

The History of Rock Music: 1970-1975

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The Auteurs 1975-82

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

Female creativity 1975-79

Joni Mitchell had opened the floodgates, and the early 1970s had brought a number of female intellectuals to the forefront. The second half of the 1970s witnessed the definitive emancipation of women in rock music.

[Terry Garthwaite](#) (1), one of the first feminists of rock music, continued Joy Of Cooking's folk-jazz-blues fusion on **Terry** (? 1975 - ? 1975) and subsequent albums.

[Joan Armatrading](#) (1), born in the Caribbean islands but residing in Britain, fused folk, rhythm'n'blues, gospel and reggae on **Joan Armatrading** (? 1976 - sep 1976), while retaining the austere and introspective manner of Joni Mitchell.

Significant artistic growth took place as well among country singer-songwriters. The most impressive talent was probably [Nanci Griffith](#) (1), who, on early albums such as **There's a Light Beyond These Woods** (dec 1977/jan 1978 - ? 1978) and especially **Poet in My Window** (? 1982 - ? 1982) betrayed a tender, romantic soul while setting her stories of personal loss and failure in an oppressive universe, worthy of Kafka's novels.

By far the most gifted and magnetic female singer-songwriter since Joni Mitchell was [Rickie Lee Jones](#) (13), a protégé of Tom Waits whose husky and sensual voice penned one of the boldest attempts at the degraded moral landscape of urban USA: her debut album, **Rickie Lee Jones** (?/dec 1978 - mar 1979). Fluctuating between sobriety and intoxication (both physical and spiritual), Jones managed to be both visionary and romantic while singing about the alienated and neurotic life in the city. Meanwhile, the backing band tinged her ballads with nocturnal rhythm'n'blues and jazz, coining an intellectual variant of late-hours lounge-music. Singer and band acted "classy" while being deliberately sloppy. Intricate psychodramas and surreal suspense also rule on **Pirates** (jan 1980/apr 1981 - jul 1981), while **Flying Cowboys** (? ? - sep 1989) is the best of her lighter collections. New heights were reached with **Traffic from Paradise** (? 1993 - sep 1993), her most abstract,

psychedelic, unfocused and cryptic work.

Texas 1975-80

Townes Van Zandt had unwittingly started a school of singer-songwriters in Texas. For a while, that school was one of the most prolific and intriguing of the planet. They were inevitably closer to the "roots" (country, blues, folk, tex-mex, etc) and to the format of the ballad, but enhanced that tradition with a stronger sense of the human condition.

One of the towering figures of the Texas school, [Guy Clark](#) (1), was also one of the least prolific. **Old Number One** (? 1975 - nov 1975) introduced a laconic and romantic country balladeer who injected archaic feelings into his strong narrative scaffolding.

Other Texan honky-tonking singer-songwriters were: George ["Butch" Hancock](#) (1), who perhaps displayed the strongest Woody Guthrie influence on the bleak acoustic ballads of **West Texas Waltzes & Dust-Blown Tractor Tunes** (? 1978 - ? 1978); [Joe Ely](#) (1), whose **Honky Tonk Masquerade** (? 1977 - feb 1978) coined a blue-collar rock that is a visceral version of Gram Parsons' country-rock; [Terry Allen](#) (1), whose **Juarez** (? 1975 - ? 1975) was a bold narrative concept and whose **Lubbock (On Everything)** (? 1978 - ? 1979) was a formal tour de force encompassing blues, tex-mex, honky-tonk and rock'n'roll; [Rodney Crowell](#) (2), specializing in harrowing stories and lugubrious meditations, particularly on **Ain't Living Long Like This** (? 1978 - aug 1978) and **Keys to the Highway** (? 1989 - oct 1989); [T-Bone Burnett](#) (1), whose **Truth Decay** (? 1980 - ? 1980) was a gem of bluesy roots-rock, and Richard Dobson, who reached maturity with the populist concept **Save The World** (? 1982 - ? 1982).

Nashville in the Seventies

Among Nashville honky-tonk singers of the era the most virulent was perhaps Gary Stewart, established by *Drinkin' Thing* (1974) and *She's Actin' Single* (1975).

Among country songwriters, [Eddie Rabbitt](#) was probably the most popular (if not original) of the decade, penning *Pure Love* (1974), *Drinkin' My Baby* (1976), *Every Which Way But Loose* (1979), *Drivin' My Life Away* (1980), *I Love A Rainy Night* (1981).

[Mel Tillis](#), who had written several hits including Kenny Rogers' *Ruby Don't Take Your Love To Town* (1969), assembled one of the most respected bands in Nashville, the Statesiders, and became a star on his own with Ken McDuffie's *Good Woman Blues* (1976), *Coca Cola Cowboy* (1979) and *Southern Rain* (1980).

Influenced by country-rock and by the outlaws, Los Angeles-based songwriter [Steve Young](#) penned *Seven Bridges Road* (1969), *Lonesome On'ry and Mean* (1973) and *Montgomery in the Rain* (1977).

[Ronnie Milsap](#), who had 35 number one singles, was the star of country-pop in the 1970s: Eddie Rabbitt's *Pure Love* (1973), Don Gibson's *A Legend in My Time* (1974), *Day Dreams About Night Things* (1975), *It Was Almost like a Song* (1977), Kye Fleming's *Smoky Mountain Rain* (1980), *Any Day Now* (1982), etc.

[Crystal Gayle](#) joined the ranks of the Nashville divas with Ed Bruce's *Restless*

(1972), *Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue* (1977), perhaps the quintessential country-pop crossover, and *Talking In Your Sleep* (1978).

[Barbara Mandrell](#) came a few years later with her shameless covers of soul hits and the country songs written for her by Kye Fleming and Dennis Morgan and produced by Tom Collins: *Sleeping Single in a Double Bed* (1978), *Years* (1979), *I Was Country When Country Wasn't Cool* (1981).

[Anne Murray](#)'s career at the border between country and pop peaked with *You Needed Me* (1979).

Other Nashville hits of the 1970s were: Johnny Russell's *Rednecks, White Socks, and Blue Ribbon Beer* (1973), the Bellamy Brothers' *Spiders And Snakes* (1974) and *Let Your Love Flow* (1976), Donna Fargo (Yvonne Vaughn)'s *Happiest Girl In The Whole USA* (1972).

San Francisco-based Asleep At The Wheel resurrected western swing.

Populism 1976-82

A melancholy vein, one of defeat and hopelessness, dominates the songs of the post-Vietnam years.

A cynical chronicler of urban paroxysm and social grotesques, [Warren Zevon](#) (11) injected the rowdy posture of the Frontier's desperado into the stereotype of the intellectual singer-songwriter. **Warren Zevon** (? 1975 - may 1976) downplayed the elegiac and emphasized the epic, which, after all, is the authentic spirit of folk music. His casual and irreverent tone and his violent sound (country-rock and blues-rock detonated by southern boogie and garnished with operatic or soul melodies) had more in common with punk-rock than with the Los Angeles masters. His cinematic ballads sang about the subconscious of the wild USA hero, harking back to Sam Peckinpah's cinema and even further back to the hard-boiled thriller. Alas, that exuberant inspiration died out after **Excitable Boy** (? 1977 - jan 1978).

[Rick Danko](#) (1) recorded the best album the Band never did after their first two: **Rick Danko** (? 1977 - ? 1977).

[Steve Forbert](#), whose sparse acoustic **Alive on Arrival** (mar/? 1977 - ? 1978) was largely an autobiographical concept, and [Willie Nile](#), whose debut album, **Willie Nile** (? 1979 - feb 1980) contained mostly Byrds imitations and heralded the folk-rock revival of the 1980s, were typical of the search for the "new Dylan", that continued unhindered throughout the 1970s.

[John Hiatt](#) (3) improved over the eclectic style of Leon Russell (country, soul, gospel, rock and blues) by adding reggae and rhythm'n'blues to **Slug Line** (jan 1979 - aug 1979). **Stolen Moments** (? 1990 - jun 1990) turned that hybrid into a highly personal and touching act. **Walk On** (? 1995 - oct 1995) opened new stylistic avenues, at the border between jazz, pop and blues.

An authentic "blue-collar hero" of the Midwest, [John "Cougar" Mellencamp](#) (1) coupled the charisma of James Dean (the rebel with no cause) and the populist mythology of rural USA with a forceful rhythm'n'blues sound and a rowdy shout. If Bob Seger and Bruce Springsteen could be his closest reference models, Mellencamp had a knack for the anthemic tone that set him apart, as evidenced in

Hurts So Good (1982) and *Authority Song* (1983). At the same time, he connected with the desolate lives of the heartland, as he proved majestically with **Scarecrow** (mar/jun 1985 - aug 1985), the album featuring *Rain On The Scarecrow* and *R.O.C.K. In The USA*, and with *Paper In Fire* (1987).

Former Eagles singer-songwriter [Don Henley](#) (1) perfected an art of mournful Dylan-esque sermons until he delivered one of the most gripping social frescoes of the 1980s, **The End Of Innocence** (? 1987/? 1989 - jun 1989).

On his own, former Steely Dan pianist [Donald Fagen](#) released even more creative and original collections, proving that he was more than a cocktail-lounge entertainer: **Nightfly** (? 1982 - oct 1982), a Pete Townshend-like recollection of his roots, and **Kamakiriad** (? 1992/? 1993 - may 1993).

[Huey "Lewis"](#) Cregg bridged the old-fashioned bar-band and modern blue-collar rock on hits such as *Working For A Living* (1982), *I Want A New Drug* (1983) and *Power Of Love* (1985), each packed with a hurricane of quasi-jazz saxophones, blues harmonica, boogie guitars and gospel organs.

On the commercial front, [Bryan Adams](#) split his career between heartfelt torch ballads (*Straight From The Heart*, 1983) and lush, riff-driven rockers (*Run To You*, 1984).

[Robbie Robertson](#) (1) began his solo career at 44 but struck a chord: **Robbie Robertson** (? 1987 - oct 1987) presented him as the heroic spokesman of the collective subconscious, and **Storyville** (? 1991 - sep 1991) is a concept album that reads like a tribute to New Orleans at the turn of the century. Each album is a dense textural pastiche that is worth it for its sheer sonic appeal.

Bridging the gap 1977

With the sinister odes of his solo album **Peter Gabriel**, also known as **Car** (fall 1976 - feb 1977), former Genesis' vocalist [Peter Gabriel](#) (13) metamorphosed into a tormented and angst-ridden poet of the post-industrial neuroses, capable of delivering harrowing visions of the psychological holocaust in tightly crafted musical formats. The electronic ballads of **III**, also known as **Melt** (summer/fall 1979 - may 1980), that explore urban fear and despair, the eerie soundscape of **Birdy** (oct/dec 1984 - mar 1985) and the sinister futurism of **So** (feb/dec 1985 - may 1986) fueled his cosmic melancholy at different levels. The high-tech fusion of electronics, funk rhythms, rock instruments and ethnic sources that he had perfected over the source of those albums imploded on **Passion** (feb 1988/mar 1989 - jun 1989), a sonic mural of psycho-ambient music that reneged on his own technical innovations and withdrew to an archaic world and to the spartan format of chamber music, ideally bridging past and future, first world and third world, the personal and the public.

[Marianne Faithful](#) (1), one of the British teen idols of the mid-1960s, had to wait until the late 1970s to achieve artistic independence with **Broken English** (? 1979 - oct 1979), an album that smells of expressionistic cabaret, a collection of gloomy lieder sung in a desperate voice (reminiscent of Marlene Dietrich).

Another British sensation, [Kate Bush](#) (2), was certainly an influential and intelligent figure, but was also a typical compromise of the 1970s, only half-heartedly experimental, continuously flirting with the pop charts. She helped redefine the

singer-songwriter in the era of the new wave, but then the new wave had already made that figure obsolete. Her main contributions were in the vocal department: a four-octave range that mauled folk, opera and world-music, often in a shrill register halfway between a childish scream and a soprano howl. Her arrangements were not as revolutionary as advertised, borrowing as they did from Joni Mitchell and Peter Gabriel, but they did introduce electronics into a folk-rock format and crafted claustrophobic atmospheres. **Kick Inside** (jun 1975/aug 1977 - feb 1978), a terrifying personal diary, and **The Dreaming** (? 1981/? 1982 - sep 1982), the ultimate testament of her eccentric, lush, futuristic sound, represented the two poles of her work. The Freudian travelogue of **Hounds Of Love** (? 1983/? 1985 - sep 1985), fueled by even denser orchestration, ended twenty years later with the philosophical meditation of **Aerial** (? 1999/? 2005 - nov 2005), mostly hushed by intimate chamber textures.

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