate case) nationalism to the point of neo-Nazism. Not surprisingly, many Norwegian Black Metal fans have difficulty swallowing the idea of a Black Metal movement in the United States. When American Metal bands began borrowing the term, the backlash was immediate: USBM bands were no more than copycats. Accusations of musical thievery were rampant, and even the most eloquent nay-sayers did little more than assert Norwegian Black Metal is just more authentic sounding.

It's not hard to assume that this sense of realness has something to do with the violence committed by members of the Black Metal community in Oslo between 1991 and 1993. This dark narrative began with the suicide of Per Yngve Ohlin, the singer of Mayhem. Ohlin, known as Dead onstage and off, suffered from severe depression and was known for his keen obsession with death and dying. He was the first musician to wear corpse paint on stage and reportedly carried a dead raven around in a bag with him so he could inhale "the stench of death" before performing. On April 8, 1991, Mayhem guitar player Euronymous (Øystein Aarseth) found Dead in the home they

shared outside of Oslo, his wrists slit and his brains in a heap next to his head, caved in from a shotgun blast to his skull. Instead of immediately informing the authorities, Euronymous arranged Dead into a grotesque tableaux and photographed him for what would become the cover of an early live album, *Dawn of the Black Hearts*. As if that weren't bizarre enough behavior, Euronymous also allegedly removed small pieces of Dead's skull from the scene and distributed them among members of the Oslo Black Metal community he deemed most worthy.

This was the beginning of what would become a notoriously sordid history. Varg Vikernes, another pivotal Black Metal artist who performed solo under the moniker, Burzum, joined Mayhem on bass shortly after Dead's death. With his charismatic leadership and a convincing argument that capitalism and Christianity were responsible for obliterating Norway's pagan culture, Varg amassed a loyal following of young Norwegian musicians in the Black Metal scene. With these fresh acolytes in tow, Varg went on to orchestrate the famously publicized arsons of seven churches in southern Norway—all of them historic wooden stave churches from the medieval era.

Despite these well-organized (albeit criminal) acts of cultural rebellion, all was not well among the Oslo Black Metal elite. A rivalry between Euronymous and Varg—over their commitment to the movement's goals and who should get credit for the church burnings—resulted in Varg murdering his bandmate, who was found outside his apartment with 23 stab wounds in August, 1993. Varg was paroled in 2009 after serving a 15-year prison sentence for murder, arson, and possessing explosive materials he intended to use for blowing up a radical left wing political center in Oslo.

To say that these events gave Norwegian Black Metal a bad reputation and a commercially viable mystique is an understatement. The church burnings in particular have been used to categorize Black Metal as a Satanic enterprise, but Varg argues that the arsons were expressions of Paganism or even Odinism, a contemporary revival of Germanic Paganism. A 2008 prison interview featured in the documentary, *Until the Light Takes Us*, shows a well-mannered and articulate Varg explaining that,

beginning in the dark ages, wherever Catholics and Christians went they destroyed the native histories, relics and records of a multitude of cultures. Even now in Norway, “They [Christians] want to replace our culture with the American assertion of the Judeo-Christian culture. Christianity is the root to all problems in the modern world.” Today, Varg and his wife operate Ancestral Cult, an organization devoted to reviving ancient European philosophy and religion. Varg continues to make music as Burzum, and the Ancestral Cult website links to his most recent recordings, as well as a number of books, videos, and a blog upon which Varg openly advocates Social Conservatism and White Nationalism (he insists he is not a neo-Nazi).

Given this rich backstory, replete with cultural rebellion, criminal acts and Nordic pride, it's no wonder why Black Metal bands in the US are reviled for being inauthentic. Then again, it may not be the job of USBM to measure up in terms of cultural history. Certainly, American Metal fans find reasons to champion a band if the music is good. I have been a rabid music fan my entire life—more specifically a metal fan in the last ten years—and while I don't agree many elements of their politics, I enjoy some of the music made by both Norwegian and American Black Metal musicians. It's mostly a musical allure, but the imagery and the themes are nothing if not provocative. To me, the Black Metal aesthetic is also a profoundly masculine one, and as such it fills me with simultaneous fascination and dread. Women are conspicuously absent from the vast majority of Black Metal groups, yet they are not de facto lyrical (or visual) targets of violence and hostility as they are in other Metal genres. A scan of the audience at a Black Metal concert will reveal not a sprinkling of but many women thrashing alongside their male peers.

I spoke with one such female Black Metal fan, fellow record store manager Gillian Fitzhugh, and tried to find out how USBM bands are distinguishable from of their Nordic predecessors. Fitzhugh says that while American Death Metal carries a strong social and political weight, Black Metal in America will never possess the same cultural heft as in Norway because “we have such wildly different social histories.” This allows American Black Metal to be wholly focused on musicality. She also points

out that USBM bands appropriate the Norwegian Black Metal concepts of nihilism, despair, and the occult, but because they can't draw on Norse mythology they weave alternative narratives around their work: "It seems like the well known American Black Metal acts have found ways of crafting a distinct and different mythology around themselves." Fitzhugh cites the Washington-based band, Wolves In the Throne Room, as "outsiders in an outsider sub-genre." They play in the Black Metal style, but their politics are radically to the left. "When not on tour, the members of the band live in a rural area outside of Olympia, WA and grow organic vegetables," Fitzhugh remarks.

Former *New Yorker* Music Critic, Sasha Frere-Jones, points out that American Black Metal musicians "have left a fair amount of the pageantry behind—not to mention the violence—and helped to create a community, as well as a musical moment that is rife with activity." For instance, the Brooklyn-based band, Liturgy, has borrowed many of the sonic and visual hallmarks of their Scandinavian predecessors, but they've mashed them up with more avant-garde and post-rock sensibilities. The band has hybridized its sound and associated itself with visual arts so much that even accusations of pretentiousness can't dull the electric energy of their music or their live performances.

I asked another Metal fan and former intern for the Metal label Roadrunner Records, Eric Chan, what is it that makes American Black Metal so special? He responded with another question: "Does American Black Metal really need to prove itself? Isn't the point of this genre to make extreme music without the approval of anyone?" Certainly, Ozzy was not looking for anyone's affirmation; he was looking to capture the imagination of a generation desperate for emancipation from the mainstream. What would Ozzy say about Varg's actions and those of his contemporaries? I imagine him being more baffled than horrified. History has had its share of cultural revolutionaries and not all of them have pursued their goals peacefully, but something about all those things that happened in Oslo in the early 90s makes me think that the blood shed there belonged to tyrants rather than patriots. ■