

Going Underground

IT'S A TYPICAL SATURDAY NIGHT. In the city, the girls are lining up at George St bars in lipstick-pink mini dresses, and the boys, in skinny jeans, are praying their bouncer cousin will be able to get them through the door tonight. A 20-minute cab ride away in Enmore, it's a different story. At the Sly Fox Hotel, the dress code is black. **Black hair, black velvet, black lace...** black everything. It's alternative '80s goth night, Ascension, held on the first Saturday of most months. Tunes are by Depeche Mode, The Cure and Joy Division. Over in nearby Marrickville, a group of self-described **vampires** are meeting at a warehouse to participate in rituals, which may include "feeding" on one another via small incisions. Welcome to the Inner West's underground. Despite its rampant gentrification, this side of town still plays host to an impressive array of alternative subcultures.

Stephanie Calkin, who runs the Enmore gothic clothing store, **Gallery Serpentine**, and founded the "darkly beautiful" Under the Blue Moon Festival, says the Inner West is the place to be an alternative creative. "There's a lot of support in keeping a high degree of creativity in the community. For me, when a community is naturally creative in the way it dresses, the way it makes music and the way it makes art – and that flows out into the urban environment – you've got a really, really cool place to be."

"I'd like to think that all vampires are gothic, but if the recent *Twilight* movies are anything to go by, vampires obviously shop at Supre! I mean, seriously, the Edward Cullen character is about as gothic as Bert Newton, although slightly better-looking."

Inner West goths are well catered for. They can try out a new goth make-up line, **Miss X Aesthetic Laboratories**, created by Angelspit band member Destroyx, at Gallery Serpentine, sip absinthe at the new Absinthesalon in nearby Surry Hills, or listen to James Russell's **Dark Passage** radio program on 2SER on Thursdays at midnight. Tunes are by local acts such as The Process Void and Empty, and, from overseas, Velvet Acid Christ, The Birthday Massacre and Psyche. Though, Russell says, there's plenty of crossover too: "I've lost count of how many times I've gone into a goth club in the



Gallery Serpentine's Stephanie Calkin



From goths and vampires to sex-soaked couples clubs, there's a side to the Inner West that's remained largely hidden from public view. Until now. Story by Carla Caruso.

The lotus position

Camperdown swingers club **Lotus Lounge** is a multimillion-dollar venue but most people driving past its nondescript frontage on Parramatta Road would have no idea what's taking place mere metres from their car. As owner Adam says, "You basically have to know where it is."

The establishment, which is only open on Friday and Saturday nights, has a similar feel to an upmarket nightclub, with a large bar, pool table – oh, and a **huge jacuzzi**.

"There's pretty much three type of couples who come in," Adam explains. "Basically, you get a **voyeuristic type of couple**, who want to enjoy the lounge, meet people and might want to play by themselves. Then you get the second type of couple – usually the lady's bisexual, so the ladies may play

and the guys hang back. And, the third couple might be the type that actually swings."

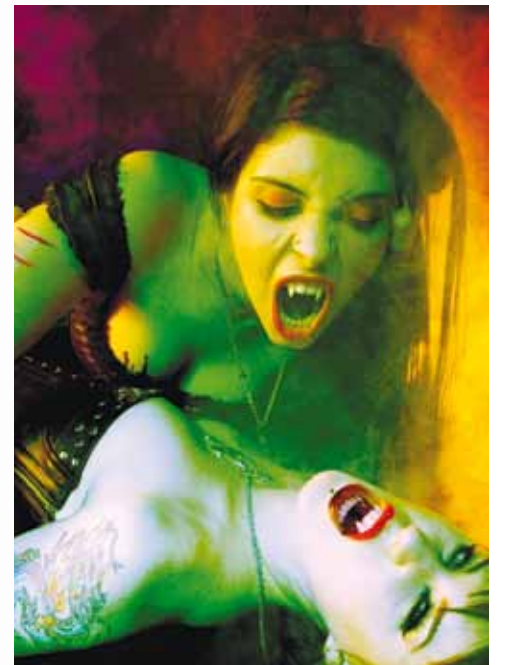
Adam says the his venue is a safer option than meeting "likeminded people" at, say, a bar. "At the end of the night, you can basically go your own way. You're not at the house of someone you don't know or in a hotel room. There are other people there that make it safe."

Around 20 couples turn up to play on a typical Friday or Saturday night at the Lotus Lounge. "Every type of person you can imagine goes to the venue," Adam says. "Professionals, people from the Inner West, or out in the suburbs, and those from interstate or overseas."

Bookings are essential. Intrigued? Head to www.lotuslounge.com.au.

last couple of years and heard The Presets get played." Calkin says: "It's very clichéd but you can't go past the beautiful **St Stephen's Cemetery** in Newtown [as a hang out]. We actually filmed the opening scenes of our upcoming goth-yoga DVD there." (For those not in the know, goth-yoga involves the use of corsetry within the workout, with big, stumpy boots essential.)

The three-decade old gothic subculture, which has its roots in the UK's post-punk period, is forever evolving, according to Calkin. "There's still the **Morticia archetype** out there, where it's all long, flowing dresses, or the **Marilyn Manson archetype**, but that's not the only thing." New influences include "steam punk", which blends Victoriana, science fiction and steam-age contraptions style-wise, and colourful "Loli-goths", drawing Japanese gothic style to create a Lolita-look. "The other major themes that are coming through are roller derby, burlesque, rockabilly and swing-dancing," Calkin adds. "There's a huge crossover amongst these communities."



Another outgrowth of the goth culture, turbocharged in recent years by the popularity of films and TV shows such as *Twilight* and *True Blood*, is vampirism. Sydney photographer and gothic artist **Avelina De Moray** frequently pays tribute to the subculture in her art. She says: "The vampire scene in Sydney is extremely underground. Basically, if you have to ask where it is, you probably don't belong there."

The attraction for Moray, who plays in goth-metal band **As Angels Bleed**, is the erotic side of bloodsucking. "For me, it's all about the romance, sensuality, darkness and style that the vampire portrays. There's a certain confidence attached to immortal vampires that I think many people find themselves attracted to."

She points out the **Inner West's vampires** are a lot different to the ones seen on screen. "I'd like to think that all vampires are gothic, but if the recent *Twilight* movies are anything to go by, vampires obviously shop at Supre! I mean, seriously the Edward Cullen character is about as gothic as Bert Newton, although slightly better-looking."

De Moray isn't a fan of is bloodletting. "The human body carries more bacteria than any other species. But I'm told that you can consume a pint and a half of someone's blood before becoming sick. Or, is that a pint and a half of your own blood? I always get those two mixed up."

Enmore gothic expert **Jodie Meidling** – known in the goth community as "Jodie Coyote" – says the current fascination with vampirism, particularly among younger people, is a natural progression of the goth subculture. (Meidling currently features in a video on goth culture as part of the Powerhouse Museum's *The 80s are Back* exhibition.) "It's very difficult for young people at the moment to do something that is so debauched and against society to really stand out. Realistically, it's all been done before. With kids getting into the new culture of 'vampire', nothing would freak out their parents more. It's about breaking as many extremes as you can."

Which, when you think about it, is exactly the attitude that's made the Inner West what it is today. ■

Main photo: Gallery Serpentine fashion by Koukei Photography. Additional photography (left): Ben Gregan and Avelina De Moray (above), www.avelinademoray.com.