Aimee Hinds, "Entry on: Cities in Dust by Siouxsie and the Banshees ", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1055. Entry version as of September 14, 2026.

Siouxsie and the Banshees

Cities in Dust

United Kingdom (1985)

TAGS: Eruption of Vesuvius Pompeii Roman History

We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Cities in Dust
Title of the Album(s)	Tinderbox
Studio/Production Company	Polydor
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom, Ireland, Netherlands, United States
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1985
First Edition Details	Siouxsie and the Banshees, *Tinderbox: Cities in Dust*. Polydor, 1985, 4.06 min.
Running time	4.06 min
Format	Vinyl
Official Website	siouxsieandthebanshees.co.uk (accessed: August 11, 2020).
Genre	Narrative songs
Target Audience	Young adults
Author of the Entry	Aimee Hinds, University of Roehampton, aimee.hinds89@gmail.com
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, s.deacy@roehampton.ac.uk Lisa Maurice, Bar-Ilan University, lisa.maurice@biu.ac.il

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Creators

Siouxsie and the Banshees at Lollapalooza by Carlos Aguilar, 1991. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons, licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 (accessed: January 11, 2022).

Siouxsie and the Banshees (Music Band)

Siouxsie and the Banshees (1976–1996) were a British rock band. The band were originally formed in 1976 by the only constant members Siouxsie Sioux (real name Susan Ballion, b. 1957) and Steven Severin (real name Steven Bailey, b. 1955) after they had met at a concert. They released eleven studio albums. In 2002 they reunited briefly for a reunion tour.

The band straddled several genres across their career, starting out with punk origins inspired by the Sex Pistols, but touching also on post-punk, gothic rock, and new wave through the 1980s and with pop and dance elements through the late 80s and 90s. Their songs lyrically range from the very dark and gothic to the upbeat and pop-influenced, although musically they have remained at least alternative rock. Both the band and Sioux herself have been hugely influential, with many contemporary female artists including PJ Harvey, Courtney Love, Charlie XCX, Ana Matronic and FKA Twigs expressing their admiration.

Sources:

wikipedia.org (accessed: July 27, 2020);

wikipedia.org (accessed: July 27, 2020).

Prepared by Aimee Hinds, University of Roehampton, aimee.hinds89@gmail.com

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Additional information

Summary

The song narrates the destruction of Pompeii in 79AD due to the eruption of Vesuvius. Pompeii is not mentioned by name, although the cover art for this single feature an image of the plaster cast of a dog, found in the House of Orpheus in Pompeii. The lyrics are direct and explicit in their treatment of the destruction and the human tragedy, through the choral lyric “your city lies in dust”, through references to hiding and choking, and in particular the final verse:

Hot and burning in your nostrils

Pouring down your gaping mouth

Your molten bodies blanket of cinders

Caught in the throes

The video begins with images of human figures cast in plaster superimposed on a background of a bubbling red liquid. The plaster casts fade out to a dancing skeleton while the bubbling liquid becomes red curtains with a Greek key pattern along the edge, which open to reveal an image of lava flowing through rocks with flying embers while Sioux lies below, eventually fading herself into a plaster cast. Broken buildings can be seen in the lava streams. Throughout the video there are short scenes of men dressed and made up to appear entirely white running an attempting to hide, and at one point one of them also morphs into a plaster cast. Images of Sioux are superimposed against a background of flames.

The song was written shortly after Siouxsie Sioux visited Pompeii.

Analysis

Lyrically the song deals directly with the eruption of Vesuvius, although it is unclear whether it is being viewed from Pompeii or from nearby Herculaneum; as neither town is referenced by name, either (or both, as the title refers to plural cities) could be the subject of the song. The song was finished prior to the album and so release was rushed before the band toured their album. Although it deals with the same subject matter as *Pompeii* by Bastille, the song uses much more explicit language and imagery to summon the horror and chaos of the eruption. The song is sung from the point of view of a survivor, or

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possibly a passing traveller, with the repeated refrain of "your city lies in dust, my friend". Throughout the song there are references to people running and hiding, and the desperation of the situation is clear from the first verse:

Water was running children were running

You were running out of time

Under the mountain, a golden fountain

Were you praying at the Lares shrine?

A later verse mentions someone found "hiding…choking on the dirt and sand", which again references the desperate measures people went to in order to escape the eruption. The reference to the Lares is historically accurate, reflecting the presence of *lararium* in Pompeii and Herculaneum, around which daily religious rituals would have revolved (Roberts, 2013: 95–99); such details reflect Sioux's visit to Pompeii. While Siouxsie and the Banshee's do not reference classical motifs elsewhere, other songs on this album are rooted in specific places (Savage, 2019), including the track *Land's End*.

The second person point of view in the song gives a tone which, similarly to Bastille's *Pompeii*, places moral blame on the inhabitants or the city itself, with the lyrics indicating the city's fall from glory embodied by the eruption:

Your former glories and all the stories

Dragged and washed with eager hands

The reference to washing can be interpreted in ritual terms (for example, the washing away of sins) or as a nod to the archaeological cleaning of the site.

Unlike Bastille's version of the same event, Siouxsie and the Banshees end on a graphic note:

Hot and burning in your nostrils

Pouring down your gaping mouth

Your molten bodies blanket of cinders

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Caught in the throes

While this imagery (along with that of the video) imply the presence of burning lava, the loss of life in both Pompeii and Herculaneum was due to surges of extreme heat and poisonous gases. However, the image of the "molten body…caught in the throes" captures the essence of Pompeii's famous plaster casts, which reveal the last contortions of the inhabitants.

The language in the lyrics is quite clear about the fate of those caught in the disaster, although there is no explicit mention of death, and the outsider perspective makes it fairly easy to understand for younger listeners. Given the explicit nature of the lyrics as far as referencing the destruction, there is no need for the listener to have knowledge of the events surrounding Pompeii, although small details such as the *Lares* will be missed. Although there is little information about Pompeii's influence on the band beyond Sioux's trip to visit (for example, Savage, 2019), the depth and detail of the song reflects an engagement with the place beyond research from books or television.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

Eruption of Vesuvius Pompeii Roman History

Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture

Death Environment Loss

Further Reading

Hales, Shelley, and Joanna Paul, eds., *Pompeii in the Public Imagination from its Rediscovery to Today,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Roberts, Paul, *Life and Death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, London: The British Museum Press, 2013.

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Savage, Jon, "Siouxsie and the Banshees: Our 1986 Interview", *Spin*, July 26, 2019 (accessed: June 16, 2020).

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