

The History of Rock Music: 1976-1989

New Wave, Punk-rock, Hardcore

[History of Rock Music](#) | [1955-66](#) | [1967-69](#) | [1970-75](#) | [1976-89](#) | [The early 1990s](#) | [The late 1990s](#) | [The 2000s](#) | [Alpha index](#)

Musicians of [1955-66](#) | [1967-69](#) | [1970-76](#) | [1977-89](#) | [1990s in the US](#) | [1990s outside the US](#) | [2000s](#)

[Back to the main Music page](#)

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Cow-punks and Roots-rock of the 1980s

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

Cow-punks 1984-86

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Just like the creative outburst of 1966 was followed by the "realignment" of 1970 (with Bob Dylan, the Byrds and the Grateful Dead returning to their musical roots), so was the "new wave" of 1976 followed by a revival of roots-rock. In just a few years, rock'n'roll went from the blasphemous fever of punk-rock to the traditional rhythms of roots-rock.

The difference between 1980 and 1970 was that in the 1980s the "realignment" took place a little bit at a time. It actually began in a disguised form, with the emergence of punk bands that disfigured the traditional styles, such as X, Dream Syndicate and Gun Club.

The idea led to the phenomenon of "cow-punks", punks who played country music but set their stories into the milieu of the misfits, the way Gram Parsons had done a generation earlier. Milestone recordings of the genre included several albums made in the South: **Native Sons** (jul 1984 - oct 1984), by Kentucky's [Long Ryders](#); **Lost And Found** (? 1984 - ? 1985), by Tennessee's [Jason & The Scorchers](#) (1); **Dash Rip Rock** (? 1986 - ? 1986), by Louisiana's [Dash Rip Rock](#), **Scarred But Smarter** (? 1986 - fall 1986), by Georgia's [Drivin'n'Cryin'](#).

North Carolina's [Fetchin Bones](#) (12) were, by far, the most spectacular "cow-punks" of the era. **Cabin Flounder** (? 1984 - ? 1985) was raw roots-rock dynamited by the vibrant hysteria of vocalist Hope Nicholls (a cross between Patti Smith, X's Exene Cervenka and the Pretenders' Chrissie Hynde). The band played epileptic garage-rock that bordered on the nervous breakdown, blurring the line between rockabilly, slam-dance and hoe-downs. The rhythmic emphasis and the double guitar noise got even

more crude and irreverent on **Bad Pumpkin** (? 1985 - ? 1986), while **Galaxy 500** (aug 1987 - ? 1987) was mostly a tour de force by the vocalist.

Los Angeles became the headquarters of the first cowpunk wave, thanks to [Tex & The Horseheads](#)' **Tex & The Horseheads** (? 1984 - ? 1984), [Blood On The Saddle](#)'s **Blood On The Saddle** (? ? - spring 1984), the [Rave-ups](#)' **Town + Country** (? ? - fall 1985), [Lone Justice](#)'s **Lone Justice** (? ? - summer 1985), the album that introduced singer Maria McKee, [Thelonus Monster](#)'s **Next Saturday Afternoon**, later included in **Stormy Weather** (? 1986 ? 1987), and the Beat Farmers' **Tales Of The New West** (? 1984 - jan 1985) in San Diego. Johnette Napolitano led her [Concrete Blonde](#) through the rustic and populist rock'n'roll of **Concrete Blonde** (? 1986 ? 1986).

Ohio's [Great Plains](#), led by nasal vocalist Ron House and featuring organist Mark Wyatt, entertained the colleges with a bouncy, witty and catchy mixture of cow-punk and folk-rock on **Born In A Barn** (? 1984 - ? 1984).

Populism 1984-86

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The ultimate creature of Los Angeles' barrios, [Los Lobos](#) (2), recycled an exuberant combination of rhythm'n'blues and tex-mex, of Doug Sahm and Flaco Jimenez. **How Will The Wolf Survive?** (? ? - nov 1984) was possibly the first album to find the common denominator among accordion, bajo sexto, rock guitar and drums. And it did so with the spirit of punk music: Cesar Rosas' incendiary guitar fugues, David Hidalgo's thundering tenor and drummer Louie Perez's uncontrollable urge created an explosive blend. They repeated that orgy of rhythms only once, with the demonic shuffle *Shakin' Shakin' Shakes* (1987), because they were maturing as romantic bards of the barrio and as eclectic calligraphic scholars of musical styles. The touching **The Neighborhood** (? 1990 - sep 1990) and **Kiko** (? ? - may 1992) were simultaneously pensive and encyclopedic. On one hand, the songs plunged the listener into the world of the chicanos. On the other hand, the arrangements mixed orchestral passages a` la Duke Ellington, cajun accordions, cumbia tempos, New Orleans' rhythm'n'blues, mandolin-driven polkas, boogie, funk and rock'n'roll. Los Lobos' caustic, fatalistic and nostalgic social melodrama had become the soundtrack of the USA's melting-pot and of the "American dream".

With **Johnson** (? ? - ? 1988), Los Angeles' [Pontiac Brothers](#) shifted the emphasis towards populistic rock in the vein of the Rolling Stones and Bruce Springsteen.

Boston's working-class heroes were Dan Zanes' [Del Fuegos](#) (1), whose **Longest Day** (? 1984 - nov 1984) harked back to the 1970s, fusing "blue-collar rock" of the USA (Springsteen, Seger, Mellencamp) and British "pub-rock" (Costello, Parker, Lowe).

In the same city, [Treat Her Right](#), Mark Sandman's first band, told

haunting stories on **Tied To The Tracks** (? 1988 - apr 1989) using the blues as a vehicle but a blues that was almost too slick to still be blues.

Among the great New York-based populist voices of the second half of the decade, the leaders were the [Del-Lords](#) (2), formed by ex-Dictators guitarist Scott Kempner. Kempner, one of the great storytellers of rock music, penned the suave epics of **Frontier Days** (? ? - ? 1984) by finding an unlikely common ground between sounds of the Sixties (Mersey-beat hooks, surf choruses, garage distortions) and sounds of the grass-roots (cowboy ballads, folk melodies, Byrds-ian guitars, bluesy rhythms à la Creedence Clearwater Revival). Refining that idea with a deeper sense of identification with its anti-heroes, **Johnny Comes Marching Home** (? ? - ? 1986) sounded like a cycle of solemn odes to the town, in the spirit of Springsteen's **Born In The USA** and Petty's **Southern Accents**, while sonically continuing the quest for a compromise between the Blasters and the Fleshtones (and furthermore set in Nashville). If the hard-rock sound of **Based On A True Story** (? ? - ? 1988) sounded out of context, **Lovers Who Wander** (? ? - ? 1990) was a touching, almost philosophical swan-song that wrapped up the group's mission in a blaze of glory.

Elizabeth Brown's [Absolute Grey](#) (1), also from New York, assembled carefully dramatized issues on **What Remains** (jul 1985 - spring 1986), as well as on its successor **Sand Down The Moon** (summer 1987 - ? 1989) that would not be released for three years.

The [Silos](#)' second album, **Cuba** (? ? - spring 1987), was a good example of how this generation could be derivative of the classics without sounding like the classics at all.

Few roots-rock outfits managed to fuse the domestic tone and the epic tone the way Seattle's [Walkabouts](#) (2) did. Chris Eckman's melancholy elegies, Carla Torgeson's solemn and mournful harmonies, and a folk-rock sound that recalled a noisier Fairport Convention, led to the vibrant **Cataract** (aug/oct 1988 - mar 1989) and to the prophetic and desolate **Scavenger** (sep/oct 1990 - jul 1991). The vast fresco of **New West Motel** (nov/dec 1992 - feb 1993) began a progression towards ever more eccentric arrangements.

West Coast roots-rock 1985-86

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The Bay Area was terrorized by the craziest of all roots-rockers, Santa Cruz-based [Camper Van Beethoven](#) (23), one of the most brilliant and influential bands of the decade, led by vocalist and guitarist David Lowery and multi-instrumentalist Jonathan Segel. Other bands had tried a folk/punk fusion, but their version was positively demented. The hilarious **Telephone Free Landslide Victory** (jan/feb 1985 - jun 1985) offered a merry blend of ska, country, surf, rock'n'roll, and, last but not least, fake world-music, with a spirit that drew from (at least) punk, the novelty numbers of the 1950s, the music-hall, jug-bands of the 1940s, Ennio Morricone's soundtracks, and the psychedelic freaks of the 1960s. It sounded as the unlikely meeting point of Syd Barrett, Frank Zappa, the Third Ear Band and the Holy Modal Rounders. The instrumental skills

increased (particularly Segel's keyboards and violin parts), on **II & III** (summer 1985 - jan 1986), allowing them greater freedom as far as counterpoint goes, but also prompting them to play slightly more regular roots-rock (i.e., to focus on the music and not on the gags). Their third album, **Camper Van Beethoven** (may/jun 1986 - aug 1986) was no longer a send-up of world-music but a new kind of world-music. By merging the psychotic verve of the first album and the erudite ultra-fusion of the second album, Camper Van Beethoven had produced the ultimate folk blasphemy. They finally adopted a more mainstream sound on **Our Beloved Revolutionary Sweetheart** (summer/fall 1987 - may 1988), without sacrificing the idea of mixing untouchable genres but vastly reducing their musical negligence, and a serious, adult tone on **Key Lime Pie** (feb/jul 1989 - sep 1989), a collection of (relatively) subdued ballads that evoke Neil Young and Bob Dylan.

San Francisco's scene offered a wealth of folk-rock bands. Samuel Coomes' [Donner Party](#) (1) specialized in eclectic and mildly psychedelic roots-rock on their two self-titled albums, **Donner Party** (jan 1987 - ? 1987) and **Donner Party** (? ? - ? 1988), particularly the latter, just a bit more elegiac and nostalgic.

The [Cat Heads](#) (3), a supergroup of sorts, featuring vocalist Mark Zandrea, former Ophelias' guitarist Sam Babbitt, former X-Tal's bassist Alan Korn and Donner Party's drummer Melanie Clarin, harked back to the angelic quirkiness of the hippies. **Hubba** (? ? - ? 1987) was a gentle infusion of country, blues and folk, while **Submarine** (? ? - ? 1988) experimented with neoclassical arrangements and hard-rock guitars. Zandrea and Clarin's *It Thing* was the ideal continuation of the Catheads: **The Ode** (? 1992 - ? 1992) relished in the juxtaposition of pop and rock, of tradition and new wave, of ethereal and aggressive.

[Thin White Rope](#) (2), from nearby Davis, displayed the strongest psychedelic overtones, which their best albums, **Exploring The Axis** (jul 1985 - oct 1985) and **Sack Full Of Silver** (? 1989 - mar 1990), wed to Guy Kyser's existential angst, releasing visions of a majestic wasteland amid gales of hypnotic quasi-raga country-rock.

Other notable roots-rock albums of the second half of the 1980s from Bay Area bands include: [Downy Mildew](#)'s **Broomtree** (? 1986 - apr 1987), [Wire Train](#)'s **In A Chamber** (summer 1983 - ? 1984), [28th Day](#)'s **28th Day** (? ? - ? 1985).

[American Music Club](#) (13) stood apart as one of the groups that transformed roots-rock into an intimate, almost transcendental experience. Mark Eitzel's laconic pessimism, halfway between Gram Parsons's calm despair, Nick Drake's funereal lament, and Tim Buckley's dreamy agony, acted as the center of mass for the atmospheric psychodramas of **Engine** (feb/mar 1987 - oct 1987). The dialectics between instruments (including hazy snippets of strings and keyboards) and vocals punctuated the otherwise evanescent melodies of *Big Night*, *At My Mercy*, *Outside This Bar*, in a manner that was also reminiscent of Van Morrison. Eitzel's stream of consciousness reached for a visceral tension on **California** (aug 1988 - oct 1988), a work that was both more austere and more introverted. *Firefly*, *Bad Liquor*, *Blue And Grey Shirt* and *Highway 5* were not songs

but swoons of communication breakdown. The band indulged in psychological impressionism, letting Eitzel's words fluctuate in a mist of emotions. It was also a vocal tour de force of Eitzel, who followed his stories modulating both anger and romance, impersonating both the crooner and the shouter. The bleak and lyrical **United Kingdom** (aug 1989 - oct 1989) seemed to complete Eitzel's spiritual self-flagellation, besides absorbing more of the jazz, soul and gospel eloquence for tracks as adventurous as *The Hula Maiden* and *Heaven Of Your Hands*. The nightmare relented on **Everclear** (nov/dec 1989 - ? 1990), the album that marked a transition from the "closed" landscape of the first phase to the "open" landscape of the second phase. Less intense but more humane, only a couple of moments (*The Confidential Agent* and *Miracle On 8th Street*) recalled past agonies, but the playing was more accomplished and the arrangements more articulate. The more complex, dense and atmospheric sound **Mercury** (dec 1992 - mar 1993), which features *The Hopes And Dreams of Heaven's 10,000 Whores*, and the sophisticated soul-pop of **San Francisco** (? 1994 - sep 1994), capitalized on Eitzel's ability to merge elegant melancholy and roaring passion.

Texas roots-rock 1986-88

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Texas bands, on the other hand, were more on the "cow" side than the "punk" side of the equation. Centered on intellectual Austin, they were seriously trying to be part of a tradition, even when they still embodied the punk ethos. [Timbuk 3](#) drew from the Dire Straits and Bob Dylan's country-rock phase for **Greetings From** (? ? - jun 1986). Michael Hall's [Wild Seeds](#) (1) borrowed the intense empathy of Bruce Springsteen and Tom Petty and wed it to a kaleidoscope of Sixties sounds on **Brave Clean + Reverent** (? ? - ? 1986). [Poi Dog Pondering](#), a seven-unit combo (including violinist Susan Voelz), harked back to the "jug bands" of the 1950s on their debut EP **Poi Dog Pondering** (? 1988 - ? 1989), a creative stew of country & western, zydeco, skiffle, pop, jazz, folk-rock. [Texas Instruments](#) concocted one of the best synthesis of folk-rock and punk-rock with **Sun Tunnels** (? 1987 - apr 1988).

On albums such as **Hello Young Lovers** (may 1989 - sep 1989), [Glass Eye](#) (1) concocted a unique jazz-country-rock fusion that was both brainy and detached, the antithesis of their era.

Great Lakes roots-rock 1986-89

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The Great Lakes had their share of the action. Wisconsin, where the Violent Femmes had changed forever the meaning of "roots-rock", was particularly fertile. Led by singer-songwriters Sammy Llanas and Kurt Neumann, the [BoDeans](#) (1) coined a catchy rootsy style with **Love And Hope And Sex And Dreams** (nov/dec 1985 – may 1986), a style that ran the gamut from the Everly Brothers to Fleetwood Mac (as their 1991 hit *Good Things* would prove). [EIEIO](#) (1) were even more varied, evoking Byrds, Little Feat, Band and other masters of roots-rock on **Land Of Opportunity** (? 1985 - may 1986).

Minneapolis, the new Mecca of hardcore after the renaissance led by Husker Du and the Replacements, was equally fecund. [Beat Rodeo's **Home In The Heart Of The Beat**](#) (? 1985 - ? 1986) was one of the albums that countered the monopoly of hardcore.

However, Minneapolis' success story was that of [Soul Asylum](#) (2), originally disciples of Husker Du, whose **Made To Be Broken** (? 1985 - jan 1986) retained the verve of pop-core while adopting the romantic cliches of power-pop and folk-rock. As guitarist Dan Murphy and vocalist Dave Pirner matured, the band's style veered towards a melodic hard-rock tinged with the Replacements' epos on **Hang Time** (? ? - apr 1988). The mainstream sound of **And The Horse They Rode In** (? 1990 - sep 1990) led to *Runaway Train* (1992), their best compromise between generational anthem and power-ballad.

In Ohio, Greg Dulli's [Afghan Whigs](#) (1), who had begun as punks with **Big Top Halloween** (apr/sep 1987 - feb 1988) and pseudo-grunge rockers with **Up In It** (sep 1989 - apr 1990), an abrasive blend of Replacements and Dinosaur Jr, rediscovered soul music and the rhythm'n'blues ballad on **Congregation** (jul/aug 1991 - jan 1992), a calmer and catchier collection. Despite the sell-out, **Gentlemen** (apr/jun 1993 - oct 1993) was not only meticulously well-crafted but also Dulli's most sinister and disturbing confession.

One of the most original and radical revisions of the blues and country tradition was carried out by a Canadian group, the [Cowboy Junkies](#) (1), led by siblings Michael (guitar and songwriting) and Margo (vocals) Timmins. **Trinity Session** (nov 1987 - early 1988) paraded melancholy spectral dirges whispered in noir-film atmospheres by a vocalist who sounded like the chanteuse of a cocktail lounge or a Marlene Dietrich of a Frontier brothel.

Following the melancholy and nostalgic **Jayhawks** (? 1985 - ? 1986) and **Blue Earth** (? 1989 - ? 1989), the [Jayhawks](#) (1), formed in Minnesota by vocalist Mark Olson and guitarist Gary Louris, made an album inspired by Neil Young and Gram Parsons, **Hollywood Town Hall** (? ? - ? 1992), that embodied the ethos of the urban population in search of rural candor. **Tomorrow The Green Grass** (spring 1994 - feb 1995) virtually began a new career, thanks to lush arrangements and harmonies that recalled Fleetwood Mac and Crosby Stills Nash & Young.

Chicago's [Souled American](#) (2), formed by singer-songwriters Joe Adducci and Chris Grigoroff, featuring guitarist Scott Tuma, and inspired by Camper Van Beethoven, penned one of the most lunatic albums of the era, **Fe** (? 1987 - sep 1988), an idiosyncratic stew of country, blues, jazz, reggae and zydeco, delivered at the lazy, lethargic tempos of the Cowboy Junkies. The whackiness was replaced by technical dexterity on **Flubber** (? ? - ? 1989), but the lugubrious lethargy of **Frozen** (? 1993 - ? 1994) and **Notes Campfire** (? ? - ? 1996), both eroded by lengthy nightmarish tracks and stripped-down texture-oriented instrumental jamming, reinvented their sound around Tuma's guitar.

Nashville, 1982-89

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In the second half of the decade, Nashville underwent a generational renewal of its own. The "urban cowboys" of the 1970s (Kenny Rogers, Dolly Parton, Barbara Mandrell), who had turned country music into a commodity, were increasingly out of touch with the younger generation. The gap was bridged by the "new-traditionalist" movement, that harked back to honky tonk and the outlaws, and sometimes borrowed the casual and angry aesthetic of punk-rock. The first neo-traditionalists were arguably Randy Owen's Alabama, a country-pop band that thrived on such upbeat tunes as *Tennessee River* (1980), *Feel So Right* (1981) and *Love In The First Degree* (1982). [Ricky Skaggs](#) shocked the world of country music with **Waiting For The Sun To Shine** (? 1981 - may 1981), on which he played high-speed bluegrass instrumentals and rigmaroles with the casual demeanor of a southern-rock band. [George Strait](#), with **Strait From The Heart** (sep 1981/apr 1982 - jun 1982), set the pace for the rest of the pack, as did John Anderson's hits *Wild and Blue* (1982), *Swingin'* (1983) and *She Sure Got Away With My Heart* (1984). [Randy Travis](#)' **Storms Of Life** (? 1986 - jun 1986) and [Clint Black](#)'s **Killin' Time** (nov 1988/? 1989 - may 1989) also set new standards. Earl Thomas Conley, on the other hand, set new records of sales with *Fire And Smoke* (1981), *Holding Her And Loving You* (1983), etc. However, it was [Garth Brooks](#) who became the superstar of the neo-traditionalists with the numerous hits off **No Fences** (jun 1990 - aug 1990) and **Ropin' The Wind** (spring 1991 - sep 1991).

Among female vocalists, Reba McEntire and Wynonna Judd were the new queens of Nashville. But Rosanne Cash affirmed a less passive view of women in country music with Leroy Preston's *My Baby Thinks She's A Train* (1981), *Blue Moon With Heartache* (1981), *Seven Year Ache* (1981), John Stewart's *Runaway Train* (1988), and the marital concept **Rhythm And Romance** (? 1984 - summer 1985).

These were the stars. Others never made the charts, but were no less fluent in the new idiom, for example, [Jim Lauderdale](#), a prolific songwriter whose best album was probably **Planet Of Love** (? ? - nov 1991).

The music of [Lyle Lovett](#) (1) was hardly country music at all. His debut, **Lyle Lovett** (? 1986 - aug 1986), borrowed from country, rock, rhythm'n'blues, jazz, folk and pop. **Pontiac** (? 1987 - jan 1988) achieved a formidable balance of atmosphere, tunesmith, rhythm and melody. Lovett even embraced big-band jazz with **His Large Band** (? 1988 - jan 1989).

Guitar Town (late 1985/early 1986 - mar 1986), by [Steve Earle](#) (2), shocked the scene with its loud and frantic sound that mixed rockabilly, honky-tonk and blues, borrowing the attitude from the Rolling Stones and the emphasis from Bruce Springsteen's populist rock; while the mature statement of **Transcendental Blues** (? ? - jun 2000) emanated the ethereal and mystical quality of John Fahey's music.

[Dwight Yoakam](#) (1), who had debuted in 1984 in an acoustic, unadorned style, matured with the eclectic and introverted **If There Was A Way** (? 1990 - oct 1990) and **This Time** (? ? - mar 1993), finally helped by adequate arrangements.

[Junior Brown](#) (1) was a virtuoso whose guitar playing turned **12 Shades Of Brown** (? - ? 1990) into one of the most inventive country albums of all times.

Hailing from the honky-tonk school of Texas that spawned Joe Ely and Butch Hancock, [Jimmie Dale Gilmore](#) incorporated psychedelic rock and rhythm'n'blues on **After Awhile** (feb/mar 1991 - ? 1991) and especially **Braver Newer World** (feb 1996 - jun 1996).

[Vince Gill](#) returned to a poppier sound with his hits *Look At Us* (1992) and *I Still Believe In You* (1992).

Among female interpreters, [Trisha Yearwood](#) was probably the one who could claim to be heir to Linda Rondstadt, starting with *She's In Love With The Boy* (1991).

At the turn of the decade, [Patty "Loveless" Ramey](#) was the female counterpart to Vince Gill, striking gold with *Timber I'm Falling in Love* (1989), the irresistible hook and riff of *I'm That Kind of Girl* (1990), *Blame It on Your Heart* (1993), *You Can Feel Bad* (1996), *Lonely Too Long* (1996).

Washington-based [Mary Chapin Carpenter](#) emerged as the ultimate crossover singer-songwriter, blending country, folk, pop, rock and feminism on **Hometown Girl** (? 1987 - jul 1987) and contributing to the renewal of the Nashville sound with **Come On Come On** (? 1992 - jun 1992) before turning philosophical on **Time Sex Love** (nov 2000/jan 2001 - may 2001).

Blues, 1980-81

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The blues phenomenon of the 1980s was Georgia-born guitarist Robert Cray, who introduced a sensual soul-tinged vocal phrasing and a virtuoso jazzy style, influenced by Albert Collins. His progression from **Bad Influence** (? - ? 1983), containing mostly original material, **Strong Persuader** (? - ? 1986), his best-seller, corresponded with the maturation of his populist vision.

The surgical guitar of Texas' Johnny Copeland, revealed on **Copeland Special** (? 1979 - ? 1981), stood as a sinful compromise between Albert Collins and B.B. King.

Wilson Pickett's guitarist Robert Ward, who was only discovered at 52 for **Fear No Evil** (oct 1990 - mar 1991), was the neo-traditionalist of this generation.

Among white musicians, [George Thorogood](#) in Delaware, Roomful Of Blues in Rhode Island, the [Fabulous Thunderbirds](#) in Texas, continued to play the blues for the punk generation.

Instrumental roots, 1985-88

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Surf music and instrumental music of the Sixties were best represented by [Shadowy Men On A Shadowy Planet](#) (11), but it took a while for guitarist Brian Connelly and his cohorts to release a full-length album. A sequel of superb EPs, such as **Love Without Words** (? ? - aug 1985), **Wow Flutter Hiss** (? ? - apr 1986) and **Schlagers** (? ? - apr 1987), refined their approach to the genre, which is a mixture of nostalgic and neurotic, of old-fashioned and post-modernist. Their instrumental vignettes drew from blues, pop, country, rockabilly, surf, Ennio Morricone, Duan Eddy, and many other sonic icons of the past without ever quoting them "literally". Those vignettes were like metaphors imprinted in a collective subconscious. Their masterpiece, **Dim The Lights Chill The Ham** (? ? - ? 1991), was the first album since the Raybeats to revolutionize the idea of instrumental rock'n'roll, while retaining a humorous attitude a` la Leo Kottke. **Sport Fishin'** (dec 1992 - may 1993) was slightly more serious and less effervescent.

The resilience of the genre around the world was proven, for example, by [Laika & The Cosmonauts](#)'s **C'mon Do The Laika** (? ? - ? 1988) as far as in Finland.

[continues...](#) | [back...](#) | [Index](#)