Run From The Shadows

*The Art of Darkness. The History of Goth*, John Robb   
(512pp, £25, Louder Than War)

John Robb came to the public's attention when The Membranes burst on to the music scene in the late 70s and early 80s. Their noisy, deconstructed punk was on almost every cassette compilation of the time, a flexidisc single and then their 1983 mini-album, *Crack House*. Later releases lost some of the energy before the band disbanded, although (of course!) they reformed in 2010.

Meanwhile, Robb had played in other not so successful bands and reinvented himself as a TV presenter, journalist and author, writing and talking about music, green issues and veganism. *The Art of Darkness* is the latest in a stream of intriguing books, including volumes about The Stone Roses and The Charlatans, as well as 'oral histories' of punk rock and music in Manchester.

Hyperbole and outpsokennes have long been Robb's trademarks, and this new tome is no exception. Everything and anything Robb wants to call Goth, often without any rhyme or reason beyond liking it, gets called Goth. This includes working backwards to include 'Europe's Gothic History', the Romantics, elements of psychedelia back in the 60s and 'The (Un)Holy Trinity' of the Doors, Velvet Underground and Stooges.

I mean, sure, there were some bad dudes back in the day, and some of them wore black, others even used eyeliner, but it doesn't make them Goth. (Nico, of course, is an exception: she was definitely Goth!) In fact the Velvets and Stooges are normally regarded as proto-punks, although that may not matter to Robb as he ploughs on claiming various bands and individuals involved in glam rock, punk and post-punk as – you guessed it – Goths.

By now we are only 137 pages in, but it is time to introduce one of the bands that most readers, I suspect, are expecting: Siouxsie & The Banshees. So, we get a potted version of the well known story of the Banshees formation and the Bromley contingent, despite that being punk history, and eventually three pages out of 22 are given over to the band and their *JuJu* and following albums, which are clearly Goth. As someone at an early gig after that album was released I can attest to the shock that the band's crimped hair and cheesecloth attire caused the punk hoards present, not to mention John McGeogh's semi-acoustic guitar.

It would have been interesting to have explained what was happening to audience expectations, but Robb wants to move on. The Damned, a bunch of pantomime horror jokers, are next, swiftly followed by Adam Ant, whose swift sidestep from AntMusic and SexMusic to Pop Star is not really considered, any more than his appropriation of New Romantic dandyism and groundbreaking use of video. Then we get Joy Division and Manchester. Now, I love Joy Division but they weren't Goth, despite suicide, drugs, epilepsy and hypnotic songs. Neither were most of the bands mentioned in a chapter on Industrial Music, although David Tibet's occult- and magick-infused noise chants and loops might come close, though not as close as his later gnostic neo-folk apocalyptic songs... Nurse With Wound's collaged soundscapes, however, were more to do with Dada and Musique Concrète; whilst Whitehouse's full frontal sonic assaults explored notions of control, power and audience confrontation.

The Cure, are of course, present and correct in a chapter of their own, but before we move on to Bauhaus we have to endure a chapter framed as North vs South about the likes of The Batcave and other venues which quickly became the music papers' favourite haunts (geddit?) and soon spawned a huge array of talentless hangers-on and would-be Goths. Meanwhile, Bauhaus, featuring the skinniest, whitest singer of all time issued the appallingly badly played but otherwise superbly addictive 12" of 'Bela Lugosi's Dead', going on to produce a number of superb albums, a passable David Bowie cover, a number of spin-off bands, and a memorable advertising campaign for cassettes. (Peter Murphy really was gaunt. He queued up in front of us once to buy tickets at Sadlers Wells. You could almost see through him, and there was no way anyone was going to dare talk to him or even admit to recognising him.)

Robb likes Killing Joke, too, so they get a chapter, as do Einstürzende Neubaten and the bands in orbit around them, whilst Nick Cave gets his own chapter as do Southern Death Cult. But then so do The Cramps, The Sisters of Mercy, and then New Model Army and performance poet Joolz. Theatre of Hate, Laibach, Fields of the Nephilim too; and The Virgin Prunes. The strangest thing is that they are all given the same treatment, all welcomed into the Goth clan. Whether they are gothic pop, would-be rockers (see Ian Astbury and Cult), a Slovenian cross-media group, or Dublin anarchist performance artists who are also friends of U2, Robb welcomes them with open arms, gathering up strays, has-beens, would-have-beens and might-have-beens at the same time. Some, I imagine, must be pleased to get a posthumous mention, others must be desperate to dissociate themselves from their neighbours here.

This is an exciting and fast-moving read, but I wish it would calm down and take a step back. If Robb had focussed on genuine connections of music, influence and even fashion to weave a story, the reader might understand what Robb thinks Goth was (or is: apparently there has been, heaven help us, 'a second coming of Goth'). Perhaps starting with Bauhaus, The Cure and later Banshees plus some of the history of Romantic attitudes and European horror would have allowed legitimate sidesteps to Joy Division, but at least explain it. Was it the fact they played doomy music or because they had black jeans? Weren't the likes of The Mission just a populist version of Goth? What are the links between Halloween imagery and Goth? Gothic literature and architecture and music? Between Heavy Metal and Goth? How does the Blues fit in? Is Nick Cave still a Goth now he makes grown up, inquisitive, confessional songs about death and religion?

I know, I know, it's only music and it doesn't matter. But it does, it does. The fact that Robb is in many ways so informed, has great stories to tell, is full of energy, enthusiasm and the gift of the gab, makes me want a more coherent, edited and better structured book. This is a mad, unfocussed high speed road trip throughout an imaginary land of music, all done without a map or sense of direction. It's exciting, at times thrilling but mostly exhausting, a journey as an end in itself rather than a way of actually visiting places.

Rupert Loydell

(1123 words)