

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](#)

(Copyright © 2009 Piero Scaruffi)

American Graffiti

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

New York

TM, ®, Copyright © 2005 [Piero Scaruffi](#) All rights reserved.

American Graffiti is the title of George Lucas' film that in 1973 launched a phenomenon in the USA: a revival of the Fifties and the Sixties. There was something innocent and magic in those decades that went lost in the Vietnam War and the oil crisis of the Seventies. The rediscovery of those decades is also a rediscovery of the roots of rock and roll. After the fall of alternative rock, Seventies music had become largely corporate-driven. Genres that had been created as rebellion to the Establishment were rapidly becoming mainstream. The music of the Fifties and the early Sixties sounded more authentic.

Broadway and Hollywood focused on the Billboard charts, on the one-hit wonders that went lost after the deluge of 1966-67. Thousands of kids playing in their garages and basements focused on the bands that were playing in garages and basements in the Sixties. The second half of the Seventies saw a revival of the whole spectrum: rockabilly, surf music, folk-rock, psychedelia, even horror soundtracks. It was as if an archeological frenzy was shaking the musical fabric of the nation. It was like the youth of the Seventies was out to decipher the graffiti of previous "teen" civilizations of the USA.

First and foremost, punks discovered the evil soul that had been hidden for two decades inside rockabilly. Rockabilly's epileptic rhythm fit well with punk's outrageous looks. Furthermore, punks pushed the envelope of that rhythm, wed it to the tones of horror soundtracks and turned it into something bleak and gloomy and deranged. Bent to the mood of the times, it became more than a genre: it became a perverted hypnotic ritual whose hiccups and reverbs had an overtly sexual and macabre meaning. New York was, again, the epicenter. Suicide invented "psychobilly". The [Cramps](#) (11) invented "voodoo-billy" with **Songs The Lord Taught Us** (summer 1979 - mar 1980), a collection of macabre, manic, ebullient rockabilly numbers that emphasized the beastly instincts: a tribal and feverish rhythm, a tone of voice that bordered on shamanic and zombie-like, a catacomb echo dampening the sound.

Disguised as mere B-series parody, Cramps' voodoo-billy offered another poignant fresco of urban alienation and another effective fresco of junk culture. Turning to morbid and porno themes with **A Date With Elvis** (fall 1985 - feb 1986), **Stay Sick** (? 1989 - feb 1990) and **Look Mom No Head** (jun/jul 1991 - sep 1991), the Cramps devoted themselves to recreating the subculture of horror movies and high-school fantasies over and over again, elevating the most degenerate themes to the status of archetypes and semiotic signs.

The [Fleshtones](#) (12) went beyond genre-bending: they turned rockabilly, garage-rock, surf music and horror soundtracks upside down in what was basically an exercise in post-modernist art. Led by keyboardist Peter Zarella, they injected punk effervescence and irreverence into structures that were meant for pure party time. Their anthemic *American Beat* (1979) could be the most representative song of the "Sixties revival". **Roman Gods** (feb/jun 1981 - nov 1981), an album that stands as a tribute to the subconscious of an era, coupled the verve of punk-rock with martial and solemn tones in both instrumental tracks and catchy tunes. The music on albums such as **Hexbreaker** (? 1983 - jun 1983), which played down the rebel attitude in favor of Phil Spector's "wall of sound", and **Fleshtones Vs Reality** (? 1986 - nov 1986) managed to be both visceral and epigonic, to project both frustration and nostalgia.

Another post-modernist attack to the tradition was carried out by the [Raybeats](#) (2), formed by former members of the Contortions and possibly the least conventional of all revival bands. The brilliant musicians gave new meaning to the classic sounds of rockabilly guitar, Farfisa organ and "yakety" saxophone. The instrumental tracks on **Guitar Beat** (apr 1981 - jul 1981) were lattices of atonal, tribal and discordant sounds that simulated conventional Sixties songs. An erudite appendix to that skewed program was **Escape** (? 1980 - early 1981), recorded by Raybeats guitarist Jody Harris and Richard Hell's guitarist Robert Quine and set to disco rhythms.

Of course, the charts featured much more conventional bands, notably the [Stray Cats](#) (1), whose funny and nostalgic restoration of post-war atmospheres (doo-wop, rockabilly, honky-tonk, dance-hall orchestras, swing big-bands) fueled a "rockabilly craze" that brought two minutes of fame to sincere worshippers of the genre like the [Panther Burns](#) and the [Zantees](#).

By far the wildest rock'n'roll animal of the era was [Von Lmo](#) (11). Alas, he was also one of the least friendly to the record industry. **Future Language** (? 1981 - ? 1981) and the posthumous **Cosmic Interception** (? 1979/? ? - ? 1994) feature ferocious space-rock jams that borrow the energy of Hawkwind, the loudness of Blue Cheer, the fury of MC5 and the free format of Albert Ayler, propelling anthemic melodies and distorted heavy-metal guitar.

Garage-rock

TM, ®, Copyright © 2005 [Piero Scaruffi](#) All rights reserved.

However, the emphasis shifted rapidly towards garage-rock, the wild and raw sound of amateurish rock'n'roll: in Washington the [Slickee Boys](#) (1), whose **Cybernetic Dreams Of Pi** (? 1983 - dec 1983) was a precursor of the psychedelic retro` sound, in New Jersey the [Dramarama](#), in Ohio the [Romantics](#) and, indirectly, the [Pretenders](#) (1), whose **Learning To Crawl** (sep 1982/nov 1983 - jan 1984) announced the strong post-feminist persona of Chrissie Hynde and displayed a forceful guitar-rock tinged with ska and blues. The [Wipers](#) (1) in Oregon, led by Greg Sage, poet of the agony and heroic guitarist, revitalized garage-rock of the Pacific Northwest with anthems such as

Youth Of America (1981) and albums such as the excoriating **Is This Real** (late 1979 - early 1980) and especially the existential **Over The Edge** (? 1982 - ? 1983).

Boston, whose scene had been revitalized by the Modern Lovers, boasted one of the most prolific and creative schools, particularly the [Real Kids](#) (1), whose **Real Kids** (fall 1977 - early 1978) was mainly influenced by early Rolling Stones, and the [DMZ](#), who later became the Lyres.

Power-pop

TM, ®, Copyright © 2005 [Piero Scaruffi](#) All rights reserved.

In the process, rock music rediscovered melody and it didn't take long before power-pop, the ultimate "feel good" genre, was rampant again.

Chicago can be credited with rejuvenating the genre, first with the loud, melodic rock of [Cheap Trick](#) and then with the sophisticated retro` sound of the Shoes and with generic "revivalists" like the [Service](#). The [Shoes](#) (2) tower over the rest of the pack, thanks to albums such as **Black Vinyl Shoes** (? 1977 - ? 1977) and **Present Tense** (summer 1979 - fall 1979) that are musical encyclopedias of Mersey-beat choruses, surf harmonies, jingle-jangle guitars, enhanced with the occasional hard-rock riff.

Boston, again, had the most successful and influential bands, the Cars, plus diligent bar-bands such as [Neighborhoods](#).

The slick and sparkling sound of Ric Ocasek's [Cars](#) (1) stood almost at the opposite end of the new wave's ethos: catchy melodies (that were almost lullabies and nursery rhymes compared with punk-rock), electronic arrangements (often bordering on baroque), frigid and slightly neurotic vocals, and loud, insistent, staccato keyboards created a version of early Roxy Music for the new wave, and slowly approached the highly synthetic sound of **Heartbeat City** (jul 1983/jan 1984 - mar 1984).

Another antithesis of the new wave was [Jonathan Richman](#) (1), who had contributed to start the fire with the Modern Lovers but veered towards the opposite end of the spectrum with **Jonathan Richman & The Modern Lovers** (? 1976 - oct 1976). While not precisely "pop", Richman was in many ways the ultimate remnant of the Sixties: a childish bard of his virulent generation who sang in a spartan folk style about ordinary events, a timid albeit witty observer of teenage life, a cross between Buddy Holly and Chuck Berry.

In Kansas the [Embarrassment](#) (1) were as good and as overlooked as the Shoes. **Death Travels West** (oct 1982 - spring 1983) is their humble classic.

The [Moberlys](#) brought the California-style revival to Seattle.

California 1976-

TM, ®, Copyright © 2005 [Piero Scaruffi](#) All rights reserved.

In California, Dave Alvin's [Blasters](#) (2) led the way to a more personal re-interpretation of the Fifties, but, de facto, also launched a new form of populist, grass-roots music. **Blasters** (aug 1981 - nov 1981) and **Non Fiction** (jan 1983 - nov 1983) were more than mere homages to the naive lifestyle of the past: they were sincere rootsy vignettes that captured the USA soul the same way the Band had done it a

decade earlier.

Inevitably the specter of Gram Parsons reappeared: [Rank And File](#), featuring former punks Alejandro Escovedo (ex-Nuns), Chip Kinman and Tony Kinman (ex-Dils), recorded the manifesto of "cow-punk", **Sundown** (jun 1982 - nov 1982), or country-rock for the punk generation.

Power-pop found fertile soil in California, the state that was most distant (physically and psychologically) from New York's disturbed new wave. By the end of the Seventies, Los Angeles had become the capital of power-pop.

Tom Petty, [Jules Shear](#) and, in Berkeley, [Greg Kihn](#) were the "theoreticians" of power-pop, skilled songwriters that used melody and a repertory of cliches to paint their generation's mood.

The classy retro` sound of [Tom Petty](#) (4) linked the Sixties revival with a populist stance and, therefore, with the mood of ordinary, adult USA citizens. The songs on **Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers** (? 1975/? 1976 - nov 1976) and **You're Gonna Get It** (? 1977/? 1978 - may 1978) mimic faithfully the Byrds, the Who and the Rolling Stones. Each of them could have been on an original album of those Sixties heroes. Petty's nasal, Dylan-ian whine gave the revival movement its spokesman. The crystal-clear production emphasized the impeccable skills of the band, in contrast with the sloppiness of much punk-rock of the era. Petty reached his melodic and atmospheric apex on **Damn The Torpedoes** (? 1978/? 1979 - oct 1979), whose songs are powerful mini-dramas, and then ventured into the collective subconscious of the USA on albums such as **Southern Accents** (? 1983/? 1985 - mar 1985) and **Full Moon Fever** (? 1988/? 1989 - apr 1989) that reflected the mood of quiet despair of the working-class and vented heart-felt pessimism. Petty joined Springsteen and Mellencamp as a chronicler of inner struggles and defeats, and as an emblem of redemption.

Among the purveyors of power-pop who thrived in Los Angeles at the turn of the decade were Peter Case's [Plimsouls](#) (1), whose **Plimsouls** (? 1980 - feb 1981) was an inspired revisitation of folk-rock and Mersey-beat, Paul Collins' [Beat](#), possibly the best power-pop band of its time, the [20/20](#), another power-pop outfit, the [Last](#), a modern-day Farfisa band, and the [Redd Kross](#) (1), whose **Neurotica** (jan/feb 1987 - ? 1987) offered furious rock'n'roll and catchy melodies. The [Go-Go's](#) (1) revived the tradition of the girl-groups, specializing in teenage anthems with a punk-rock exuberance, particularly on **Beauty And The Beat** (? 1981 - jul 1981), and the [Bangles](#) took that spirit into the charts.

The sound of these bands was often modeled after the Flamin' Groovies, whose saga was continued by the Phantom Movers formed by their former songwriter, [Roy Loney](#) (1), whose best album was **Out After Dark** (? 1979 - sep 1979).

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