

THE DEVIL'S MUSIC

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Is Heavy Metal the Devil's music? From stories of blues legend Robert Johnson's deal with the Devil, through the outrage raised by Elvis Presley's pelvic sorcery, to the Judas Priest backmasking trial in 1990, Heavy Metal and its precursors have routinely been linked to the immoral, the satanic, and the occult. While the vivid imaginations of moral crusaders are prone to running wild, there is no denying that there are ties between Heavy Metal and the occult. From the very start, Heavy Metal has toyed with occult symbolism and themes. Black Sabbath evokes sinister occult connotations in the very name of the band, Led Zeppelin references infamous occultist and magickian Aleister Crowley in several songs, and such examples are ample throughout the history of Metal.

While this is true for most Heavy Metal, the occult features most frequently and intimately in the various subgenres of Extreme Metal. Still, with a few notable exceptions, even here the interest in the occult rarely seems to have extended further than to artistic expressions. From the early 1990s and Norwegian Black Metal things started to change. We now had a subgenre of metal that actively and nigh exclusively engaged in heathen and satanic imagery, and framed it not as artistic expression but rather as ideological and religious sentiment. However, at the core the occultism of Norwegian Black Metal was arguably more about anti-Christian rebellion than independent engagement with serious occult thought.

If early Heavy Metal artists were interested in the occult due to its artistic potential, and Norwegian Black Metal musicians due to its rebellious power, we have in the last ten years experienced a marked increase in the engagement with and *investment* in the occult on more than a discursive level. Some first-generation Norwegian Black Metal artists – such as Gorgoroth's Gahl with his new band Wardruna – have turned to the often heathen/occult-inspired neofolk genre, arguably in an alternative pursuit of originality and authenticity in a genre where the music cannot be made any more extreme.

We also find bands that go beyond anti-Christian rhetoric and instead focus on more complex occult content. The retro 70s-inspired "occult rock" genre that has been very popular in recent years, with bands such as Jex Thoth, (the now defunct) The Devil's Blood, and Jess and the Ancient Ones, is one example. Another is the increasing number of Black Metal bands that express sophisticated and well-developed rather than rudimentary and generic occult belief systems, frequently frame their performances as "rituals", and in some cases profess allegiance to specific occult groups (invariably of the darker Left-Hand Path variant). In Sweden the occult groups most frequently namedropped are Dragon Rouge and the Misanthropic Luciferian Order (the latter restructured as The Temple of the Black Light), with fairly popular bands such as Ofermod, Saturnalia Temple, Dissection, and Watain.

Interestingly, this more sophisticated engagement with the occult also functions as a sort of bridge between subgenres, with something of a semi-independent "ritual Black Metal" scene arising as a consequence. Everything

from dark ambient projects, through occult rock bands, to the most extreme of Black Metal share the same venues and audience, often with “Black Metal” being reinterpreted as the identifier for an authentic inner occult core and conviction rather than a purely musical genre.

How have these developments come about, and is Heavy Metal the Devil’s music? Did the Devil steal the beat, or did he always possess it?