

ENIGMATIC ENTERTAINMENT

Maynard Sims

www.maynard-sims.com

IT'S ONLY ROCK AND ROLL... OR IS IT?

It's 1956. At a small club in New York the lights dim. The crowd shifts uncomfortably with nervous anticipation. There's a small gasp as Screaming Jay Hawkins makes his entrance – carried on stage in a flaming coffin. The flames are extinguished and Hawkins, dressed like a voodoo Loa, launches into a blistering version of Nina Simone's *I Put A Spell On You*. The effect is electrifying.

A few years later in a small smoky club in the Kings Cross area of London the lights dim, funereal music is played and another coffin is carried onto a stage. This one isn't alight. The occupant has more sense. But he has watched Hawkins' stage act and has borrowed from it shamelessly.

Screaming Lord Sutch – David to his friends, and not a member of the peerage – launches into a raucous stream of songs, backed by a band called The Savages who at one time or another will feature such rock icons as Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck, Ritchie Blackmore and Nicky Hopkins. Like Hawkins, Sutch's on-stage shenanigans will earn him many column inches in the popular press and a notoriety that will upset the moral majority and lead to his concerts being cancelled and public vilification. And the irony of the situation is that such infamy will not translate into record sales, and in fact apart from a few semi-memorable songs, their recordings will remain as just a footnote to the history of popular music.

But horror will top the charts a couple of years later when an enterprising mimic called Bobby Picket will take his affectionate impersonation of Boris Karloff to the top of the charts with *The Monster Mash*, an altogether more digestible form of musical horror.

By the late sixties and the beginning of the seventies things had taken on a demonic aspect in the hit parade. In 1968 their Satanic Majesties, the Rolling Stones asked for *Sympathy For The Devil*, and Old Nick himself was haring up the charts courtesy of The Gun's *Race with the Devil*, a speedy, riff driven song replete with demonic laughter. Actually it could have been just a phase of demonic laughter as the Crazy World's Arthur Brown had cackled himself silly just months before. He had also stuck a flaming colander on his head and proclaimed himself the God of Hellfire. The keyboard player of Arthur Brown's fiery hit was Vincent Crane who went on to form Atomic Rooster and have a top ten hit with *The Devil's Answer* and if that wasn't enough in the way of supernatural syncopation, German one hit wonders The Rattles had their moment of glory with *The Witch* complete with another bout of demonic chortling.

Black Sabbath. The name says it all really. Named after the 1963 Mario Bava film and not, as it has been widely reported, after a Dennis Wheatley novel, their exploits have been well documented, as have the bat-biting exploits of their erstwhile front man Ozzy Osbourne. They were at the forefront of the heavy metal movement. Dark and menacing lyrics, sung over a heavy, riff-laden, but melodic, instrumentation, they influenced countless bands who were to follow, including Iron Maiden, who in the best traditions named themselves after a medieval instrument of torture, and had an emaciated corpse, affectionately known as Eddy, on stage with them.

Less well known, but contemporaries of the early Sabbath and, if possible, more notorious, were Black Widow whose stage act had all the trappings of a black mass complete with mock-sacrifice. Songs like *Come To The Sabbath* had tabloid journalists reaching for their epithets of outrage, but they need not have feared. Black magic had a limited hold on the nation's pop-buying market, and after three increasingly unsuccessful albums Black Widow soon disbanded and went their separate ways. Most notably drummer Romeo Challenger went on to join Showaddywaddy, with whom he still plays today. A sharp lesson to those who dabble in the Black Arts.

And then there was Alice Cooper!

Few have equalled Alice for using elements of graphic horror on stage. Fake blood, a guillotine, and a hangman's noose were all elements of this supreme showman. Once again the public were outraged, but at least his records sold – the anarchic *School's Out* topping the charts being the first of many hits.

Hard on his heels in the shock-horror stakes were Kiss whose use of make-up exceeded Cooper, but whose music was fairly crude. They were and are seen as something of a horror comic and have never really been taken seriously.

The use of horror elements in music is not the exclusive territory of rock/heavy metal bands, although those are in the majority. In 1973 10CC who were to go on to be one of the world's most popular groups, released their first album. Along with *Rubber Bullets* and *Donna*, tucked away on the second side of the album was a joyous homage to the horror "b" movie, *Ships Don't Just Disappear In The Night*, written by band members Eric Stewart and Graham Gouldman and giving name checks to Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi and Vincent Price. The pair repeated the trick on the next album with a voodoo song about the Loa of death, Baron Samedi.

The same year another entry into the sub-genre came from a surprising source. Helen Reddy, an Australian singer who was best known for her feminist paean *I Am Woman* and her reading of Alex Harvey's *Delta Dawn*, had a hit worldwide with a chilling ghost story in song, *Angie Baby*.

The mid-seventies saw Edgar Allan Poe's work being plundered.

Alan Ross, an old school friend of ours, brought to the ears of the unsuspecting public *The Pit And The Pendulum*. It would be nice to report the album was an unmitigated success, but reviews were less than enthusiastic and the album soon found its way into the bargain bins.

Rather more luck was had by Abbey Road engineer Alan Parsons whose Project released *Tales Of Mystery And Imagination*, a much superior record than Ross's, featuring titles like *The Raven* and *The Fall Of The House Of Usher*, and the vocal talents of John Miles and Arthur Brown (yes him again, sans flaming colander).

Another band that adopted elements of the genre in both their image and their songs were Blue Oyster Cult. Taking as their logo the sign of Cronos, the Titan god who ate his son The Grim Reaper, they made a major contribution to the sub-genre with the superb and suitably titled *Don't Fear The Reaper* and later with the sprightly *Joan Crawford (has risen from the grave)*. Later they would go on to compose the soundtrack for the horror film *Bad Channels* in 1992. But basically they were a biker band that adopted occult nuances on occasion as well as plundering the science fiction genre with equal success, signing up Michael Moorcock as lyricist.

Blue Oyster Cult's other claim to fame was that they also joined the ranks of the artists who have found inspiration for their songs in some classic horror films. Their contribution was the heavy rocking *Godzilla*. Before them there was Edgar Winter with *Frankenstein* and after them Warren Zeavon's *Werewolves of London*.

Punk was the musical movement of the mid-seventies that was going to sweep aside all that had gone before – burying the dinosaurs of rock. So why was Dave Vanian of The Damned dressing up like Dracula and borrowing much of his shtick from an old rocker who by this time had given up trying to shock with his music and instead had turned his attention to trying to get himself elected into the House of Commons? Answers on a postcard please.

Punk spawned the Goth movement, lots of boys with pale faces wearing black and girls with long lank hair and whiny voices, but the gloomy music had more to do with adolescent angst than had any real relationship to horror – although there were a few poseurs who claimed they were vampires, nobody took them seriously and they went back to their day jobs as insurance salesmen and Body Shop staff.

The merging of horror and music reached its defining moment in 1982. Despite all the headway made in the heavy metal and hard rock fields, the hero of the hour had made his name singing the kind of exuberant soul that had been the byword for the Tamla Motown label.

Michael Jackson's first flirtation with horror had come a few years earlier when he had sung a love song to a rat in the title theme to *Ben* the film sequel to *Willard*. Unfortunately not even Michael Jackson's emotional trilling could save an absolute turkey of a movie.

But in '82, with a smash album burning up the charts across the world, Jackson contributed a storming contribution to the sub-genre.

With an interlude spoken by Vincent Price (him again) and a tale of the undead the track that gave its name to the *Thriller* album was a sensation. But what really stood this apart from anything that had come before was the video.

Directed by John Landis, and utilising state of the art SFX make-up, the long-form video was an electrifying piece of cinema, with a narrative envelope wrapping the song and stunning zombie dance sequence. There was also a follow-up stand-alone video, '*The Making of Michael Jackson's Thriller*', which sold in huge numbers.

There must have been great gnashing of teeth in the heavy rock fraternity. Michael Jackson had not only merged music and horror in a stunning record and video, and not only had his horror song/flick sold millions, but he had made the sub-genre *cool*.

The influence of *Thriller* could be seen in videos to come. Meatloaf would don fangs and make-up in a future video and Bonnie Tyler's shoot for *Total Eclipse of the Heart* featured a gothic mansion and strange children with glowing eyes and an altogether spooky atmosphere.

On the heavy metal scene things were becoming more extreme with the onslaught of Death Metal, basically satanic or horrific lyrics over a thrash metal backing. Purveyors of this new twist on an old theme were bands like Venom, Slayer, White Zombie and, from Denmark, Mercyful Fate. Fate's lead singer, King Diamond soon broke away to form his own eponymous band. With his Alice Cooper styled face makeup, and supernatural lyrics, he became for a while, the mainstay of this branch of the metal tree, although for Diamond and the others their popularity was limited to a hard core fan following.

The tradition continued with bands like Marilyn Manson, Slipknot and Amen pushing the boundaries of outrage to new levels, and with all of them the line can be drawn back nearly fifty years to an R&B singer climbing from a burning coffin and mesmerising his audience with tales of magic and voodoo.

It is said that Stephen King is a pretty good guitarist, and rock music certainly forms a soundtrack to his work, the lyrics punctuating the text of many of his books. Shaun Hutson had links with Iron Maiden, and James Herbert had his own music room and was known to strum a bit. Musical horror writers... perhaps best left to another article!

As a footnote it's worth mentioning two bands that didn't so much use horror in their act, but took their names from horror icons.

Bram Stoker were a UK band, very much in the Uriah Heep mould, but their music was nowhere near as accomplished. They trod the boards briefly in 1972 but quickly vanished without so much as an album to their name.

H.P. Lovecraft on the other hand did record and the albums have become collectors' items today. Unfortunately despite having songs called *At the Mountains of Madness* and *The Time Machine* (a slight case of author mis-identification here we suspect) the music for the most part is bland sixties American pop with thin production and jarring harmonies. One of the albums does though contain the song *That's The Bag I'm In*, a truly horrific piece of music, but for all the wrong reasons.

Still Bram Stoker, H.P. Lovecraft. Perhaps one day some enterprising band will name itself L.H. Maynard or then M.P.N. Sims... but then again, maybe not.