The History of Rock Music: 1976-1989

New Wave, Punk-rock, Hardcore

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Shoegazing and Space-pop

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

Shoegazing 1986-87

When My Bloody Valentine (110) came out of Ireland, something truly original was finally created within the chaos of the psychedelic revival. The mini-album **Ecstasy** (? 1987 - nov 1987) explored the ambiguity that would make their mature sound so haunting and devastating: ecstasy and terror were two faces of the same moon, and that moon shone day and night. Daydreaming and nightmare became the same state of mind as guitars enveloped naive melodies and drums smashed vocal harmonies. **Isn't Anything** (? 1988 - nov 1988) went one step further than Jesus And Mary Chain, in that it renounced punk's violence and harked back to the most dilated forms of acid-rock. Kevin Shields' "shoegazing" guitar fulfilled Jerry Garcia's and Jimi Hendrix' galactic bliss, and helped the sweet litanies grind their way into a transcendental trance. Electronic keyboards joined guitar noise on **Loveless** (? jan 1989/? 1991 - nov 1991), the ultimate exploration of textures in rock music. Its stunning chaos can be viewed both as an enraptured "om" to the universe or as a deranged scream in a madman's cell or as a terrified paralysis in the face of a supernatural force. The album changed the meaning of the word "music" by proving the equivalence between "noisy" and "symphonic", the same way that Einstein proved the equivalence between inertial and gravitational mass.

Acid-rock had been about "trance" since the early times of the Grateful Dead and the Velvet Underground, but its commercialization (circa 1967) had created the misunderstanding that "psychedelic" was about bizarre and cute arrangements of very catchy tunes. It took 20 years for these "shoegazers" to rediscover the original meaning of "psychedelic".

Guitarists Peter "Sonic Boom" Kember and Jason Pierce formed Spacemen 3 (2), the band that transformed sustained guitar noise into spiritual

meditation, and psychedelia into zen. **The Perfect Prescription** (jan/sep 1987 - oct 1987) was supposed to be the musical transcription of an overdose, but it still resembled a slow-motion replay of Red Crayola's dense maelstrom of dissonances. **Playing With Fire** (jun/fall 1988 - feb 1989) achieved an ethereal and transcendent sound which was, de facto, bordering on Brian Eno's ambient music. It is not a coincidence that the group eventually recorded a 45-minute improvisation for distorted guitars, *An Evening Of Contemporary Sitar Music* (aug 1988, released as **Dreamweapon** in 1990), explicitly dedicated to LaMonte Young, the guru of static music. Spacemen 3 were, first and foremost, an idea, the idea of unfolding gentle, ecstatic melodies around the drones of distorted guitars, an Indian praxis that had already been employed by Brian Eno and Robert Fripp.

Even more spiritual and contemplative (and minimal) were the soundscapes "painted" by Robert Hampson's Loop (1) on **Heaven's End** (aug/sep 1987 - end 1987). Their songs were mere variations on a droning pattern, with moods ranging from catatonic to violent.

Eccentric pop 1986-88

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After the orgy of distortion delivered by dream-pop and shoegazing, restoring a bit of discipline to the genre became a legitimate desideratum in the USA. A few artists understood that the psychedelic premise could be used for the sake of producing eccentric arrangements and crafting dynamics in a Dadaistic spirit.

One of New York's most creative minds of the 1980s was Mark Kramer (11), a studio maverick with a flair for bizarre arrangements. After playing country music for the new-wave audience with guitar improviser Eugene Chadbourne in Shockabilly, best immortalized on **Earth Vs** (? 1982 - ? 1983), and recording an album of demented folk a` la Fugs, **Happiness Finally Came To Them** (? ? - ? 1987), with multi-instrumentalist Ralph Carney (ex-Tin Huey) and singer Daved Hild (ex-Girls), Kramer formed B.A.L.L. with Don Fleming, and Bongwater (12) with the performance artist (and future television actress) Ann Magnuson. Bongwater's masterpiece, **Double Bummer** (? ? - ? 1988), was born at the confluence of Kramer's dadaistic tape manipulation and Magnuson's psychoanalytical monologues, with a touch of free-jazz and a lot of retro` passion. Leaving behind the wild experimentation of that post-modernist monolith, Bongwater retreated to a simpler, gentler, catchier form of eccentric pop on **Too Much Sleep** (? 1989 - ? 1989), not too unlike the Jefferson Airplane circa 1967. If **The Power Of Pussy** (? ? - nov 1990), a concept on the social value of sex, replete with hyper-realist vignettes of urban angst drenched into claustrophobic atmospheres, belonged more to Magnuson than to Kramer, **The Big Sell-Out** (summer 1991 - ? 1992) was Kramer's nostalgic tribute to the hippie civilization. But his entire, prolific and multiform career, was only a prelude to Kramer's colossus, **The Guilt Trip** (aug 1991/oct 1992 - end 1992), a tragicomic and ostensibly autobiographical postmodernist treatise. Whether sung or instrumental, Kramer's pieces were studio-virtuoso efforts. The amount of sonic events constituted a maze of sidetracks and detours in which the very meaning of

music disappeared. It was emotional collapse due to information overload. Throughout the album, a logorrheic guitar libido seemed to be Kramer's real voice, but stifled by the hyper-active montage that churned out music like an assembly line. Despite all the artifice, the whole also retained the quality of a social fresco a` la Who's **Tommy**. It was, de facto, Kramer's final testament.

The greatest and craziest disciples of classic Pink Floyd came out of Oklahoma: the Flaming Lips (14), whose art bridged the punk ethos and the hippie burlesque. Their aesthetic was in many ways derived from cartoons: shapes that were grossly naive and easily identifiable, stereotyped characters that bordered on parodies, simplified and often implausible situations. **Hear It Is** (? 1986 - aug 1986) was fundamentally still rooted in punk-rock and garage-rock, with overdoses of Stooges and the Velvet Underground (but already with a respectful attitude towards the song format). But other songs harked back to Syd Barrett's oblique lullabies, Neil Young's guitar neurosis and Jim Morrison's melodramatic eloquence. The band was equally versatile in the soft and the hard registers, and it proved it with the semiotic cauldron of **Oh My Gawd!!!...** (? ? - nov 1987), a post-modernist masterpiece. The arrangements were creative to the point of being grotesque, while abrasive rock'n'roll crescendos, psychotic singalongs and transcendent dirges seemed to fuel each other to ever higher levels of unorthodoxy. **Telepathic Surgery** (? 1988 - jan 1989) reached a demented level of stylistic collage, particularly with the monumental piece *Hell's Angel's Cracker Factory*. The streamlined sound of **In A Priest Driven Ambulance** (? ? - sep 1990) and **Hit To Death In The Future Head** (? ? - aug 1992) relied on catchy melodies and sound effects in the tradition of early Pink Floyd, but marked the first retreat into conventional formats. Dreamy litanies and surreal ditties became typical of less and less adventurous albums: **Transmissions From The Satellite Heart** (jan/feb 1993 - jun 1993), **Clouds Taste Metallic** (? ? - sep 1995) and **The Soft Bulletin** (apr 1997/feb 1999 - may 1999). The notable exception was **Zaireeka** (apr/aug 1997 - oct 1997), a set of four discs to be played simultaneously on four different players.

New Jersey's Yo La Tengo (13), the project of Ira Kaplan and Georgia Hubley, exploited a more obvious synthesis of classic styles. **Ride The Tiger** (dec 1985/jan 1986 - ? 1986) "rode" Television's transcendent guitar trance, the finger-picking of country music, the tremolo of psychedelic-rock, the exuberant riffs of instrumental surf bands, and so forth. **New Wave Hot Dogs** (? ? - ? 1987) and **President** (may 1988/? ? - ? 1989) failed to capitalize on that synthesis, but **May I Sing With Me** (? 1991 - feb 1992), their boldest sonic experiment, coined a personal language of abstract ballads and moody textures. Each song was an exercise in balance: balance between action and meditation, between rebellion and fatalism, between nonchalance and poignancy. **Painful** (? 1992 - oct 1993) formalized the aesthetics ("shoegazing" drones and simple melodies) behind that philosophy. Despite the lack of novel ideas, the duo could chisel impeccable songs: the mystical feeling that permeated **Electr-O-Pura** (? ? - may 1995), and the intricate and eclectic **I Can Hear The Heart Beating As One** (? ? - apr 1997), that casually blended jazz, industrial, dissonant and Indian elements, led to the pure abstraction of **And Then Nothing Turned Itself Inside Out** (? 1999 - feb 2000), but

also to the classical eclecticism of **I Am Not Afraid Of You And I Will Beat Your Ass** (? ? - sep 2006).

Detroit's Viv Akauldren (1), featuring keyboardist Keir McDonald, added an odd blend of ambient, progressive and world-music to the psychedelic trips of **I'll Call You Sometime** (? ? - ? 1987).

A wildly creative Los Angeles outfit, the Red Temple Spirits (11), tested the limits of the genre. The extravagant mysticism of **Dancing To Restore An Eclipsed Moon** (? ? - ? 1988) had few or no precedents. It rehashed emotional debris left buried under the cosmic and ritualistic hymn of Pink Floyd's *Interstellar Overdrive*, under the psychotic and metaphysical melodrama of the Door's *The End*, under the apocalyptic frenzy of the Velvet Underground's *Sister Ray*, while scouring medieval fairy tales, Tibetan mantras, whirling Sufi dances and gothic ballads for intimations of supernatural existence. The lighter **If Tomorrow I Were Leaving For Lhasa** (? ? - ? 1989) was the charming and graceful appendix to that ponderous masterpiece.

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