

## The History of Rock Music: 1976-1989

New Wave, Punk-rock, Hardcore

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### Between Noise-rock and Post-rock

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

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#### *New York's noise-rock 1986-88*

Sonic Youth coined a style that came to be called "noise-rock". It was still abiding by the rules of rock and roll but it was hijacked by dissonant or discordant sounds. Notable purveyors of noise-rock in the second half of the decade were [Nice Strong Arm](#); [Rat At Rat R](#), whose **Rock & Roll Is Dead** (1985) was prophetic; [Agitpop](#) (1), whose **Back At The Plain Of Jars** (1986) was reminiscent of Half Japanese and Pianosaurus; [Ritual Tension](#) (1), whose **I Live Here** (1986) was devoted to clownish non-linear Pere Ubu-esque "dances"; [Gut Bank](#) (1), who recorded an album of amateurish but highly creative noise-rock, **Dark Ages** (1986), and pioneered the "riot-grrrrls" movement.

Robert Poss (a student of avantgarde composers Alvin Lucier, Phil Niblock and Rhys Chatham) led the triple-guitar attack of the [Band Of Susans](#) (13). The guitar tornadoes on the EP **Blessing And Curse** (1986) and on the full-length **Hope Against Hope** (1988) gave rock'n'roll a new twist, fusing minimalistic repetition, psychedelic vocals and guitar noise. The concept evoked the Velvet Underground (and even T.Rex), but the execution was loud, driving and discordant in a way that acknowledged hardcore and noise-rock. Their conversion to pop music, on **Love Agenda** (1989), was even more successful than Sonic Youth's, because catchy hooks and rock'n'roll rhythm were matched by grander noise, alternatively hypnotic/ethereal and metallic/neurotic. **The Word And The Flesh** (1991) and **Veil** (1993) capitalized on that alchemic combustion, further sharpening the guitars and polishing the melodies.

The [False Virgins' Skinjob](#) (1989) was representative of the flood of Sonic Youth imitators to come.

[Of Cabbages And Kings](#) (2) were masters of dramatic tension, thanks to

an eclectic fusion that reached out to hardcore as well as to jazz. The EP **Of Cabbages And Kings** (1988) and the mini-album **Face** (1988) were still reminiscent of their roots (Swans, Foetus, Glenn Branca), but an original and unpredictable style developed on **Basic Pain Basic Pleasure** (1990), a work so gripping, gloomy and arcane that it seemed to be dedicated to mental disorders, and on the Foetus-like **Hunter's Moon** (1992).

### *Boston's noise-pop 1985-87*

By the end of the decade noise-rock had already evolved into highly original and personal styles. The most influential bands, that would inspire hundreds of musicians (and particularly grunge musicians) in the following decade, came out of Boston.

[Dinosaur Jr](#) (13), formed by guitarist Joseph Mascis and bassist Lou Barlow, set the "noise-pop" standard of the 1990s (a merger of distortion and melody), and acted as the link between Sonic Youth and grunge. Mascis' Neil Young obsession (via the Meat Puppets) surfaced on **Dinosaur** (1985). Layers of loud feedback permeated each note of **You're Living All Over Me** (1987). Each song sounded like a languid acid-rock ballad grafted onto hard-rock spasms. Mascis unleashed unabashed pop melodies over orgiastic and fetishistic guitar noise. **Bug** (1988), the last album with Barlow (who went on to form Sebadoh), capitalized on that invention, that soon became one of the most abused stereotypes in rock music. **Green Mind** (1991), that was de facto Mascis' first solo album and a more accessible one, and **Where You Been** (1993), featuring new bassist Mike Johnson and delving into introspective melodrama, became mere routine.

The [Pixies](#) (12), led by vocalist Black Francis (real name Charles Thompson, but later better known as Frank Black) and guitarist Joey Santiago, created another reference standard with their eccentric garage-pop that subverted many clichés of the rock song. Bassist Kim Deal co-wrote some of the best material. Introduced by the ebullient EP **Come On Pilgrim** (1987), a stunning stylistic excursion that ranged from demented exotica to irreverent roots-rock à la Violent Femmes, their eclectic talent blossomed on **Surfer Rosa** (1988). A triumph of the imagination, it took punk-rock to places where it had never been before. Black Francis' slightly psychotic howl and Deal's shimmering warble met Pere Ubu's tortured exuberance, without sacrificing too much to intellectual abstraction. In fact the songs were anchored in the familiar structures of hard-rock and power-pop. It was, mainly, an exercise in controlled violence. More focused and tighter, **Doolittle** (1989) was simply a formidable display of impeccable songwriting by a team of highly creative musicians. After **Bossanova** (1990), a failed experiment with easy-listening, **Trompe Le Monde** (1991), basically a Francis solo, partially returned to the verve of the early days, but, overall, the last two albums were to the first two albums what the music-hall is to the garage.

### *The South's art-punk 1985-87*

A school was being born in Kentucky that would be influential throughout

the 1990s. Its early leaders were bands at the crossroads between roots-rock and noise-rock, and Tara Key's [Antietam](#) (1) were the most typical in bridging those two styles, i.e. the South and Sonic Youth, the rural and the urban sound, tradition and modernism. The savage and awkward playing on **Antietam** (1985) was emblematic of the distance that separated the new generation from the generation of the Fetchin Bones.

[Squirrel Bait](#) (1) only recorded an EP (1985) and a full-length album, **Skag Heaven** (1987). Loosely affiliated to Husker Du's pop-core, their sound broke new ground in the way it juxtaposed loud guitars and tragic vocals. After the band's break-up, its main members would contribute to the birth and evolution of genres such as grunge, slo-core and post-rock.

[Blind Idiot God](#) (12), hailing from St Louis (Missouri), were an instrumental power-trio that predated both post-rock and grunge, and that took inspiration from both MC5, Jimi Hendrix, John Coltrane and Glenn Branca. **Blind Idiot God** (1987) unwound an explosive mix of hardcore, heavy-metal and space-rock, dressed up with spices of reggae and funk. The ugly geometry of its mini-rock symphonies had few precedents in popular music. The trio topped that masterpiece with the seismic wall of sound of **Undertow** (1988) and the erudite funk-jazz-reggae-metal crossover of **Cyclotron** (1992).

The wildly schizoid jazz-core instrumental combo [Alter Natives](#) (1), formed in Virginia by saxophonist Eric Ungar, matched the progressive sound of Los Angeles' jazzcore bands (Minutemen, Saccharine Trust) at least on their debut album, **Hold Your Tongue** (1986).

Tennessee's [Phantom Tollbooth](#) (1), too, attempted to fuse hardcore and prog-rock (in a more refined manner than Minutemen) on **One-way Conversation** (1987).

### ***San Francisco 1984-88***

San Francisco continued to be at the cutting edge of new music. Its scene adapted to the style and issues of hardcore with the usual dose of idealism, creativity and wit. The new "eccentrics" were closer in spirit to the early years of the new wave than to the latter days of noise-rock.

[Tragic Mulatto](#) (12) debuted with the eight-song mini-album **Judo For The Blind** (1984), a pandemonium of spastic, minimal and primitive concepts, a colossal tribute to nonsense. Pared down to a quartet, Tragic Mulatto's ridiculous circus concocted **Locos Por El Sexo** (1987), an artistic paradox that is the musical equivalent of a descent to hell, a relentless romp of indecent bacchanals led by Flatula Lee Roth's saxophone and tuba and by her anthemic, Grace Slick-ian vocal phrasing. An eight-member outfit recorded **Hot Man Pussy** (1989), which expanded the palette to heavy-metal and ethnic music, while Roth launched into witchy spasms and blasphemy exorcisms. Even more psychedelic and exotic, Roth reveled in even more perverted and lugubrious shrieks on **Chartreuse Toulouse** (1990), their swan song.

[Slovenly](#) (3) evolved from Saccharine Trust's jazz-core. Since their debut album, the tentative **After The Original Style** (1985), they embraced a

bizarre fusion of electronic, funk and jazz, arranged with saxophone, violin and trumpet. *Things Fall Apart*, on **We Shoot For The Moon** (1989), is their equivalent of Ornette Coleman's free-jazz, while **Highway to Hanno's** (1992) perfected their style at the border between avantgarde and music-hall.

[Thinking Fellers Union Local 282](#) (12) were remnants of San Francisco's hippie/freak culture of the 1960s, and heirs to the Residents' theatrical madness. **Tangle** (1989) and especially **Lovelyville** (1991) collected eccentric, amateurish, irreverent and manic-depressive miniatures that overflowed with echoes of the most disparate genres (free-jazz jamming, funeral music, heavy-metal riffs, Indian pow-wow music and folk lullabies). The unifying theme of these musical landmines was the performance, which evoked the Holy Modal Rounders in their most irrational moments. There was no limit to human imagination in the demented cabaret of **Mother Of All Saints** (1992), a chaotic excursus through jazz, bluegrass, exotica, Ennio Morricone and Frank Zappa, a super-collage of sonic debris assembled by vocalist Anne Eickelberg, percussionist Jay Paget, multi-instrumentalists Brian Hageman and Mark Davies on a wealth of instruments. Faithful to Dada's principle of art as a paradox, the band was at its childish peak. Then they retreated to the amusing surrealism of **Strangers From The Universe** (1994) and jumped on the "lo-fi pop" bandwagon with **I Hope It Lands** (1996) and **Bob Dinners And Larry Noodles Present Tubby Turdner's Celebrity Avalanche** (2001).

[Sharkbait](#) (1) were more like a circus than a rock band, but **Feed Our Frenzy** (1988) nonetheless unloaded a chaotic mass of hard-rock riffs, found percussions, samples and electronic noises. During their "crushfests" the audience was invited to join on stage and beat whatever object they liked until it broke (hence the "crush"-fest).

### ***Between folk and dream-pop 1986-87***

A humbler New York act, [Hugo Largo](#) (11), with the unusual line-up of two basses and violin supporting vocalist Mimi Goese, took the best that noise-rock had to offer, and wed it to classical music and to British dream-pop. **Drum** (1987) could be defined as a meeting of ecstatic acid-rock and austere chamber music. Its ethereal lieder and exotic lullabies roamed a stylistic landscape that extended from Tim Buckley to new-age music. **Mettle** (1989) increased the hypnotic effect with another batch of jazz, folk, medieval and Indian fusion.

Similar oneiric projects were engineered, with similar humility, in Georgia by Lynda Stipe's drum-less [OH-OK](#), that recorded only two EPs in 1982-83, and her [Hetch Hetchy](#) (1), a keyboards-based project that debuted with the EP **Make Djibouti** (1988) and blossomed on the album **Swollen** (1990), produced by Hugo Largo.

In North Carolina the [Blackgirls](#) (2), a female band equipped with acoustic guitar, piano and violin, and committed to sentimental martyrdom, released a specimen of existential angst and Raincoats-like eccentric lullabies, **Procedure** (1989), followed by the austere elegies of **Happy** (1991).

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