

Alternative Subculture

Image – what I wore, what I looked like, what music I listened to, who I hung out with – became all-important to me. I wanted to be seen to be different. Dark clothes were a must, reflecting my interest and involvement in the occult. Initially, I leaned towards punk in my style and musical interest. I was into many of the punk bands who were popular in the late 80s, and even some of the original punk bands who were still around from the 70s. I began listening to groups such as GBH, The Exploited, Conflict, the Dead Kennedy's and Crass. Predictably (as their names might hint), these groups had a negative effect on my thinking and attitudes. Most were anti-Christian and anti-establishment, and many of the song lyrics disseminated certain beliefs, world views and political movements such as anarchism and the animal liberation movement. I began to view myself as an anarchist and proudly daubed the anarchy symbol (the letter A with a circle round it) in white paint on the arm of my leather jacket.

I wanted to be with others who shared my beliefs, so began to hang around a shop called Probe Records in Liverpool, as

I had heard this was a popular meeting place for punks and other alternatives. Bona fide record buyers had to brave their way up the large steps leading to the shop, tip-toeing their way through the gangs of mohicans who were sprawled out there, stoned on pot. Despite their fierce appearance however, most of the punks were actually a very friendly bunch and never really caused people any bother.

One of them, perhaps spotting that I was new, made an effort to talk to me, and we became good mates. Joe sported an extremely impressive mohican hairstyle that stood around 14 inches high. He also wore huge Dr Marten boots, and was covered in so many studs and chains that he looked as if he was wearing armour. As we crossed the busy roads of Liverpool city centre, we almost caused accidents, as drivers became distracted by the freakish sight before their eyes.

On one memorable occasion, Joe slept over at our house after we had been to a nightclub called The System. We slept downstairs, draped over the armchair and sofa. The next morning my father came into the room early, not expecting to see anyone there. Joe slowly woke up and got to his feet, still in full armour and with his mohican only a little dented. My father's face was a comical mixture of shock and bemusement as he stared at Joe as if encountering someone from another planet. Without a word, he left the room again, shaking his head in disbelief.

I was never satisfied with one image though and was always looking for something more original and outrageous. Consequently, the punk look quickly transformed into a bizarre, somewhat morbid sort of hybrid of punk and

gothic. At the peak of this period in my life, I was dressing in black most of the time, wearing white face paint and black eyeliner! Even though my hair is naturally a very dark brown I always dyed it *jet* black, just to ensure that the look was totally accurate.

I began listening to such groups as Sisters of Mercy, Siouxsie and the Banshees, the Cure, and The Mission, but my favourite was a band called Alien Sex Fiend. I loved this group so much that I painted a huge, white, screaming skull on the back of my black biker's leather jacket with the name of the band above it. The shoulders of the jacket were draped in a cobweb-style design and laced with large, spiked studs that were like needles.

Wherever I went, my appearance caused a stir. People who saw me in the street stopped and stared in utter disbelief. Some laughed at me, and some became enraged. I liked the attention, and put up with the jeers; they were worth it to be noticed and different. Only in my home area did I have to be more careful how I looked. There were no Goths, punks or alternatives of any sort in the North End of Birkenhead. People did not take too kindly to the weird and exotic and I knew I would be a target for attack if I wasn't careful. So on days when I knew I would be staying in the immediate area, I toned down my appearance.

Rather to my surprise, my mother actually seemed to like the way I looked. My father, on the other hand, was not so happy. Most of the time he put up with it, but sometimes he was acutely embarrassed by my weird looks, particularly when we were in public, or if he happened to bump into a friend. The only time my father ever became really angry about my appearance was when I pierced my nose with a

large stud. I did this by the not-to-be-recommended method of pressing two ice blocks against my nose, then, when it felt numb enough, simply pressing the stud in. Sitting proudly in the living room, I waited for someone to notice. My father kept giving me sideways looks from the other end of the room and eventually asked me about the large spot on my nose. I quickly corrected him and told him it was a nose stud. To my shock, he jumped up angrily and lunged towards me to examine it. He shouted at me to get out of the house and not to come back until 'the b***** thing' was gone. I had no option but to take the stud out.

The weekend was my time to shine. I used to spend most of Friday getting ready for the evening when I went to various nightclubs to meet others in the alternative subculture. On Fridays, I would go to Stairways Nightclub in Birkenhead. This was mostly a club for bikers but was also popular with other subculture groups. I loved the rush of adrenaline and confidence that flooded through me as I walked into the club and headed for the bar to buy my first drink of the night. I knew people were looking me over and saw admiration on their faces. 'And rightly so,' was my response. 'I have put a lot of time and effort into looking like this.' I guess I probably thought a lot of myself at that time!

One of the other clubs I visited regularly was Planet X in Liverpool. Goths, punks, bikers, skinheads, freaks and geeks of every description frequented this dark lair. I found out that, perhaps not surprisingly, many of the alternative people who came to Planet X also had an interest in the occult. Before long, I had made some new friends who shared my interest in music *and* occult spirituality.

Yet despite the busyness, despite the excitement of the clubs and the new-found friendships, I continued to feel very lonely inside. I was often surrounded by people but unable to relate to them in any meaningful way. Communication was usually distant and superficial, often non-existent. Many of the Goths had created such a persona of coolness that they were almost 'too cool' to talk to. They spent entire nights just standing by the bar, like statues, only moving occasionally to flick their long hair back or take a gulp of drink. They seemed soulless, unresponsive and empty. In their attempt to identify with the ultimate dark and mysterious gothic image, they seemed to have lost touch – not only with others around them, but with themselves as well.

But I did have friendships of a kind; travellers down the same paths. Chief among them were Daz and Degsy. Daz was a punk and Degsy was a Goth. Usually, after a late night at Planet X, Degsy and Daz would spend the night at my house, as I was the nearest, and my parents were reasonably tolerant. It was also the most comfortable place to crash. We used to have a lie-in the following day, get up slowly, then spend the rest of the day listening to music and discussing the previous night's events.

One night, much the worse for wear, we staggered into a taxi. The taxi driver looked at us suspiciously but decided not to refuse us.

'Take us to the graveyard!' said Degsy, giggling a little at the odd request.

'That's a new club, isn't it?' said the taxi driver, not liking to admit he didn't know. We shouted with laughter, finding the least thing hilarious.

'No, mate! We mean the *real* graveyard – you know, Flaybrick Cemetery, at the top of Tollemache Road.'

The taxi driver looked at us as if we were mad. 'Why do you want to go there at three o'clock in the morning?' he asked.

'To take some photos of ourselves by the gravestones,' I said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Without another word, the taxi driver took us to the graveyard and deposited us there, leaning out of the window to get a better look. As we leapt over the small cemetery wall, blending rapidly with the enveloping darkness, we heard him shout 'B***** hell!' as he revved up the car and shot off. We posed by the gravestones, the flash of the camera throwing us into brief, eerie relief.

Although Daz and Degsy were better company than most of the other people in the local alternative subculture scene, I only really saw them when we hooked up to go to a nightclub – mostly at weekends. During the week, in the evenings, I frequently met up with another group of friends, who were not connected at all with the scene I had got so involved with. Sometimes we hung out in my bedroom listening to music, but much of the time we gathered outside an art gallery in Oxton. A huge gang of us used to sit there, drinking alcohol and making quite a racket – much to the annoyance of the local residents. The police often arrived to move us along as we became a bit of a nuisance.

Soon, alcohol wasn't enough, and we began experimenting with so-called 'soft drugs', mostly in the form of cannabis. This opened up a whole new world for us that we thought was great at the time. We sneaked into the grounds

of a nearby dental practice to find a quiet place to smoke pot in a home-made pipe. We then rolled out of the place, falling over each other and laughing like a pack of hyenas, saying ridiculous things like, 'Look, that tree has hundreds of portions of chips on it!' as we made our way back to the art gallery walls, causing yet more commotion for the poor people living nearby.

Thankfully, my experimentation with drugs was relatively minor and I never really liked many of the experiences I had with cannabis. In fact, some of the things that happened were actually quite frightening.

One evening, having already smoked a small amount of potent pot, I set off with some friends to a local pub. By the time we reached it, we were all laughing hysterically. Gradually, though, the intensity of the drug began to escalate until it became too unpleasant to bear. One of my friends noticed the look on my face and said, 'Look! He's on a downer!' Frightened, I didn't know what to do, so followed them into the pub. I felt as if everyone in it was staring at me and I sank, trembling, into a chair. Severe claustrophobia and panic rose in me. I had to get out! My legs were like jelly as I staggered to the door, and I was convinced that the entire pub was laughing at me.

The park was the quickest and most familiar route to safety. Now though, it was a place of fear and danger. Large matchstick-shaped people loomed at me by the trees. I ran but I could only run in slow motion. I finally made it through to the end of the second park and could see the gate in view, with the welcoming street lights glowing beyond. Encouraged by the sight, I put my head down and ran as hard as I could. But to my horror, I suddenly saw a

gang of about thirty people blocking the way to freedom. I closed my eyes for a second; when I opened them, they had all disappeared! The relief, when I finally got home, was enormous. It took some time to recover, and needless to say I decided not to go any further down the drug-taking path, and even became quite 'anti-pot'; a view which earned the displeasure of some of my friends who enjoyed smoking the drug. I was much more comfortable drinking alcohol and equipped myself with a generous supply of gin or vodka when we gathered round the art gallery.

As the weeks went by, rumours of our unofficial get-together spread on the local youth grapevine. Every night, someone new would join us, often from quite a distance, via a friend, relative, or work colleague. The crowd became quite big and raucous, thus attracting even more local teenagers, and though police and residents tried to be diplomatic in their approach, it was obvious that the situation could not continue much longer without trouble.