

Black Metal

The term Black Metal was coined by British band Venom, who released an album bearing this name in 1982. It became largely understood as a designation for metal music with Satanic lyrics (which had to a degree existed before Venom was formed in 1979). Venom, and other roughly contemporary 1980s bands like Sweden's Bathory, were not really Satanists, however, but provocative shock rockers (an exception was Denmark's Mercyful Fate, where singer "King Diamond" was a member of the →Church of Satan). Around 1990, a circle of bands in Norway and Sweden (among them Mayhem, Darkthrone, Burzum, Emperor, Marduk, Dissection, and Abruptum) decided they wanted "real" Satanism to underpin their music. To them, this meant a theistic, purposefully destructive worship of evil, much like the Satanism imagined by early-modern witch hunters, later Christian conspiracy theories, and in horror films. In a way, it could be understood as a reaction to the humorous, epicurean Satanism of Anton LaVey, that was so hated by these individuals that the genre's most famous record label (Deathlike Silence Productions) featured a crossed-over photo of LaVey on several releases.

Starting out as an obscure underground phenomenon, the Nordic Black Metal scene rose to public prominence when several musicians decided that action, not just words, was called for. A series of church burnings (44 in Norway alone between 1992 and 1995, 25 of which were solved and in all cases turned out to be the work of Black Metal-affiliated individuals), grave desecrations and even murders (usually of other members of the scene and/or with homophobic motivations) followed. At this time, most of the leading adherents of Black Metal Satanism were young men, often from fairly stable social backgrounds and with "nerdy" interests like →role-playing games and Tolkien novels. The rapid radicalisation of such persons, whereby they developed a violent, anti-social macho identity and engaged in what could be described as acts of terrorism directed at Christianity, is yet to be fully understood.

In Norway, a number of bands belonged to the loose network called the Black Circle, which had the record shop Helvete ("Hell") in Oslo as their hub. It was run by

Mayhem's Øystein "Euronymous" Aarseth (1968–1993), who functioned as the movement's primary ideologue. A Swedish equivalent was the True Satanist Horde (TSH), partly modelled on outlaw biker gangs. According to the founder of TSH, Abruptum's Tony "It" Särkkä (1972–2017), the Norwegian group could be considered a sub-group of the Swedish one. The exact chronology regarding who first developed the new Satanic ideology, and who inspired who, is somewhat unclear. When the Black Circle imploded in 1993 following the murder of Euronymous by Varg Vikernes (1973–) of Burzum, TSH continued and absorbed some individuals from Norway too.

During this phase, most participants in the scene had scant knowledge of esoteric traditions, and their Satanism was intentionally primitive. Some artists, like Vikernes' one-man band Burzum, eventually diverged in a neo-pagan direction (with Vikernes unconvincingly claiming older song titles of his like "Dominus Sathanas" had been coded pagan references all along). This usually entailed abandoning the Black Metal label. In the emic discourse of the scene, "Black" indicated adherence to Satanism, and several key figures like Aarseth, Särkkä and Emperor's Baard "Faust" Eithun (1974–) clearly stated this was the very definition of the genre. Therefore, it was and is common for bands of a non-Satanic inclination to define themselves as Pagan Metal, Viking Metal, or some such variation instead. Undeniably, Black Metal is also to a degree a *musical* style (tremolo picking, certain drum patterns, a croaking, screeching song style etc.) that can be found with artists singing primarily about e.g. vampires or pagan gods too, but the Satanic aspect remains a privileged element.

During the second half of the 1990s, some bands, like the Swedish Dissection, were starting to get involved with more systematic and ritualistic forms of Satanism, which drew to a greater extent on classic ritual magic. Dissection's front figure Jon Nødtveidt (1975–2006) got deeply engaged with the Misanthropic Lucifer Order (later renamed Temple of the Black Light, TotBL) led by the enigmatic figure calling himself "Vlad". Seemingly partly inspired by the system of →Dragon Rouge, but with a Gnostic "anti-cosmic" twist, this order engaged in animal sacrifices, intricate rituals and plentiful violence. A death list of defectors was made, and firearms acquired. Things soon spiralled out of control. Nødtveidt and "Vlad" were arrested in 1997 for the murder of a homosexual man, and subsequently jailed.

The scene at large (which today encompasses tens of thousands of bands, most of which are not involved in esoteric practices), however, had now started to become sanitized to some degree, with growing mainstream acceptance and fewer deeds of violence. In the final years of the 1990s, there was a reaction to such mainstreaming. This so-called "orthodox" turn was initiated in Sweden, by the bands Ofermod, Malign, and Funeral Mist, and was a sort of "back to Euronymous" movement that effected a revitalization of the committed worship of evil. It also entailed a more esoteric approach, with more references in interviews and on record releases to ritual practices. Bands in other countries – like Katharsis from Spain, Antaeus from France and Deathspell Omega from France/Finland – followed suit, and a network of likeminded artists arose centred around the French label Norma Evangelium Diaboli. Formed in 1998, Swedish Watain soon also became a key group in this expanding network.

Watain's singer Erik Danielsson (1982–) was very shrewd in promoting his band and building subcultural capital, as well as a highly talented graphic designer and a quite sophisticated Satanic thinker. He could perhaps best be described as a conceptual artist, who developed Watain into a *Gesamtkunstwerk* featuring extravagant live shows and a strikingly consistent aesthetic. This combination, along with undeniable musical skills, soon catapulted the band to fame even outside the Black Metal milieu. 2011 even saw them being awarded a Swedish Grammy. When Jon Nødtveidt was released from prison in 2004, he had reformed Dissection and invited Watain to tour with them. Following this, Danielsson appears to have been influenced by the TotBL system, making a mark on later Watain releases. Watain continue to be one of the most popular Black Metal bands, skilfully balancing the courtship from mainstream media (and attendant high sales figures for their albums) with underground musical and esoteric credibility. Nødtveidt, on the other hand, committed ritual suicide in 2006, after a successful comeback album and touring.

It is interesting that the new form of Black Metal arose in one of the more secularised parts of the world. The "orthodox" scene had its epicentre in Sweden, where its focus on magic, ritual, and metaphysical evil stood in clear contrast with the hegemonic cultural narrative of secularism. In "orthodox" Black Metal's rhetoric on wanting to re-enchant the world (though not phrased in these exact terms), Satanism was posited as the polar opposite of a secularised world drained of spiritual values. This

"sacralising" endeavour shows in many bands today describing their live shows as rituals, and actively bringing ritual paraphernalia and operations on stage. There have also been several festivals organised in Sweden (twice in Västerås and twice in Umeå) with a specific focus on Black Metal as a *ritual* activity, with esoteric bookstands, lectures, art exhibitions, etc., also on the premises.

TotBL is still an active (though probably not very populous) order, but has wanted to disassociate itself from the Black Metal scene. Ofermod's founder Mika Hakola (1978–), who was very important for the "orthodox" turn, is today, after serving a prison sentence for various crimes of violence, a member of Dragon Rouge. The band's records bear the signs of this, and at a 2017 concert in Stockholm, Dragon Rouge founder Thomas Karlsson lectured and performed a ritual on stage. It appears this type of closer relation between Black Metal and esotericism is likely to continue to grow in strength. Another notable development is the continued growth of local black metal scenes across the world. This includes Muslim majority countries like Turkey, where the genre's tropes are deployed and modified in efforts to protest against religious dominance in the public sphere.

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