

The History of Rock Music: 1976-1989

New Wave, Punk-rock, Hardcore

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The New Wave

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

New York's new Boheme

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1976 was a watershed year: the music industry was revitalized by the emergence of "independent" labels and the music scene was revitalized by the emergence of new genres. The two phenomena fed into each other and spiraled out of control. In a matter of months, a veritable revolution changed the way music was produced, played and heard. The old rock stars were forgotten and new rock stars began setting new trends. As far as white popular music goes, it was a sort of Renaissance after a few years of bourgeois icons (think: Bowie), conservative sounds (country-rock, southern boogie) and exploitation of minorities (funk, reggae).

During the 1970s alternative rock had survived in niches that were highly intellectual, namely German rock and progressive-rock (particularly the Canterbury school). They were all but invisible to the masses.

1976 was the year when most of those barriers (between "low" and "high" rock, between "intellectual" and "populist", between "conservative" and "progressive", between "star" and "anti-star") became not only obsolete but meaningless. Something similar had happened in 1966, when rock music as we know it was born through the revolutionary records of Bob Dylan, Frank Zappa, Pink Floyd, Doors, Velvet Underground, etc. But in 1976 rock music had a powerful ally: the record industry itself, that an army of amateurish entrepreneurs rescued from the virtual monopoly of the "major" labels.

The creative explosion was indeed very similar to the exuberance of the mid Sixties. However, the mood was completely different. The Sixties were, ultimately, an optimistic age. The young generation thought it could change (and own) the world. In 1976, only the most utopian of teenagers could fathom an ideal world in which peace and honesty triumph. The USA had washed itself of the Vietnam war and the Watergate scandal, but those wounds were still open. People, especially young people, were skeptic of authorities, of society, of the world. Clearly, only money mattered. Clearly, there was a powerful force acting on the USA society and forcing everybody to behave in a uniform

way (the "USA way of life"). Clearly, most actors in society and politics were corrupt. It was not a dictatorship: it was worse than a dictatorship, because there was no dictator to fight against. Young generations felt powerless, and not only because they "were" powerless but also because they came to realize that there was no other way.

The oil crisis was still hurting. In the Sixties, USA citizens had lived relatively sheltered from international events, their wealth guaranteed by the sheer isolation of the North American continent. Oil shrank the world: suddenly a war in a distant country had a direct effect on the oil pump round the corner, and on the USA economy as a whole. Certainties about the present and the future were shattered.

In the meantime, decade after decade an enemy from the inside had been growing unchecked: urban violence. In 1976 the USA had already become the most dangerous country in the West, with a murder rate that was tens of times higher than Europe's or Japan's. In the Sixties the main threat to urban peace had been the civil riots. In the Seventies all sorts of misfits (and mostly white) became the protagonists of a hidden civil war.

The "collective consciousness" was frustrated to the point that it was difficult to have any dream, let alone a dream of "peace and love". Idealism was dying. Materialism was rampant. The Sixties had been the age of the eccentric, of the bizarre, of the unusual. The Sixties had been the age of social commitment and political participation. The early Seventies had been a time of "restoration", of return to normal life, of mediocrity, uniformity and sociopolitical indifference. The counterculture had been defeated by the Establishment. The revolution had been lost.

No wonder the teenagers of the Seventies grew up in a far less exciting environment. Their only prospect was to follow a predetermined path to a degree and a career. Their grandfathers had fought Hitler. Their fathers were the ubiquitous "baby boomers". They, the generation of the Seventies, were nothing.

This set of circumstances created an existential mood that was mostly unconscious and subdued but nonetheless widespread among teenagers across the USA. This "teenage depression" was a form of boredom, capable of breeding violence and nihilism.

The rock musicians of 1976 were venting that feeling of boredom. Their raw and unpleasant sound was related to the garage bands of the early Sixties (they did share the frustration, after all, if not the rebellion).

New York was the capital of this "new wave" of musicians. Clubs such as the CBGB's and the Max's Kansas City were their meccas. Radio stations picked up the trend. Magazines such as Creem and Trouser Press began spreading the gospel.

They came to be called "punks" even if many of them were college kids. As it grew and snowballed around the country and eventually around the world, the punk phenomenon of the Seventies mirrored the hippie phenomenon of the Sixties, but the "punks" were almost the opposite of the "hippies". Even the costumes and the haircuts were completely different. The "punk" was a street animal, not a pacifist. Their language was vulgar, not sweet. They were constantly in search of extreme excitement, not of lysergic ecstasy or transcendental meditation. Last but not least, they were not social: there were no marches, no movement, no sit-ins. A punk's way of life "was" his form of protest. They were closer in spirit to the English "mods", to the motto "live fast die young". Their idols were Lou Reed, Jim Morrison, Iggy Stouge and Johnny Thunders: the "maudits" of rock music.

Manhattan became the stage for a generation of musicians who lived like the "beatniks"

and the "bohemians" of the Fifties: The "prophets" of the punk generation were Richard "Hell" Myers, Patti Smith, Television. They played rock and roll with a twist, both in the lyrics and in the music, they put their heart in it and they tried to reach out to their generation. They were not stars: they were everykids.

The most authentic reincarnation of the spirit of Bob Dylan, Lou Reed and Jim Morrison, poetess and rocker [Patti Smith](#) (12) was first out of the blocks. The songs of **Horses** (aug 1975 - nov 1975) were little more than free-form accompaniments of Smith's poems, but **Radio Ethiopia** (jul 1976 - oct 1976), her masterpiece, and **Easter** (oct 1977/early 1978 - mar 1978) added epileptic rock'n'roll numbers and introduced a wild, visceral, feverish manner of screaming her lyrics, halfway between a medieval witch and a gospel preacher. That hysterical and emphatic register soared over a boogie bacchanal in crescendo while broadcasting epic confessions of frustration and alienation that rediscovered Chuck Berry's old trick of transforming the issues of a generation into the stuff of mythology.

[Richard "Hell" Myers](#) (1) can be considered the prophet of the new wave. He transformed New York's decadent rock from a lifestyle into an ideology and a philosophy. He didn't give it a sound (the Ramones would) but he gave it an ethos: the punk ethos. Myers formed the Neon Boys in 1971, featuring Tom Verlaine and Richard Lloyd on guitars, but their morbid and unfriendly music never escaped the underground (unlike his friend Johnny Thunders' band, the New York Dolls). The Voidoids, which he formed with titanic guitarist Robert Quine, did. Their sarcastic and desperate *Blank Generation* (1976) played the role of the manifesto for the newborn punk generation. Quine's abrasive, dissonant riffs, and Hell's visceral, neurotic whine defined a new sound. His songs, that mixed free-association babbling and Dylan-esque visionary lyrics, charged the world with explosive doses of ferocious nihilism and existential angst.

Richard Hell was also instrumental in starting [Television](#) (12), Tom Verlaine's and Richard Lloyd's band that originated from the Neon Boys. The music on **Marquee Moon** (summer 1975/? 1976 - feb 1977), Television's debut album, defined the aesthetic of the new wave: acid, macabre and mystical overtones poisoned the melody, while group jamming that recalled John Coltrane's free-jazz expanded the song format. The agonizing rituals of *Marquee Moon* and *Torn Curtain* bridged the existential and the metaphysical the same way it was done by the Velvet Underground and the Doors. Verlaine and Lloyd reinvented the role of the electric guitar in rock music, the way the sitar was played in Indian ragas, the way John Cale played the viola in the Velvet Underground, the way Ray Manzarek played the organ in the Doors and the way Neil Young played... the guitar. The funereal litanies of **Adventure** (sep/nov 1977 - apr 1978), and, 14 years after the fact, the even more disturbed sound of **Television** (? 1992 - sep 1992), remained the fundamental coordinates of New York's new wave.

[Richard Lloyd](#) (1) continued to preach Television's transcendental power-rock on **Alchemy** (summer 1979 - jan 1980), **Field Of Fire** (jan/feb 1985 - jan 1986) and **The Cover Doesn't Matter** (? 2000 - mar 2001).

[Tom Verlaine](#) (4) went on to become one of the most profound bards of the "blank generation", the antidote to the commercial sell-out of the new wave that was rapidly defusing the movement. His albums, particularly **Tom Verlaine** (? 1979 - aug 1979), **Dreamtime** (? 1981 - jul 1981), **Words From The Front** (? 1982 - jun 1982), and the baroque **Warm and Cool** (? 1992 - apr 1992), were essays of controlled improvisation, each song sculpted from irregular rhythms, discordant riffs and fragmented melodies. They were concertos for tremolos and vibratos that ventured into spectral, hallucinated, oneiric atmospheres with almost religious intensity.

These prophets opened the floodgate. Soon, the everykid felt free to express herself or himself, and the level of eccentricity skyrocketed. Maudit poets, teenage punks, obsessed prophets and decadent transvestites made up a bizarre bestiary of histrionic performers.

But the band that was going to have the greatest impact worldwide was the most unlikely one: the [Ramones](#) (12), who simply played inept rock'n'roll at supersonic speed. Their frenzy was not exactly intellectual, and certainly had no artistic ambition, but was exactly what legions of frustrated kids had been waiting for. Inspired by New York Dolls and Dictators, **Ramones** (feb 1976 - apr 1976), a rapid-fire collection of brief songs that were intentionally demented and clownish, invented the most significant genre of the last quarter century of the 20th century. *Blitzkrieg Bop* stands as the anthem that woke up a slumbering generation. **Rocket To Russia** (aug 1977 - nov 1977), their masterpiece, was the ultimate item of "junk art": a ridiculous catalog of rockabilly, surf music, Mersey-beat and bubblegum music, but charged with the violence of the slums. *Teenage Lobotomy* and *Rockaway Beach* were as irresistible as devoid of instrumental or vocal skills. A few more classics followed, although *Do You Remember Rock And Roll Radio* (1980) and *Bop Til You Drop* (1987) flirted with heavy-metal and missed the exuberant recklessness of their early days. Their lifestyle was rude and barbaric, their philosophy was a simple "I Don't Care" and their slogan was "gabba-gabba-hey": this was the revolution that changed the face of western civilization. Perhaps the title of their album, **End Of The Century** (may 1979 - feb 1980), was appropriate.

The Vietnam war had fueled the idealism of the Sixties. The punk phenomenon coincided with the end of the Vietnam war, as if the end of the war had defused the anger of the USA youth. Those years basically witnessed a return to the "juvenile delinquent" of the 1950s and the demise of the sociopolitical intellectual of the Sixties. The other issue that had emboldened the youth of the Sixties, the civil rights for the racially discriminated black community, had also largely deflated. Indirectly that may account for the much reduced influence of black music on the music of the punk generation.

No wave

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Within a couple of years the phenomenon reached its artistic zenith; which was also its emotional nadir. Music had become even less "entertaining" and musicians had become even less "entertainers". Brian Eno compiled an anthology titled **No New York** (spring 1978 - ? 1978) that stands as a documentary of that "negative" generation. Teenage Jesus And The Jerks, DNA and Mars were playing schizophrenic, paranoid, claustrophobic music. It had the fury and the conciseness of punk-rock, but it was played with sub-human skills and a demented frenzy. The songs were two minutes of ugly outbursts of atonal guitars, psychotic howling and spastic drumming. This "no wave" was the ultimate reaction against the conventions of song-oriented music. Its theme was loneliness and destitution. These were kids who were screaming to be heard. This was the generation that was dying of lack of attention and of affection. They grabbed a microphone and screamed. The silence of the "I" in the noise of the metropolis; or the noise of the "I" in the silence of the metropolis.

Teenage Jesus And The Jerks were the poster children of the no wave. Their songs were barely one-minute long, but packed beastly instincts. Lydia Lunch, their 17-year old "vocalist", was given only a few seconds to scream them, and didn't even try to do a professional job. Guitars were strummed and drums were beaten with a casual, annoyed, detached contempt. Their music was the left-over of whatever musical inspiration had bled out during a suicide attempt. Despite the obvious nihilism embedded in their

manners, their anti-musical primitivism was a vehicle to express teenage angst. It was different from Chuch Berry's or Bob Dylan's vehicles for the simple fact that teenage angst had mutated into something a lot uglier. Their declared "bad taste" expressed a desperate sense of loneliness and indifference. [Lydia Lunch](#) (14) went on to elaborate on that intuition. While apparently reacting to the whole idea of elitist art, Lunch affirmed the role of an "auteur" who was even more creative, original and personal than the singer-songwriter or progressive musicians whose goals were creativity, originality, etc. **Queen Of Siam** (fall 1979 - feb 1980), her first solo album, featuring Billy Ver Planck's orchestra on a set of inept pop parodies, displayed her capricious attitude and her contempt for "high art" as well as for good manners (as she impersonated a sloppy chanteuse). It was post-modernism turned upside down. A series of bands and albums followed, notably **13.13** (jul/aug 1981 - jun 1982). Lunch became known for songs that were fits of alienation, neurosis, claustrophobia, paranoia. Lunch's nightmares were the nightmares of a street girl who grew up too quickly and was terrified by life. Her decadent antics were set aside in the lengthy psychodrama *The Agony Is The Ecstasy* (1982), possibly her masterpiece, a cosmic and Freudian suite, a still life of the wasteland that, musically speaking, harked back to acid-rock. That unholy liturgy led to the dejected litanies of **In Limbo** (nov 1982 - sep 1984), another slow, languid, apathetic, hallucinated torture and self-flagellation by a sinner who relished her stay in a Dante-esque hell. Later in her career, Lunch focused on the spoken word, drawn to music mainly via collaborations and for theatrical purposes: *Stinkfist* (1983), *Drumming* (1984) and *Meltdown Oratorio* (1987), with her partner Clint "Foetus" Ruin, *The Drowning Of Lucy Hamilton*, with ex-Mars' Lucy Hamilton, **Naked In Garden Hills** (sep 1988 - ? 1990), with Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon, **Shotgun Wedding** (may 1991 - nov 1991), with ex-Birthday Party's Rowland Howard, etc. Her vulgar, sordid, degenerate and lascivious vocals had a unique, "negative" appeal on that generation of composers. She delved again into her depressing universe of dejected, meaningless lives on **Smoke In The Shadows** (jan 2000/spring 2003 - nov 2004) that resurrected the cadaver of her nocturnal languid smoky kitschy lounge noir jazz, as well as the spectre of her lifeless voice, scavenging emotions in an existential junkyard devastated by nihilism. At the same time she successfully updated her cliché to the age of rap. Throughout her career, her sensual moaning and demonic wailing coined a new art of vocal music, and, at the same time, reinvented the stereotype of the rock hero (heroine). Lunch stands as one of the great histrionic shamans of rock music, but a completely different kind than her predecessors Jim Morrison and Patti Smith.

[Mars](#), who released only one EP in 1980, played the ultimate "wall of noise". Their songs were the musical equivalent of nerve gas, of nuclear radiation, of volcanic lava colliding with ocean waves. It wasn't just improvised distortion: it was anarchic cacophony. The vocalist vomited undecipherable phonemes while the instruments were horribly being skinned and banged. It was the soundtrack of the apocalypse, a documentary of the extreme convulsions of a dying race. But their brief, disconnected spasms were painful meditations on post-industrial civilization.

Arto Lindsay's atonal guitar and Ikue Mori's tribal drumming gave [DNA](#) the quality of utter nausea. Their dadaistic maelstroms were reminiscent of the worst nightmares concocted by Captain Beefheart and Frank Zappa.

With these musicians, the regression from Woodstock's "public" music towards the "private" sphere reached the dimension of the narrow, dark rooms where abandoned teenagers performed terrible rituals of moral self-flagellation. The "no wave" was a catalog of the depressions and frustrations of the modern individual, a terrifying fresco of pathetic monsters. The "no wave" showed the subconscious of the new wave.

Not included in Brian Eno's compilation were several other bands that mined New York's basements and lofts. Among them, Jeff Lohn's Theoretical Girls, that released only a single and featured the young Glenn Branca.

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