

The History of Rock Music: 1976-1989

New Wave, Punk-rock, Hardcore

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British Graffiti

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

Pub-rock 1976-79

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America had the garages, the basements, the small suburban clubs. Britain had the pubs. Britain's renaissance originated from the musicians who had been playing rhythm and blues and rockabilly in the pubs. The story was not all too different from what happened in the Sixties, when blues clubs kept alive the flame that the "teen idols" and Merseybeat almost killed. In the Seventies something similar happened again. While the charts were ruled by decadent stars like David Bowie and countless mainstream pop singers, the clubs were staging rhythm and blues amateurs who were playing far more exciting music. Punk-rock changed the face of the industry and, indirectly, helped these musicians get out of the pubs.

From the punk civilization there emerged a new kind of singer-songwriter, solidly anchored to the roots of rock'n'roll and aware of social issues.

[Dave Edmunds](#), Nick Lowe, Graham Parker, Joe Jackson, Elvis Costello, and [Tom Robinson](#), not to mention the demented [Ian Dury](#) and the even more demented [Wreckless Eric](#), were the bards who launched a more sincere and vibrant approach to rock and roll. The bizarre acts of [Renaldo And The Loaf](#) and of [Snakefinger](#) found contract and fame in California, but belong to this generation.

Each of these minds worked on a different frequency, though. [Nick Lowe](#) (1) was the theoretician of power-pop and American roots-rock, as evidenced already on **Jesus Of Cool** (dec 1977 - feb 1978), while [Graham Parker](#) (1) was fundamentally a disciple of Bruce Springsteen, Van Morrison and Neil Young, as revealed by **Squeezing Out Sparks** (? 1978 - mar 1979). Despite being announced as a "gangster" at the time of his fibrillating debut, **Look Sharp** (aug 1978 - jan 1979), [Joe Jackson](#) (2) was the most eclectic and erudite of them all, and he proved it by taking on calypso, gospel, soul, jazz and, last but not least, classical, in a series of works that include symphonic works and that peaked with the lieder of **Heaven And Hell** (winter 1996/1997 - sep 1997).

The most celebrated (and possibly over-rated) musician to emerge from this generation was [Elvis Costello](#) (2). The quintessential "angry young man" of the new wave, in 1977 Costello matched a Buddy Holly-ian "look and feel" with a slightly neurotic delivery and a vast spectrum of styles (the anthemic *Less Than Zero*, romantic ballad *Alison*, eccentric reggae *Watching The Detectives*). The early singles (add the erotic twist of *Chelsea* and the angry rant of *Radio Radio* in 1978) led to the competent and varied pub-rock of **This Year's Model** (late 1977/early 1978 - mar 1978) and to the Sixties camouflage of **Armed Forces** (aug/sep 1978 - jan 1979). These albums were typical of Costello's ambiguity: subtly attacking the Establishment while openly endorsing its soundtrack. It wasn't a caricature, it was a full-hearted endorsement of Tin Pan Alley's aesthetic (or lack thereof), lounge soul, easy-listening orchestras, etc. Slowly but steadily, Costello's retro` ideology moved to the back and his passion for sophisticated arrangements came to the forefront, to the point of arranging an entire collection of songs with a string quartet.

While pessimism and disillusion prevailed in the lyrics of these working-class heroes, they set the foundations for the rebirth of optimism.

Success favored the [Dire Straits](#), a band that rediscovered J.J. Cale's laid-back style, Duan Eddy's twang and Bob Dylan's nasal delivery, in soulful hits such as *Sultans Of Swing* (1978), *Tunnel Of Love* (1979), *Twisting By The Pool* (1983), *Money For Nothing* (1985).

Britain's Sixties revival was particularly sympathetic towards the "mods", the real rebels of the Sixties. Groups such as [Eddie And The Hot Rods](#) and Paul Weller's [Jam](#), whose **In The City** (mar 1977 - may 1977) harked back to the Who and the Small Faces, devoted their career to recreating that musical universe. The [Television Personalities'](#) **And Don't The Kids Just Love It** (oct 1980 - jan 1981) evoked the mods and Carnaby Street, before they became the vehicle for Dan Treacy's bleak spleen on **The Painted Word** (sep 1982 - mar 1984).

The [Soft Boys](#) (10) went beyond mere recreation of an era: they created a new era of their own. When the talents of visionary vocalist Robyn Hitchcock and of down-to-earth guitarist Kimberley Rew met, the unique psychedelic sound of **Underwater Moonlight** (jun 1979/mar 1980 - jun 1980) was born. The lullabies smelled of Syd Barrett and of early Pink Floyd, and the rave-ups smelled of the Kinks and of the Who, but the combination of anthemic rock'n'roll and acid atmospheres was largely new. The Soft Boys laid the foundations for the psychedelic revival of the 1980s.

There was also a brief recrudescence of glam-rock, that peaked with [Adam Ant's](#) bubblegum hits.

Power-pop thrived in Ireland via Bob Geldolf's [Boomtown Rats](#) and one of the Buzzcock's most diligent disciples, the [Undertones](#) (that later originated the That Petrol Emotion).

The revival of the Sixties included a fixation for female singers and girl-groups. The leading girl-group of the era was [Bananarama](#), whose dance beats and bubblegum melodies conquered the charts.

Ska and reggae 1977-79

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Another British peculiarity was the favor accorded to ska and reggae, thanks to the large Jamaican community in Britain. Ska had been a brief fad in 1967 and then had faded into oblivion. A combination of racial issues, punk-rock, Sixties revival and agit-prop militancy resurrected it in 1977. The hit makers were the [Specials](#) (who later originated the Fun Boy Three), the [\(English\) Beat](#) (the forefathers of the Fine Young Cannibals), and the [Madness](#). For a couple of years ska was one of the most commercially successful genres in the British charts.

British reggae had a powerful godfather in producer [Adrian Sherwood](#) and his many ensembles: the New Age Steppers, the Dub Syndicate, African Headcharge, Tackhead, etc. His influence stretched from the Clash to the Pop Group, the two most significant artists to endorse reggae, from the Police to the [UB40](#), the two most famous pop acts to exploit the reggae rhythm for their melodic hits.

The [Police](#) (1), a sort of super-trio formed by veteran Canterbury-school guitarist Andy Summers, former Curved Air drummer Stewart Copeland and vocalist/bassist Gordon "Sting" Sumner, debuted with a punk-reggae cocktail, best served in *Roxanne* (1978) and *Message In A Bottle* (1979), *Walking On The Moon* (1979), but soon emphasized the melodic element, which peaked with the impeccable refrains of **Zenyatta Mondatta** (aug 1980 - oct 1980): *Don't Stand So Close To Me* and *Dedododo Dedadada*. The progression towards pop and soul melody led to the old-fashioned romanticism of *Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic* (1981) and *Every Breath You Take* (1983), and a mellow sound that bordered on lounge-music (Sting's future career).

Ensembles such as Aswad, Steel Pulse, Matumbi and UB40 offered a westernized version of Jamaican music that was rather uninspired, but were lucky enough that the audience found affinities with the implicit protest themes of the political punks.

British dub music was a more serious affair, and took longer to emerge. But, over the long term, it was dub music, and not ska or reggae music, that stuck around, thanks to the quality productions of Adrian Sherwood, Jah Shaka and prolific Guyana-born Neil Fraser, better known as Mad Professor, who penned **Beyond the Realms Of Dub** (sep 1982 - end 1982), and even Aswad's own **A New Chapter of Dub** (? 1982 - ? 1982). Artistic peaks were reached by dub pioneer and experimentalist Keith Hudson, with **Pick A Dub** (winter 1974 - ? 1974), and by the instrumental soundpainter Dennis Bovell with **I Wah Dub** (? 1980 - ? 1980) (a former member of Matumbi, an engineer who coined the soul-reggae fusion called "Lovers Rock"). Linton Kwesi Johnson, a Jamaican poet living in England, transposed reggae's mood into dub-based sermons, arranged by Dennis Bovell, on the contemporary issues of the lumpenproletariat. Ditto for the other poet of dub, Mutabaruka. These dub poets are as musical as their producers manage to be. Kwesi owes a lot to Bovell.

Modernism 1976-80

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[Ultravox](#) (3) fused punk spirit, Kraftwerk's robotic pop, Roxy Music's existential minstrelsy, dance rhythms, glam-rock's magniloquent arias and King Crimson's romantic rock on their first two albums, **Ultravox** (fall 1976 - feb 1977) and **Ha Ha Ha** (sep 1977 - oct 1977), kaleidoscopic song-cycles (ranging from virulent boogie numbers to languid pop ballads) that wed the decadent elegance of Billy Currie's violin and keyboards with the tear-jerking crooning of John Foxx (Dennis Leigh). When Foxx departed, Billy Currie and new vocalist/guitarist Midge Ure embraced a chic and

baroque program of electronic pop: **Vienna** (feb 1980 - jul 1980) is one of the albums that marked the birth of synth-pop .

There were other bands trying to bridge the gap between new wave and punk-rock, notably [Alternative TV](#).

No other musicians perfected the art of the pop song as much as [XTC](#) (3). The hysterical post-industrial neurosis of **White Music** (oct 1977 - jan 1978) slowly mutated into the melodic kaleidoscope of **Drums And Wires** (jun/jul 1979 - aug 1979), while Andy Partridge and Colin Moulding revealed to be old-fashioned tunesmiths, heirs to the legacy of Gilbert & Sullivan's operettas, Lennon & McCartney's Mersey-beat and the Bonzo Band's merry carnival (*Life Begins At The Hop, Making Plans For Nigel*). Each album further expanded the scope of the band. **Black Sea** (jun/jul 1980 - sep 1980) recalled the tender caricatures of **Village Green-era Kinks** (*Generals And Majors, Towers Of London*), and **English Settlement** (oct/nov 1981 - feb 1982) turned the satire into a stately tribute to the sounds of an entire civilization, from the music-hall to the "swinging" London, from exotica to dance-music (*Fly On The Wall, Senses Working Overtime*). The duo's quest for the perfect melody and arrangement peaked with **Skylarking** (spring 1986 - oct 1986), a realization of the kind of chamber-pop that Brian Wilson had envisioned. However, their pop ditties had a mechanical quality, as if they were generated by a cold and heartless clockwork.

[Magazine](#), formed by an ex-Buzzcocks and featuring bassist Barry Adamson, and [Monochrome Set](#), disciples of Canterbury's light-jazz, which had been among the first British bands to challenge the punk dogma, opened the way for [Squeeze](#) and their mellow pop-soul ballads such as *Up The Junction* (1979), *Pulling Mussels* (1980) and *Tempted* (1981).

[Japan](#) were seduced to the elegant, sensual and decadent dance-pop of the Giorgio Moroder-produced *Life In Tokyo* (1979), and then, by merging Roxy Music's atmospheric ballads, David Bowie's languid pathos and Peter Gabriel's ethno-funk, they concocted the seductive blend of **Gentlemen Take Polaroids** (? 1980 - nov 1980), highly dependent on the "recitation" of vocalist David "Sylvian" Batt and on the electronic arrangements of keyboardist Richard Barbieri, before fully embracing, on **Tin Drum** (? 1981 - nov 1981), the ethnic fusion that would become the trademark of Sylvian's solo career.

The [Simple Minds](#), originally explored the realms of prog-rock, pomp-rock, glam-rock and synth-pop, at the border between Roxy Music and the Velvet Underground, via the lengthy and lush *Pleasantly Disturbed* (1979), *This Fear Of Gods* (1980) and *In Trance As Mission* (1981), but eventually climbed the charts with the simple refrains of *Promised You A Miracle* (1982), *Waterfront* (1984) and *Don't You Forget About Me* (1985, not written by them).

Commercially speaking, the 1980s were dominated by the Irish band [U2](#) (2), the most sensational phenomenon to hit the British isles since the Beatles. Led by Bono Vox (Paul Hewson) and guitarist The Edge (Dave Evans), U2 emerged from the milieu of pub-rock and punk-rock, downplaying the fundamentalist tone of the punk revolution while at the same time emphasizing its populist tone. Starting with **Boy** (mar/sep 1980 - oct 1980), they bridged the vehemence of punk-rock with the mass appeal of pop and disco-music. Their music was visceral but not violent. Paul "Bono Vox" Hewson's intense crooning, Dave "The Edge" Evans' martial the rhythm section's tribal or bluesy tempos managed to blend the melancholy of folk music, the grief of black music, the

fervor of gospel music, and the magniloquence of operatic arias. More importantly, anthems such as *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (1983) and *Pride* (1984) fused historical pessimism and teenage frustration. A more pensive style surfaced later in their career, leading to more restrained collections such as **Joshua Tree** (jul/nov 1986 - mar 1987), followed by conversions to dance music, industrial music, electronic music and so forth, in a desperate attempt to remain current. They spent their career as far from the cutting edge as possible.

U2 achieved a perfect symbiosis with the gloomily utopian mood of their generation, which, in return, hailed them as heroes. The phenomenon was more social than musical, the music being often reduced to recycling that "mood" over Bono's ever more pathetic blabbering and over The Edge's ever more solemn chords. Nonetheless, it marked a milestone in the evolution of the pop song, because, around the immortal themes of martyrdom and salvation, U2 erected a moral epic of universal appeal. If their Biblical-like apotheoses bordered on kitsch, their bitter ballads and sinister rhythms did keep alive the sorrow idealized by generations of protest folksingers and street bluesmen.

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