

The History of Rock Music: 1966-1969

Genres and musicians of the Sixties

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Hard-rock 1969-73

(These are excerpts from my book ["A History of Rock and Dance Music"](#))

Hard-rock signaled, in many ways, the end of the creative 1960s. In and around the cities of the counterculture, hard-rock became a way to affirm a less "confrontational", militant stance. Musically, hard-rock was the terminal point of an evolution of blues that had seen white, middle-class musicians reinvent the music of black, enslaved musicians as entertainment for the western youth. Hard-rock was still based on blues, like rock'n'roll had always been, but it was a faster, louder and stronger kind of music, that buried the suffering of the black people under thousands of decibels.

One can find the prodromes of hard-rock in bands such as Cream (England), Blue Cheer (California) and Guess Who (Canada), that already emphasized amplification and centered the song around the guitar riff. And they were certainly a major influence on the British bands that "invented" hard-rock.

However, [Led Zeppelin](#) (2), formed by ex-Yardbirds guitarist Jimmy Page and Alexis Korner's protege` Robert Plant, were, first and foremost, children of the blues. However, the jams of **Led Zeppelin I** (oct 1968 - jan 1969) introduced a hysterical approach to black music that even blacks had never dreamed of (culminating in the epileptic zenith of *Communication Breakdown*). Led Zeppelin's sound was an extension of electric blues that relied on three factors: a faster, almost frenzied, pace; a loud and scorching howl that almost parodied the black "shouters" and had psychotic overtones; forceful guitar playing of great imagination with mystic overtones. The melodrama of songs such as *Whole Lotta Love* (1969) was continuously ruptured by guitar riffs and delirious vocals. Cream had played blues-rock as brain music: Led Zeppelin played blues-rock as body music. From *Immigrant Song* (1970) to *In The Evening* (1979), Led Zeppelin were mainly an idea of rock'n'roll for a new kind of audience. The secondary elements that had been percolating the early albums emerged vigorously on **Led Zeppelin IV** (dec 1970/mar 1971 - nov 1971): *When The Levee Breaks* was their most original (almost psychedelic) song inspired by the folk tradition, and *Stairway To Heaven* was the culmination of their "soft" and spiritual alter-ego.

Led Zeppelin became a handbook case of how a product finds a market without any need for marketing. The hippy generation had created a demand for free-form radio (as opposed to hit-oriented radio) and for arena-size concerts. Their music was completely different from the music that those radios and those arenas had been playing, but turned out to be the perfect music to maximize the commercial benefit of free-form radio and arena-size concerts.

Led Zeppelin's success had a powerful impact on the recording industry: it defined the long-playing album as rock's medium of choice. Led Zeppelin never had a major "hit" on the Billboard charts, but ruled the airwaves and the arenas. The recording industry followed the hint and began marketing albums rather than singles.

Detroit

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Another source of hard vibrations was Detroit. Detroit hosted the headquarters of some of the most extremist elements of the counterculture (e.g., the White Panthers), but, more to the point, was the most industrial city of the USA. Just like the folksingers had been the natural voice of the intellectuals of the Greenwich Village, surf-music had been the natural voice of California fun, Mersey-beat had been the natural voice of the "swinging London" and acid-rock had been the natural voice of San Francisco's hippies, a ferocious, noisy kind of rock'n'roll became the natural voice of Detroit's blue-collar workers and their children. There had been few precedents for Detroit's wall of screams and riffs (Blue Cheer in California was the notable one). The humble [Frost](#) (1) gave the city its manifesto with **Rock And Roll Music** (? 1969 - ? 1969).

[MC5](#) (11), led by White Panther's leader John Sinclair and guitarist Wayne Kramer, represented the revolutionary wing of the student riots and used rock and roll as a powerful agit-prop device. Their sound embodied the rage and the sarcasm of the extremists, their lyrics defied all moral standards. Their live shows were wild, collective orgasms in which the band unleashed a monster and chaotic fury on the audience. **Kick Out The Jams** (oct 1968 - feb 1969) remains one of the most orgiastic, terrifying and visceral albums ever released, a grotesque bacchanal of atrocious, primitive musical skills, a formidable assault on reality, the rock'n'roll equivalent of a nuclear explosion, sounding as if free-jazz and acid-rock had been savagely mauled inside a particle accelerator. The fact that its follow-up, **Back In The USA** (jul/sep 1969 - jan 1970), was so inferior is proof that the masterpiece was due to the spirit of an entire era and not to a particular group of musicians.

While no less savage, the [Stooges](#) (12) came up with a more musical proposition. **Stooges** (apr 1969 - aug 1969) borrowed ideas from Chuck Berry, Rolling Stones, Velvet Underground and Doors (hard riffs, obscene antics, libidinous vocals, distorted guitars) and pushed them to the limit. *We Will Fall* was the Doors' *The End* plus the Velvet Underground's *Venus In Furs*. 1969, *No Fun* and *I Wanna Be Your Dog* were Chuck Berry's *Sweet Little Sixteen* plus the Rolling Stones' *Satisfaction* plus the Velvet Underground's *Waiting For My Man*. The sex appeal of Mick Jagger, the erotic guitar of Jimi Hendrix, the shamanic perdition of Jim Morrison, the degenerate rituals of Lou Reed, found in the Stooges a new vehicle for a new generation that was no longer idealistic but

merely frustrated. The Stooges embraced the image of the degenerate punk, and took it to a new level of realism, leaving behind the mythic overtones of the hippy era, and returning it to its original dimensions of defiance and vulgarity. The Stooges thus achieved a historical synthesis of both musical styles and sociological meanings. **Fun House** (may 1970 - jul 1970), whose *TV Eye* virtually invented voodoobilly and whose *1970* virtually invented punk-rock, continued the saga, whereas **Raw Power** (sep/oct 1972 - feb 1973) veered towards the kind of respectable glam-rock which would soon become the new career of their vocalist Iggy "Pop" Osterberg. Every bit of Stooges music was militant, although they never referred to politics. And every bit of it was pornographic: each note, each chord, each riff was a sexual innuendo. That mixture of abrasive guitars, raw vocals and solid rhythms was a sonic kamasutra.

MC5 and the Stooges had created a new kind of rock'n'roll, one founded on extreme violence.

From blues to hard-rock

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In Britain, the "apolitical" form of hard-rock generated the same kind of hysterical reaction that Mersey-beat and progressive-rock had generated: dozens of bands adopted the new style with little or no variation between one and the other. Among the least predictable were: [Free](#), featuring vocalist Paul Rodgers, and notable for the visceral blues-rock of *All Right Now* (1970) and *Fire And Water* (1970); [Status Quo](#), whose background was into psychedelic and progressive rock; [Thin Lizzy](#), another dual guitar line-up à la Wishbone Ash; [UFO](#), who pioneered pop-metal; [Uriah Heep](#), purveyors of gothic and medieval atmospheres; [Slade](#), who wed an image of working-class holligans with catchy anthems such as *Cum On Feel The Noise* (1973).

A bubblegum and glam version of hard-rock was concocted by songwriters Nicky Chinn and Mike Chapman and by producer Mickie Most, first with Sweet, for which they penned *Blockbuster* (1972) and *Ballroom Blitz* (1973), and then with Detroit-native Suzi Quatro, who sang *Can The Can* (1973) and *Devil Gate Drive* (1974).

Best were the two bands born on the ashes of the Small Faces: [Humble Pie](#), featuring Peter Frampton, and [Faces](#) (1), featuring vocalist Rod Stewart and guitarist Ron Wood (both veterans of the Jeff Beck Group), whose **A Nod Is As Good As A Wink To A Blind Horse** (mar 1971 - nov 1971) ranks among the most lively examples of white soul-rock.

[Deep Purple](#) (1), who began as late epigones of progressive-rock and neo-classical rock, faring best with the *Concerto for Group and Orchestra* (1970) and the psychological melodrama *Child In Time* (1970), joined the ranks of hard-rock with the supersonic boogie attacks of **Machine Head** (dec 1971 - mar 1972). Despite (or precisely because of) the highly simplified guitar technique of Ritchie Blackmore, the barbaric excesses of their lengthy performances became the stereotype of hard-rock.

[Black Sabbath](#) (2), a highly influential band, further deteriorated the degree of skills required for playing hard-rock. Their distorted and booming riffs, their monster grooves, their martial rhythms, their monotonous singing and their

horror themes evoked the vision of a futuristic medieval universe, and laid the foundations for black metal and doom-metal. Melody and any instrumental prowess were negligible components of their most typical works, **Paranoid** (jun 1970 - sep 1970) and **Master Of Reality** (feb/apr 1971 - jul 1971). They were not the inventors of gothic music, but they were the first to turn it into a genre. Theirs was the ultimate attack on rockers, hippies, singer-songwriters and anyone who valued content over form.

[Queen](#) (1) were the jokers of the hard-rock movement. They borrowed ideas from progressive-rock, from the music-hall (*Killer Queen*, 1974) and from gospel (*Somebody to Love*, 1976); applied fantastic production techniques on **A Night At The Opera** (aug/nov 1975 - nov 1975), worthy of a Frank Zappa operetta; and would become the quintessence of "bombastic" rock with their 1977 anthems (*We Are The Champions*, *We Will Rock You*).

[Bad Company](#), formed by Free's vocalist Paul Rodgers, borrowed from southern boogie and added a lascivious tone, for example on **Bad Company** (nov 1973 - jun 1974).

In the USA very few bands endorsed the violent sound of Detroit's bands. For the most part, USA hard-rock was the USA's counterpart of British hard-rock; and the blues component was, generally speaking, stronger. The leaders were: [Mountain](#) (2), the USA's equivalent of Cream, that wed blues, hard-rock and psychedelic-rock with the epic *Nantucket Sleighride* (1971) and on the baroque collection **Flowers Of Evil** (*live*: jun 1971/*studio*: sep 1971 - nov 1971); [James Gang](#) (1), Joe Walsh's power-trio, whose **Rides Again** (nov 1969 - oct 1970) betrays the influence of progressive-rock; [Grand Funk Railroad](#) (1), vulgar and illiterate but masters of the "groove", and even militant on **E Pluribus Funk** (sep 1971 - nov 1971); [Montrose](#) (1), whose derivative classic is **Montrose** (? 1973 - oct 1973); [Bachman-Turner Overdrive](#) (1), led by former Guess Who guitarist, influenced by the Who and southern boogie on albums such as **Not Fragile** (? 1974 - aug 1974); [Heart](#) (1), who attempted a fusion of folk-rock and hard-rock before selling out with **Heart** (jan/apr 1985 - jul 1985).

The sound of the revolution therefore got tamed very quickly, and hard-rock became mere entertainment for the masses.

Southern waltz

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The southern states of the USA developed their own brand of "hard" vibrations, rooted in the boogie and honky-tonk traditions of the saloons, and capable of mixing country, blues and soul with rock'n'roll. "Southern rock", launched nationwide by ZZ Top and the Allman Brothers Band in 1970, became almost a genre in its own. Jacksonville (Florida) was its epicenter, its scene stirred by the hit *Spooky* (1967) of James Cobb's first band, Classic IV.

There was also a link with the psychedelic school of the 1960s, particularly visible on **Take Me To The Mountains** (? 1970 - ? 1970) by Shiva's Headband, Mariani's **Perpetuum Mobile** (spring 1970 - ? 2001), and Josefus' **Dead Man** (summer 1969; re-recorded mar 1970 - ? 1970), reissued in 1993 as **Get Off My Case**.

Jacksonville's [Allman Brothers Band](#) (3), featuring two lead guitars (Duane Allman and Richard Betts), was the first major act since the Grateful Dead for whom the (improvised) live performance was more relevant than the (composed) studio album. Not surprisingly, they became the only band capable of competing with the Grateful Dead in terms of crowds. Their debut album, **The Allman Brothers Band** (sep 1969 - nov 1969), introduced a form of loose, guitar-intensive blues-rock ballad, a southern version of the Band's roots-rock, but it was the live albums, **Live At Fillmore East** (mar 1971 - jul 1971) and **Eat A Peach** (mar/dec 1971 - feb 1972), that transformed those ballads into epic sonic excursions.

Adding two drummers to the twin lead-guitar format of the Allman Brothers Band, and blending this extended line-up with a more genuine rural spirit, the band of Nashville's bluegrass fiddler [Charlie Daniels](#) came to impersonate the middle-class of the Midwest, starting with **Fire On The Mountain** (oct 1974 - nov 1974).

Solid rhythms and searing guitars were also the main weapons in the arsenal of James Cobb's [Atlanta Rhythm Section](#) in Georgia, on **Third Annual Pipe Dream** (? 1974 - ? 1974), the [Marshall Tucker Band](#) in South Carolina, on **Searchin' For A Rainbow** (*studio*: jul 1974; *live*: may/jun 1975 - ? 1975), [Wet Willie](#) in Alabama, on **Dixie Rock** (? 1974 - ? 1975), and many others. They mostly mixed hard-rock, boogie, country, soul and gospel, although each band had its own recipe and used different percentages for each ingredient.

The most original album of this era came from the obscure [Hampton Grease Band](#) (10), formed by guitarist Harold Kelling and vocalist Bruce Hampton: **Music To Eat** (? 1970 - ? 1971), an unlikely but effervescent blend of Frank Zappa's **Absolutely Free**, Captain Beefheart's **Trout Mask Replica** and the Allman Brothers Band's **Eat A Peach**.

The ultimate, definitive purveyors of southern boogie were [ZZ Top](#) (2), whose best album, **Tres Hombres** (? 1973 - jul 1973), was a veritable encyclopedia of southern styles, highlighted by Billy Gibbons' guitar. Later into their career, ZZ Top veered towards heavy-metal (i.e., the sound invented by their descendants) and adopted devastating electronic rhythms, for example on **Eliminator** (? 1982 - mar 1983), thereby delivering the same old brutal concept to the punk generation.

Bands such as Black Oak Arkansas, the original three-guitar boogie band, best heard on **Keep The Faith** (? 1971 - feb 1972), and the Outlaws (whose 1975's jam *Green Grass And High Tides* may well be the most exciting of the genre) increased the doses of guitar riffs and heavy rhythms.

There were no protagonists (no solos and no virtuosi) in the group sound (also based on three guitars) of Florida's [Lynyrd Skynyrd](#) (2), the leaders of this second generation, fronted by Ronnie VanZant. Their objectives were down to earth: granitic riffs and earth-shaking rhythms to sing the macho (and self-destructing) lifestyle of the reactionary southern male. **Second Helping** (jun 1973/jan 1974 - apr 1974), which contains their anthem *Sweet Home Alabama*, was their best show of force, but their dreadful philosophy peaked with **Street Survivors** (? 1977 - oct 1977), released as VanZant died in a plane crash.

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