



Black Angel

UK's **Black Angel** have been generating buzz since the release of their debut LP *The Widow* in late 2019, being praised as a **goth rock revival band** making musical nods to the genre's forerunners from the 80s. Producer, musician, and band founder **Matt Vowles** went on to release the project's second album *Kiss of Death* during the summer of 2020 which has been in heavy rotation at many dark alternative DJ's online streaming events. As their third full length release *Prince of Darkness* is planned for spring 2021, we caught up with Matt Vowles for an exclusive distanced photoshoot and to discuss the inspirations behind this project, how to navigate the music industry in the age of social media, growing up in the new romantic era, and the importance of naming your drum machine in keeping with the tradition of the genre's predecessors.

interview by **Elizabeth Rhodes**
 photographer **Saryn Christina**

For those who don't know, what was Doktor Avalanche and why were you so inspired by it?

Matt Vowles : In the late 70s, early 80s was the birth of synthesizers and drum machines and the cool thing about The Sisters of Mercy was they didn't hide it away. You know, they gave it a name, called it Doktor Avalanche. I thought that was super cool. When Black Angel first came out, I got comments like, "Oh, you should use real drums" or "where's the drummer". Well, if I wanted to use a real drummer and real drums when we played, I guess I would have done it. It was very intentional to have that particular sound when I started Black Angel. I guess about three years ago, I just really got back into the genre. I'd always been into it, it's always on in the car. But I really got back into a lot of the old albums and The

Sisters albums starting with *First and Last and Always*, really listening to them and doing a bit more research, going back and reading sleeve notes and lyrics and that kind of stuff. It was never to copy them, it was always to pay homage to them and just take little bits that I thought were cool from a lot of bands like Bauhaus, Sisters, Siouxsie [and the Banshees], The Damned, and take those influences and put it into Black Angel. So yeah, The Sisters used a Boss DR55 "Doctor Rhythm" drum machine when they first started out called Doktor Avalanche and I just basically came off some research finding out what they did and I pretty much use not the same but similar samples in all my drums. It gives it a very instant feel especially on the dance floor or in clubs. So yeah, that's where that came from.

Okay, now I must ask if you named your own drum machine.

MV : This is a really good question because I wasn't going to say anything to anybody. In fact, apart from anybody who reads this article, I'm looking for that kind of white rabbit surprise where somebody sends me an email and says, "I was reading the credits and I saw what the drum machine was called." So, my favorite film in the whole world is *This Is Spinal Tap*. I can watch it again and again and again. It never, ever gets old. The plan was that the album credits for this next album, which is called *Prince of Darkness*, I'm hoping will be out in the spring, is that when you look at the credits, you'll see that the drummer is called, I haven't decided which one yet, it will be one of the ex-drummers in *Spinal Tap*. Actually, on this album I have a little drum kit in the studio here. So, I did actually play all the additional drums on the album. So, I do play them but there is no real drummer in the band. This isn't necessarily a band. It's not a one-person artist, it's a sort of a production unit. But I do want to give the drummer a credit so yeah, I'm going to use one of the drummers from *Spinal Tap* and I'm going to see if anybody emails me the month after we release it, actually see if they can find that little white rabbit in there.

You've mentioned that you grew up at least partially in Bristol, England. Tell us more about the scene there

when you were first getting into music and the new romantic genre.
 MV : I did most of my formative growing up years in Bristol until I was about 18. The whole goth thing got started with my brother, which I've mentioned in lots of previous interviews. I was a total new romantic. It was Duran Duran and Spandau Ballet. I still love *Rio* and I say it's my second ever favorite album. It's just a masterpiece. But that's all I was into. I dressed in purple; I had this big wedge hair.

To be precise, it was not purple; it was burgundy, as John Taylor would have corrected us.

MV : It was exactly burgundy. Everything was burgundy and in England we had the side lace up winklepickers that were leather. It was what we call stay-press with the trousers; they were these silky trousers, and it was a granddad shirt, which I'm not sure what you call over here, but it's a collarless shirt. It's like a jumper, which you call a sweater. There's buttons up front.

We call it a cardigan.

MV : There you go. So yeah, I wore that. But my brother persuaded me to buy The Clash's *This is Radio Clash* single and then I borrowed his *Give 'Em Enough Rope* cassette. And of course, anybody that remembers cassettes remembers they were just pure gold. You really had to like somebody to lend them a cassette because the likelihood of you getting it back in one piece was really small, especially if they are in a car cassette player. The number of times I remember trying to drag reams of tape out of there with my pencil trying to spool it back into the cassette, I'd lost count. So, he was the one that got me into it. There was a club called The Whip in Bristol, which we would go to and that's where it all really kind of happened. It was at that time; I think goth music in England was at its height but The Sisters I don't think had released *Floodland* by then.

It was 1987 that Floodland came out.



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MV : Yeah, exactly. But I remember The Sisters' "1969" playing and all the classics. It was every Friday night we'd all pile into the pub, because in Britain you could drink when you were 18. Although we were at the time 14 or 15, it wasn't difficult to get served in pubs. You would photocopy one of your friend's older brother's driving license because it was just a paper copy back then with some typed information on it. So, you just photocopy that, put it in a little plastic wallet, and hand it to the barman. It's nothing like the rules are over here. Inevitably, everyone at the pub was pretty much underage anyway. It was a great musical and social experience.

Bristol is so close to Cardiff in Wales. Was there a major London influence or were there cool record shops, clothing shops, etc. in Bristol that got you started in the scene back in that time?

MV : Totally. London's obviously the hub and then around that you've got say Bristol, Birmingham, and Manchester are some of the other major cities. Bristol is a big place. If you've heard the music of the last few years, Massive Attack, Portishead, Tricky, [Bristol] always had a big rich musical culture—back then in the 80s, not so much, but as a city at the time, it was great. It wasn't as crazy as London, but it was as busy as Birmingham or Manchester or any of the big cities.

It definitely wasn't sleepy. It certainly had edgy moments to it, especially when you're thirteen or fourteen years old out on the town for the first time. It was just a great experience, very vibrant.

This reminds me of Trevor Ristow's book, Waiting For Another War: A History of The Sisters Of Mercy, Volume 1: 1980-1985. The author shares interpretations of Andrew Eldritch's lyrics and what it was like to be in Leeds in the late 70s and early 80s leading up to the formation of Sisters.

MV : He's an interesting character. I've not read a whole lot but I sometimes come across interesting facts like Patricia Morrison is on the cover of *Floodland* but she didn't play a note on the album. Andrew didn't think she was quite up to it, which he was a bit of a, I'm not going to say control freak, but I guess he wanted exactly what he wanted. And that's what I've done with this project, which I haven't with other projects before. I got tired with the whole band mentality of, "Oh, I like this. Oh, no, I don't like this" and compromising stuff. That was the thing I didn't want to do with Black Angel. It kind of sounds maybe a little bit selfish but this was just my project, and I did this because I wanted to do it and for no other reason than I just hoped people would get a kick out of it. So, I guess maybe there's a similar mentality there.

Speaking of the name Black Angel, when I first learned about this project, I immediately thought about The Cult and the song of the same name. I'm guessing that is the inspiration for your project's name?

MV : You are exactly right. I'm definitely not a closed book. I don't think it's a difficult one for anybody who's into the genre, right? Yeah, "Black Angel" when I first heard it, I just loved it. I loved listening to it. I was a student in Manchester, and I played it over and over and over and over again. It is one album that you can listen to on headphones. It was such a sad event a few weeks ago when the producer, Steve Brown, passed away. Again, I've read stories that The Cult fired him after

Love because they wanted a more rock sound, which is a shame because I think it's the best album they've done. "Black Angel" is a total favorite song of mine and that is how it all came about. It's funny, I thought we'd get a lot more flack about it because there's obviously the band The Black Angels. These days the industry is so oversaturated with music and bands, good stuff and bad stuff. Everything just seems so widely spread around these days that I think in the three years we've been going there's been one person saying, "Oh, you do know there's a band called Black Angels." I expected reams of people to be saying, "Why do you call it this when it is already a band like that?" But I think in this genre, anyone who's into it kind of gets it. To me, it's really not that important.

I remember the lyrics for "Black Angel" and the lines that stood out to me are connected to the vibe I get when I listen to the music of your project Black Angel.

*The sirens call a sailor to die
Enchanted by the sound, his desires have been found
In his mind, his life is rushing by
All this while, the storm it rages on
He's turning old, he shall never return
Sail on to the eternal reward*

There's romance, longing and darkness in that song that is also in the music that you create. Would you agree? MV : Yeah, totally, all of it. I was only listening to that yesterday, coincidentally enough. I was listening to that part of the lyric, thinking about some stuff I've been writing. I also thought, I'm going to look at that particular song and wonder if they're too close. I'm not necessarily a lyric person. For me, it's all about the music. When I hear a song, it's the melody, the beat and how it moves me that way. I don't really listen to lyrics at all. In fact, funnily enough, my son, when he has to suffer all the stuff I play in the car when we're driving around, he said, "There's one thing about bands in the 80s. I can never understand their lyrics." That's a true point. In the 80s goth genre a lot of the lyrics would kind of run together and it wasn't quite as decipherable in some songs. It winds my kids up but I love it, I don't think they should necessarily always be as clear as day. If you've got the lyrics on the sleeve notes in front of you, that helps you out. To go back to your point, all of Black Angel is exactly like that and on this particular album coming up, *Prince of Darkness*, I think I'm going to end up writing the whole thing. Normally, I invite other writers that I've worked with in the past to see if they want to contribute with either just lyrics or lyrical melodies because when I first started Black Angel, it wasn't my strong point. We are now on to album three and I've had to make myself do it. I find it a lot easier. I was just writing lyrics today and it's always the same thing: it's always about love, love lost, love just out of reach. To me, the whole goth thing, that's what it's all about. The Sisters' "This Corrosion" is such a good video. One thing I love about that and their whole approach was, even though I think they took it very seriously, it was always very flamboyant. You know, romantic. The same thing with The Cult and *Love*. So yeah, we definitely do the same thing. Whether it's just an unconscious "rubbing off"



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that kind of thing, it's definitely not intentional. It's just my personality, which is why I latched on to that album in the first place. But yeah, you can expect plenty of that on the new album for sure.

You've mentioned your love of bands like The Damned, The Clash, The Sisters of Mercy, The Cult, etc. What films and books have inspired you over the years?

MV : So, let's start with books. I don't read a lot of books. I'm a very impatient person. I know it sounds weird that I don't have the time to sit down and just be able to relax and read. I'm very creative, I always have to be making something or doing something, so I find it hard to sit down and read. I think probably the last book I read was maybe, literally twenty years ago. Films, I'm a total film buff which is why I got into the business is why I do what I do now. I wouldn't say there was anything that really heavily influenced Black Angel from any other medium apart from music. It's always been music and it's always been those bands and particular albums from that period of in time. My kids always tease me about it. It's like, "If it's not about the 80s then Dad's not interested." Which is true, I'm definitely kind of stuck in the 80s in terms of culture, music and everything because it was just a magical time for me. And now, boy, I wish it could come back.

How would you describe the visuals of Black Angel: the album artwork, the videos, and the aesthetic you and vocalist Corey Landis portray? I see a film noir element throughout your visuals and I'm aware of your background in photography and your work in the film and television industry. Tell us about the album artwork for the single "She Said". It is a clear reference to Bauhaus' LP *In the Flat Field*.

MV : You're totally correct. The single for "She Said" yes, it was definitely influenced by the Bauhaus album, but just with the shapes and the text. I'm glad people pick up on it, and again, I'm not trying to copy anything or plagiarize anything. It's because of our love of the original artwork that I just referenced it. But yeah, I do all the artwork. It's just mainly me. I'm a huge film noir fan. It's definitely my favorite genre. I don't sit down and make a point to watch film noir or anything maybe I've not seen before but it's my favorite genre of film. I'm a big black and white photography fan. The first album cover for *The Widow*, which is that black and white artwork, it's definitely an influence on that. It's all part of that comforting, darker or more alternative look at things. I went to film school and we studied a lot of classic film noir movies and it definitely has a sort of unconscious "rubbing off" on what we do. For *The Widow* extended version, being a bit of a perfectionist, one thing I try to do is anything that we put out, whether it being artwork or an album or a video, I want people to see that the production level is what would hopefully come from a major label. For me, that was released in the 80s, they all did pretty much come from either a major label or a major independent label and a lot of time and care went into the production, the recording and the artwork so I just want to match that. It was really important for me to not just do iPhone videos and put them on YouTube. Everything has to be of a certain level before I let it out there. That's a really important thing for me with this project.

Black Angel has been lauded as a "revival" project. What is your response to

that term and the implications that you are miming or resurrecting a bygone era of music?

MV : Yeah, I've heard this a few times over the last year. I mean, I use all social media, I still use Facebook and there's some really nice people and in some of the groups they're talking about the revival of post punk and gothic rock. I personally don't really see that, I think maybe bands have always been doing it. It's because of social media, the accessibility and people being able to release basically whatever they want to, on whatever platform. I don't necessarily think there is a resurgence, but if there is, I think that's great. Quite often I go on Bandcamp and listen to other bands that are producing music in the genre and there's other bands out there that are also very, very supportive. There's not a catty sort of attitude out there. It seems most of the goth rock bands and post-punk bands are very supportive of each other. They buy each other's music and plug them when they can. I think that's really great because for me it's just all about enjoying the music and just hopefully getting people to listen to it.

When it comes to lyrics, what are your inspirations? Andrew Eldritch (infamously took ages to write lyrics and this is something he was very protective of. The separation with Wayne Hussey is rumored to have been very much connected to their creative differences when it comes to lyrics. What are your thoughts on this?

MV : I was just thinking about this, again, today. I was writing a song today because I'm trying to finish up all the lyrics on the album now and I was thinking, "Oh, you know, I hope this isn't too cheeseball." My strengths reside in the music and the production. I can make sure everything is perfect down to the last cymbal hit, that's really important. For the lyrics, of course they are really important, but it's not my strongest forte. Some of the time I'll write stuff and look at it back through my fingers, just wondering how terrible this possibly is, but after a couple of rewrites I convince myself that it's pretty good. I always start out by writing the music and then I just have lyrics and lyrical melodies to fit. So yes, being a lyricist is definitely not my strongest suit. Hopefully, it's not as bad as I think it is half the time.

John Taylor of Duran Duran said that when Simon Le Bon joined the band, he was happy because there was finally a poet in the band. I think that's what Andrew Eldritch was to The Sisters of Mercy. He really was a poet, he was reading a lot and referencing the literature and art that he was consuming and inspired by.

MV : I was listening to The Mission's "Wasteland" yesterday and oddly enough, for him to leave [Wayne Hussey departed The Sisters of Mercy and co-founded The Mission] and start another band, you kind of think that the guitarist as a singer might suck, but I was listening to his performance and he is a really strong singer. Another thing, for the first time ever on the new album I'm going to do a cover of Duran Duran's "The Chauffeur".

Perfect.

MV : So, I was listening to that because obviously I needed to write the arrangement to the original music. I mean, they are fantastic lyrics that I wish I could write. My lyrics are always very literal, and I don't know whether that's a lack of patience because once I've got something and I think, "Okay, yeah, that works" I move on, whereas maybe I should be a little bit more like Andrew Eldritch and

just muse over them a little bit longer, but maybe that will come as time progresses.

What do you think about the reopening of venues and the return of live music: will we be able to go back to enjoying loud music in a dark, crowded room or will things be totally different?

MV : Yeah, I don't know. That is a very special thing. It is great to be out, whether it's a club or you go and see a band, in a dark smoke-filled venue. I'll be honest, I know it's kind of a means to an end, but I think a lot of the live streaming stuff isn't that good. Let me explain that. Yes, of course, I think it's important that bands get out there and they continue to connect with people that listen to them. I don't know whether it's the format but for me, I lose interest very quickly because it just looks like there's a bunch of people stood in a room with an iPhone. It doesn't hold my attention for very long, so I'm hoping that we can get back to some form of normality and leave our houses so we can leave the streaming live video performances behind and get back to something that we all know a little bit better.

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If you think about the band Suicide back when they were coming up in New York City in the 1970s, their live performances would drive people away because what Alan Vega did onstage was shocking or disturbing and the music was "out there". There's something impactful about bearing witness to that. I'm going to reference John Taylor one more time in this conversation: in his teen years going to live shows he said the supporting act was just as important to see as the headliner because you could be watching a band you had never heard of and be seeing them just before they "make it big". It's the same story with the Buzzcocks looking for a support act and choosing fellow Mancunian band Joy Division. I think there's something to this, the need to be physically together in a space having a little bit of discomfort as we witness art being created. I think you're talking about how the streaming platform does not allow for that experience to happen. We're all comfortable at home and not forced to be face to face with the artist. I'm curious where things will go, and I appreciate you sharing your perspective as a creator. When we come back from this, what do you think your live shows will look like?

MV : Black Angel has always been a studio project. We have played live before and there's one thing for me personally, and of course, everybody has their own opinions, but if I go and see band X, I want to hear tracks off the album in a live situation. For example, I'm a huge fan of The The and I have been for decades. I heard they were coming to LA last year, so I bought a ticket straight away and got very excited. A week before I read a bit more about the event, which is actually one of my shortcomings that I tend to not read very clearly when I should do and that kind of gets me into trouble sometimes. But I found out it was an unplugged event. That same day I sold my ticket because there's no interest for me. I've seen The The in Bristol before and it was one of the best gigs. I want to experience what they created in the studio in a live performance, in a live space. I

essentially want to hear what I heard on the album. That, for me, is important. So, when we play it's drum machines and sequencers. We have additional guitars and stuff, but it's not going to be that far away from what you would hear if you put on the record, except we play it and perform it in a live environment. Hopefully that with the lights and what I think is a really strong performance from Corey, I think





that gives it its edge and that's why people will want to go and hopefully they will enjoy it.

What would you say to any musician who's starting out, your 'golden rules' to survive in the music industry? It looks like you self-release Black Angel on Solid Recordings. How do you navigate self-promotion in the age of social media?

MV : Yeah, so Solid Recordings is my label which I've had for a couple of decades and all the releases, I've done three projects, I've always had them come out through that particular label. It's just a very small indie label which I only put out releases that I create through it. We don't have any other artists or acts on the roster, although I have thought about it and I'd love to do it if I actually had the time or the gamble to be able to do that. With social media, I design all the merchandise myself. The thing with the girls [in Black Angel merch] on Instagram, which is basically where they come from, was a couple of years ago, or maybe less. I think like any band, you're always looking for



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some help to be able to get exposure. So, my idea at the time was to reach out to a bunch of Instagram influencers who were into the gothic genre. I wrote to all of them, "Look, this is Matt from Black Angel, here's the music. If you like it, let us know and then if I send you a free t-shirt, will you wear it, take a picture and post it on Instagram?" Everybody I spoke to was super nice and everybody agreed. So, I printed up a bunch of t-shirts and I sent them out to people. It's just like anybody else trying to find either a leg up or another angle to get some exposure to get people to listen and it's one of many ways I try and do it. I think the one thing I've learned since I started the project is that honesty is the best policy. You know, Instagram is completely fake and false and pretty much soulless. So, I just write people on Facebook and I say, "This is Black Angel. Here's a link, here is a free download. If you like it, get back in touch, I'll send you some more links." It takes a long time, but it makes some really good connections that way and the nice thing is when people get the album or see the videos and they post pictures. I would send my Black Angel CD through the mail. That's what makes it special for me that people wanted it. They looked forward to it, they listened to it, they appreciated it just like I did a couple of decades ago.

Since you've had the perspective of being a young adult in England during the 80s, what is your take on the current state of the dark alternative scene, locally in England or globally?

MV : I think it's the record labels and the music industry. You'd have a bunch of creatives, producers, engineers, mixers and we all understand the record label is like, "We're gonna give you a million-dollar advance." That's not because they think you're awesome, they think you're a great investment and you have to pay every single pound or dollar of that back before you see anything, any royalties anyway. So, we all understand how that works. But there was a system to it, they would take a band and pair them up with producers and it would turn out something that I listen to now and I still think somebody just produced this yesterday. The problem these days is, bands don't get the opportunity to have that kind of mentoring and nurturing and support behind them. So, they just kind of put music out there. Sometimes it's 'okay' produced, sounds not great, not greatly mixed and it's not greatly mastered. It could just do with some more thought behind it, some more time and investment with not necessarily financial investment, but creative investment. So that's one of the issues I have at the moment with a lot of the music that's out there. In this genre, there's

some great stuff but we're really lacking that sort of mentoring from the large labels and producers that have had all this experience and they know how to shape an artist and give an album a particular sound, which I think is vital. It is a real shame that now seems to be lacking from the industry.

When it comes to specific musical influences, are there any individual artists that you've looked to for inspiration? For example, the bass played by Craig Adams in Sisters and The Mission, Billy Duffy's guitar in The Cult, etc?

MV : I guess the main thing, Black Angel is guitar, so apart from Jimi Hendrix who is the absolute number one guitar god in the world, Billy Duffy comes in at a very close number two. From the particular sound he had on *Love* to "Love Removal Machine" and "Wild Flower", he just is ever inventing himself in terms of his guitar work and he's such a great player. But also, to mention, and I've never mentioned before, I'm a huge Cure fan and Robert Smith, album after album after album after album always is just the most fantastic guitar player not in terms of technique and shredding, I just mean the melodies and the tone. He just nails it, time and time again. So, I say, the biggest guitar influences are Billy Duffy and Robert Smith. For the rest of it, it's just a certain sound. If I sit down to write, I might spend the week before that just going through all my favorite goth albums and this is just about reinvigorating myself to get into it. I have a studio full of guitars here and I'll just plug in either a guitar or bass and I just normally get a four-on-the-floor kick drum going and let's just see what I can come up with. On this last album, I might write 40 or 50 songs and then whittle it down to ten because if I write a song, I put it on a week later and if it doesn't do it for me in the first ten seconds, I junk it and start again because I know in a year's time, I'm gonna be totally tired of it.

I agree about Billy Duffy. Also, he just looked so cool.

MV : That white hair for the *Love* album! I actually had hair similar to that back then. Obviously, you've seen me now and I can't quite pull that off. But back then I had a crown like that. It wasn't bleached white because I had to go to school, but it looked very similar to that. I thought it was really cool. He is one amazing guitarist. He certainly stood the test of time and I'm so glad The Cult had come back. I went to see them at The Forum in L.A. I know they had a kind of sticky few years where they weren't doing too well. I'm so glad they've come back. It was nice to see them in a small stadium full of a thousand people just singing along to every song when you know the lyrics from like, 25 years ago. That was a good experience.

You've mentioned events in Los Angeles a couple of times, but you've been very clear that you are an English band.

MV : My heart and roots are still definitely UK based. So yeah, if you were to say where Black Angel were from, I'd have to say in the UK, although I'm currently here [in Los Angeles] for who knows for how long but yeah, we are definitely a UK band.

So my last question for you is a very simple one. I'm curious if you would share a photo of yourself from the 80s.

MV : You know, I certainly will if I can find one with some spiky hair as well as maybe some burgundy. Let me have a look around and see if I can dig one up.

I'm so grateful for your time today.

MV : It was very nice talking to you today. It's great to know people that are into the scene and stuff and they're doing it for the right reasons.

Find out more about **Black Angel** on their [website](#) and their [Bandcamp](#). You can also follow Black Angel on [Facebook](#) @blkangelmusic and [Instagram](#) @black_angel_music.