

The History of Rock Music: 1976-1989

New Wave, Punk-rock, Hardcore

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Punk Crossovers

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

New York 1986-89

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As the 1980s came to an end, it became obvious that punk was far from dead. In fact, it was "the" most "alive" of all rock's subgenres. The legacy of hardcore was simple: thousands of bands rehearsing in garages and performing at parties throughout the USA. Not since the Sixties had there been such a universal language in teenage music.

Of the major New York punk-rock bands of the mid 1980s, [Adrenalin O.D.](#) were the only ones to truly deserve the attribute "hardcore". Their demented style was closer to California's beach-punk, as proven by the frantic **Humungousfungusamongus** (1986).

Ray Cappo's [Youth Of Today](#) became the main apostles of straight-edge hardcore, preaching positive ideals to punks on sermons such as *Take A Stand* (1986). That genre peaked with **Start Today** (1989), the album by the [Gorilla Biscuits](#) (1), featuring vocalist Anthony Civarelli and guitarist Walter Schreifels, and with [Sick Of It All](#)'s **Blood Sweat And No Tears** (1989).

The rest were punks trying to sell hardcore to the heavy-metal crowds. Albums of "punk-metal crossover" by New York bands included **Life Of Dreams** (1986), by the [Crumbsuckers](#) (1), and **Immaculate Deception** (1986), by [Ludichrist](#) (1), one of the most eclectic. In New York, the genre's artistic peak came later into the decade with [Cro-Mags](#) (1), particularly their second album **Best Wishes** (1989), and [Prong](#) (1), who boasted the most brutal "grooves" also on their second album, **Force Fed** (1988). [Danzig](#) (1) continued his messianic saga under his own name, borrowing from the Doors and Black Sabbath for **Danzig** (1988). The idea

began to stink (almost literally) with the [Lunachicks](#), a punkette-group heir to the Plasmatics' scum-rock.

Washington 1986-88

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Washington's scene was soon overflowing with experimental punk bands. Some of them ([Soulside](#)) were training grounds for future innovators. In particular, Washington was the launching pad for two of the most influential bands of the second half of the decade: Pussy Galore and Fugazi.

Arguably one of the most inept bands of all times, [Pussy Galore](#) (2) played blasphemous, obscene, irreverent, barbaric and often out-of-tune punk-blues. The hoarse and demented vocals of Jon Spencer, the ridiculous guitar strumming of Julia Cafritz and Neil Hagerty framed the sub-amateurish sound of the EP **Groovy Hate Fuck** (1986). They moved to New York, where they added ex-Sonic Youth drummer Bob Bert and keyboardist Cristina Martinez, and they tripled the absurdity of their garage-sound. Thus, their first full-length, **Right Now** (1987), sounded like Captain Beefheart meeting the Cramps and Einstürzende Neubauten in a studio with defective microphones. Spencer disassembled and "de-semanticized" rock'n'roll and then built a new syntax based on the genre's illicit sounds, i.e. on its most subversive codes. And carried out this semiotic operation while posing as a satanic pervert. **Dial M For Motherfucker** (1989) was even more meaningless and pointless, but that was precisely the point. Pussy Galore begot an impressive cast of alternative groups: Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, Royal Trux, Bewitched, Boss Hog, etc. Never was an irrelevant entity made so relevant by its irrelevance.

[Unrest](#) (23) were formed out of Washington by singer Mark Robinson and drummer Phil Krauth. **Tink Of Southeast** (1987) was an ambitious slab of progressive hardcore that included several instrumental pieces and incorporated jazz and avantgarde techniques. The extended musical vocabulary of **Malcolm X Park** (1988) and the transitional semi-pop of **Kustom Karnal Blackxploitation** (1990), and the addition of bassist Bridget Cross, led into the group's pop phase. Despite their nervous filigree, the songs of **Imperial f.f.r.r.** (1992) were, first and foremost, splendid pop-soul-folk ballads, which, despite the rarefied arrangements and the free-form dynamics, retained strong identities. Robinson was applying the lessons of Van Morrison and Tim Buckley, not the lessons of Fugazi. Whereas the mini-album **Isabel Bishop** (1993) indulged in that impeccable format, the last album, **Perfect Teeth** (1993), was again bold and aggressive like the first one. Having come full circle, Robinson dissolved Unrest and wasted his talent in a series of projects that explored Tin Pan Alley's kitsch ([Grenadine](#)) and synth-pop ([Air Miami](#)).

[Fugazi](#) (113) was the new project of Minor Threat's Ian MacKaye and Rites Of Spring's Guy Picciotto. They abstracted hardcore punk-rock into a theatrical form of music, whose ethical and political commitment was as deep as the aesthetic one. MacKaye, moral ascetic and dissolute artist possessed by a supernatural force, was the driving engine, a sort of Jim

Morrison for the hardcore generation, propelled by a dissonant and thundering accompaniment. The first two EPs, **Fugazi** (1988) and **Margin Walker** (1989), which made up the album **13 Songs** (1990), unleashed monster psychological tension to fight a devouring existential fever. The terrorist attack carried out against society by **Repeater** (1990) was more cathartic than destructive, and even presented a zen-like aspect. The two leaders and their phenomenal rhythm section devised countless tricks to keep the tension as spasmodic as possible. Now that he had acquired a new musical language, MacKaye indulged in bending it like a chunk of clay to materialize his inner ghosts. **Steady Diet Of Nothing** (1991), arguably their sonic masterpiece, replaced frenzy with cinematics: songs were always in motion, typically in an obsessive crescendo, fractured and deformed by numerous discontinuities. **In On The Killtaker** (1993) made the package more accessible by bringing out the melody (that was hidden behind the pandemonium) and polishing the guitar-vocals counterpoint. Finally, **Red Medicine** (1995) was the transfiguration of Fugazi: as they mastered the new art of storytelling that they had invented, they proceeded to turn it into a classical language. The sophisticated puzzle of timbres and arrangements, the manic dynamics of pauses and rhythms, the acrobatic repertoire of shy litanies and strident rants changed forever the context of hardcore music.

[Royal Trux](#) (103), i.e. keyboardist Jennifer Herrema and former Pussy Galore guitarist Neil Hagerty, carried out a post-modernist program of revisiting and deconstructing rock music, a program that encompassed countless quotations from the Rolling Stones, Captain Beefheart and Jimi Hendrix, as well as fueling them with the aesthetic excrements of the "no wave". **Royal Trux** (1988) revealed the duo's perverted passion for disfiguring blues-rock and leaving only harmonic ashes behind them. It was a tribute not to a genre (that was the vehicle) but to their generation of stoned and drunk artists (that was the message). There was no music per se: there were only subsonic litanies, limping rhythms and disjointed accompaniment, that mirrored (on a very warped parallel universe) the stereotypes of blues-rock. **Twin Infinitives** (1990), one of the milestone recordings of the era, a sort of **Trout Mask Replica** for the grunge generation, toured an impassable jungle of clumsy and puerile noises. Derailed by pseudo-jazz and pseudo-avantgarde pretensions, its delirious pieces sounded like nuclear bacchanals via spastic jamming. Lacking any sense of order or purpose, the album was a colossal chaos of musical detours. The anarchic and illiterate art that had been foreshadowed and incubated throughout the 1980s by the works of punk-rock, the no wave, industrial music, and so forth, had reached the terminal point. The two devastated psyches had forged a hyper-psychedelic form of cubism. **Royal Trux** (1992) marked a return to a more conventional song format, and **Cats And Dogs** (1993) was virtually a sell-out, despite the knack for extravagant dynamics.

San Francisco 1985-89

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In the mid 1980s the Bay Area launched a melodic style of hardcore that would be highly influential on the 1990s. Its leaders were [Mr T Experience](#) (2), progenitors of Berkeley's "Gilman Street" scene, who harked back to

the Ramones' farcical tone and catchy refrains. The breakthrough album was **Everybody's Entitled To Their Own Opinion** (1986), but the better produced **Milk Milk Lemonade** (1992) is the one that gave punk-pop its mass appeal.

The [Dwarves](#) (2) did not belong to any movement or scene, but they played the funniest, reckless and most exuberant punk-rock of the era. From their garage/psychedelic beginnings, they moved on to such inane jokes as **Blood Guts & Pussy** (1990) and **Thank Heaven For Little Girls** (1991), devoting themselves to forbidden dirty themes in the tradition of Alice Cooper and Cramps, and populating their songs of a disturbing crowd of sluts and perverts. But that was, after all, the original, unadulterated, uncivilized spirit of rock'n'roll.

Los Angeles 1986-87

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The leaders of Black Flag remained influential after the split. [Greg Ginn](#) continued his virtuoso explorations (solo, with Gone, with Dos and with October Faction), while [Henry Rollins](#) (22) emerged as one of the leading voices of the hardcore generation.

A force of nature, Rollins built an awe-inspiring opus on his visceral delivery, an excursion into intense vocal registers running the gamut from Iggy Pop/Stooge to Captain Beefheart. Introspection, the object of his manic quest, yielded the psychic hurricanes of **Hot Animal Machine** (1987), a milestone recording that turned the violence of hardcore inside (towards the inner life) rather than outside (society). The pathos owed quite a bit to guitarist Chris Haskett, who applied the eloquent styles of Jimmy Page and Jimi Hendrix to crafting a new dramatic art of guitar accompaniment. The steel framework of **Life Time** (1988) and the brutal coldness of the mini-album **Hard Volume** (1989) offered an infernal fresco of the human condition via an experimental sound that relied on jazz bass, psychedelic drums, atonal guitar and dynamic tempos. Despite his ego, the Rollins Band was a polycentric unit that was both tight and interactive, and the voice was certainly not the only protagonist of their psychodramas. Songs that appeared to be compact, massive units were actually composite, fragmented structures. This was particularly true on **End Of Silence** (1992), a grunge monolith and a titanic effort, that was both Rollins' supreme cry of desperation and a complex, multilateral stream of consciousness. The instruments had the alienating effect of isolating Rollins' grief, as if nobody was listening to him. A more streamlined and controlled approach on **Weight** (1993) melted and welded jazz passion and heavy-metal prowess, on top of Rollins' customary deliriums.

In the second half of the decade, quite a few Los Angeles punk bands debuted with a melodic style, from porno-punks [Chemical People](#), to militant hardcore agitators [NOFX](#).

[L7](#) (2), featuring Suzi Gardner and Donita Sparks on guitars and Jennifer Finch on bass, played a rough and blistering mixture of rock'n'roll, punk-rock and heavy-metal, on **L7** (1988), whereas **Smell The Magic** (1991)

turned to pop-metal. They found a magic balance between the wild and the anthemic tones on **Bricks Are Heavy** (1992), particularly with the classic *Pretend We're Dead*, one of rock's immortal refrains. They pioneered "foxcore" and inspired the riot-grrrrls of California.

Pop-core 1986-89

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Towards the end of the decade, when the style invented by Husker Du was beginning to take over the hardcore scene, Boston boasted two of the most successful acts: Evan Dando's [Lemonheads](#) (2), who became heroes with the honest and sincere **Hate Your Friends** (1987) and became stars with **It's A Shame About Ray** (1992), one of the albums that signaled the mass acceptance of punk-rock; and Ken Chambers' [Moving Targets](#) (1), whose punk spirit triumphed on **Burning In Water** (1986) but was also tempered by the contemporary folk-rock school of R.E.M. and Tom Petty. Chambers continued his punk-pop mission with [Bullet Lavolta](#).

Chicago's [Screeching Weasel](#) (2) were among the most effective and entertaining, first with **Boogadaboogadaboogada** (1989), a tour de force of clownish refrains that was also an indirect tribute to Ramones and Buzzcocks, and then with **My Brain Hurts** (1991), one of the few works in this genre that was as melodramatic as demented. Ben "Weasel" Foster impersonated the indifferent kid who has understood nothing of life and society, and whose intellectual level can't go beyond the provincial gossip, but the self-parodying tone harked back to the original spirit of punk-rock and rock'n'roll.

The [Didjits](#) (1), from nearby Champaign, rediscovered frantic, anthemic and epic rock'n'roll on albums such as **Hey Judester** (1988).

Alabama's [Sex Clark Five](#) (1) crafted a humble gem of punk-pop, **Strum & Drum** (1987).

[Goo Goo Dolls](#) (1), from upstate New York, found the formula to sell pop-core to the masses: on **Hold Me Up** (1990) they fused the Replacements' passionate rock'n'roll, Husker Du's punk-pop tunefulness and crisp hard-rock production.

In Minnesota, the only band that capitalized on Husker Du's intuitions was [Arcwelder](#) (1), although even their most accomplished albums, such as **Pull** (1993), never recovered Husker Du's magic touch.

The catchiest and most "retro" of the punk-pop bands came from Seattle: the [Fastbacks](#) (2) were the ultimate improvement over the ideas of Buzzcocks and Ramones. Albums such as **Very Very Powerful Motor** (1990) and **Answer The Phone Dummy** (1994) were whirlwinds of childish singalongs, reminiscent of Phil Spector and the girl-groups.

Punk-pop was initially an underground phenomenon but soon spread all over the world. In Japan, [Shonen Knife](#) (1) made albums such as **Pretty Little Baka Guy** (1986) that could be the ultimate party music: superbly pointless, but irresistible.

Rogue folk 1985-86

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In England, bands such as [Pogues](#) (1) and the [Waco Bros](#) applied the principles of punk-rock to folk music. The Pogues were a folk ensemble that played with devilish animosity, conveying the rancor and the rage of the working class and of the lumpenproletariat (and the savage manners of the hooligans). **Rum Sodomy And The Lash** (1985) and the EP **Poguetry In Motion** (1986) distorted the whole point of square-dances and folksongs, turning them into orgiastic, drunk and irreverent tirades. Their "rogue folk" influenced scores of bands (the leftovers of the folk revival) but the Pogues themselves soon abandoned the genre with the eclectic, almost pan-ethnic arrangements of **If I Should Fall From Grace With God** (1988).

[Membranes](#) (2), unorthodox disciples of Fall, boasted one of the most defiant and confrontational attitudes, that translated into the memorable psychotic bacchanals of **The Gift Of Life** (1985), that even flirts with jazz and ska, and **Kiss Ass Godhead** (1988), on a more humorous note.

The decade ended with the clownish experiences of [Toy Dolls](#) and [Chumbawamba](#) (2). The latter (yet another anarchic cell) borrowed ideas from the music hall and the circus, and crafted a sound that was both militant and chaotic, inspired by Brecht's theater and the Fugs' burlesque on semi-musical works such as **Pictures Of Starving Children Sell Records** (1986). The galloping sermons of **Shhh** (1992) began to wed the style of traditional folk songs to dance-music (funk, hip-hop and reggae), an idea that, coupled with more disciplined arrangements, led to the poppy **Tubthumper** (1997).

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