

The History of Rock Music: 1976-1989

New Wave, Punk-rock, Hardcore

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Dance Music for Punks

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

Disco-music was flourishing at the same time that punk-rock was spreading like wild-fire around the world. It was inevitable that the two cultures merged. It was also a merger of two alien civilizations, as one stood for values that were almost the negation of the other.

New York was, again, the natural place to meet. [Blondie](#) defined a fusion of disco hedonism and punk aesthetics that would be influential throughout the following decade, despite the fact that *In The Flesh* (1976), *Heart Of Glass* (1978), *Dreaming* (1979), *Atomic* (1979) and *Call Me* (1980) were simply slick disco-music sung in a decadent tone.

[Madonna](#) was to become the ultimate disco/punk hybrid. Technically, she redefined the rhythm'n'blues ballad for the age of electronic polyrhythmic beats. Sociologically, she legitimized an almost nymphomaniac look, a sort of cult of her sexual personality, a cult that stood as the female equivalent of Mick Jagger's and Jim Morrison's hedonism rather than the sensual innuendo of the disco-queens, promoting promiscuity like no other female entertainer had ever done. Culturally, she understood the value of multi-media communication in the age of video-clips. Lyrically, she continuously refined a morbid autobiography. After creating a dramatic persona who is independent, cynical and detached, and expanding it to encompass an entire historical context, she analyzed the nuances that turned an ordinary life into a mythological life. For at least four years songs such as *Everybody* (1982), *Lucky Star* (1983), *Borderline* (1984), *Material Girl* (1984), *Crazy For You* (1984), *Into The Groove* (1986), *Papa Don't Preach* (1986), *Open Your Heart* (1986) played at all four levels, one level helping the other three increase their poignancy. Her best music probably came later into her career: *Isla Bonita* (1987), perhaps her melodic masterpiece, *Vogue* (1990), *Ray Of Light* (1998) and *Hung Up* (2005), propelled by the most torrential beat of her career.

Notably, it was women who took the punk attitude to the discos. The vulgar heroines of punk were as eccentric and nihilistic as their male counterparts, but the contrast with the traditional female musician was much stronger.

While acts such as [Pat Benatar](#) (Andrzejewski) and [Cyndi Lauper](#) simply indulged in provocative looks (pioneered by choreographer Toni Basil), an entire generation of girls began to reinvent the feminine self. The Sixties had introduced the mini-skirt and sexual liberation. The punk revolution introduced something that was almost a contradiction in terms: women who acted vulgar and looked ugly, and who did so on purpose. It was not the emancipation of women, but rather the negation of traditional female values: the terminal point of a process that had been the underlying, undeclared theme of so many social changes of the century. What changed was the very definition of "sexy".

A more sophisticated fusion of punk spirit and dance music came with bands that assimilated the rhythm of funk music into the format of the new wave song: the [Talking Heads](#) (13) led the pack. **77** (apr/jul 1977 - sep 1977) revealed an odd combination of cerebral attitudes, naive melodies and surreal fables. The oblique strategy that David Byrne employed in setting to music his psychotic rigmarales was matched by a rhythm section capable of dance and tribal beats. Each of the album's vignettes was catchy, propulsive and subtly jagged. **More Songs About Buildings And Food** (mar/apr 1978 - jul 1978), the album that inaugurated Byrne's collaboration with Brian Eno, emphasized the rhythmic element, which acquired totemic proportions on **Fear Of Music** (apr/may 1979 - aug 1979), a collection of orgiastic disco-music with ethnic overtones and electronic arrangements. Byrne's touch is still evident in the dark, disturbing feeling that underlies the songs. Far from merely "selling out", Byrne and Eno were devising musical structures that artfully blurred geometry and chaos. Eno's program of "westernizing" the music of the Third World through a calculated fusion of futurism and primitivism permeates **Remain In Light** (jul/aug 1980 - oct 1980), which contains even less of Byrne's intellectual postures. Without Eno, the Talking Heads would return to a simpler style of catchy tunes. [David Byrne](#)'s solo career (1) was less successful: while his collaboration with Brian Eno, **My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts** (aug 1979/oct 1980 - feb 1981), a product of Byrne's fascination with funk, and rhythm in general, and of the duo's skills in sound manipulation, was immensely influential, the rest of Byrne's ventures in ethnic pop have been far from adventurous or revolutionary.

[ESG](#), a combo led by three singer-percussionist sisters and specialized in hypnotic grooves such as *You're No Good* (1981), [Liquid Liquid](#), whose exotic futurism peaked with the lengthy melodic jam *Rubbermiro* (1981), [Defunkt](#), and the [Bush Tetras](#), whose EP **Rituals** (jul 1981 - dec 1981) was perhaps the bleakest album of this school, used funk to create an unlikely mixture of kitsch and neurosis that epitomized "entertainment" in the dark ages of punk.

Saxophonist and vocalist [James Chance](#) (12) surfaced as a "no wave" musician in 1978, the leader of the Contortions. Their disjointed, awkward tempos, dissonant guitar (Jody Harris), gargantuan saxophone, and repellent, visceral crooning lent **Buy** (spring 1978 - late 1979) a quality of sonic sabotage. James Chance's abominable ultra-fusion was an ideal meeting point for Albert Ayler, Captain Beefheart and James Brown. The savage impetus and the neurotic off-kilter instrumental passages signified a generational nervous breakdown. **Off White** (fall 1978 - ? 1979), credited to James White, was, instead, a relatively streamlined postmodern essay that turned the previous album's bacchanals into exercises of deconstruction. **Sax Maniac** (? ? - ? 1982), performed by an old-fashioned dance combo (trombone, sax, trumpet, female choir), summarized Chance's stylistic jungle and "contorted" persona.

Philadelphia's [Stick Men](#) (1) came close to formulating the same deadly potion, particularly on **This Is The Master Brew** (? ? - ? 1982).

Peter Gordon's [Love Of Life Orchestra](#) (1) conducted the boldest experiment on dance music, starting with *Extended Niceties* (1979), possibly the absolute masterpiece of disco-music. Gordon layered keyboards and horns on synthetic beats and produced instrumental kitsch that was basically a montage of clichés (reggae, ska, surf, twist, funk, ...) By applying the techniques of avantgarde music to popular and dance music, by vivisectioning the nature of "easy listening", Gordon indirectly provided an hallucinated social fresco. The semiotic quality of his meta-musical program is evident on **Geneva** (feb 1980 - ? 1980), whose pieces are mini-symphonies for stereotypes of commercial music. Related to Andy Warhol's pop art and post-modernism at large, Gordon's mission adopts as the medium the decadent elegance of ludic customs, and sets the goal of eroding the collective imaginary of entertainment.

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As usual, the disease spread west, via the [Suburbs](#) (1) in Minnesota, whose **Credit In Heaven** (feb 1981 - jul 1981) served the most eclectic disco-pop of the era, and [Was Not Was](#) (1) in Michigan, heirs to George Clinton's sardonic/histrionic parodies and Frank Zappa's demented nonsense, whose **Was Not Was** (jan/mar 1981 - jun 1981) and subsequent albums were marvels of arrangement, stylish sonic puzzles that offered an effervescent re-interpretation of black dance music in a high-tech white (and hard-rock) context.

In Canada, [Martha & The Muffins](#) bridged B52's, the Canterbury sound and pop-jazz on **Metro Music** (aug 1979 - feb 1980).

And eventually it reached California, with trivial synth-pop ballads such as [Berlin's No More Words](#) (1984), but there it met the experimental laboratories of the underground. [Romeo Void](#) and [Voice Farm](#) (1), whose **World We Live In** (early 1982 - mar 1982) was a soundtrack for cybernetic alienation, cheered up the punk crowds of San Francisco's night clubs while Stan Ridgway's [Wall Of Voodoo](#) (1), who concocted the apocalyptic visions of **Call Of The West** (jun 1982 - aug 1982), such as *Mexican Radio*, and [Oingo Boingo](#) (heavily influenced by the British ska renaissance) roamed Los Angeles' avant-discos. [Missing Persons](#) (*Words*, 1982) were formed by Frank Zappa's associates (guitarist Warren Cuccurullo, bassist Pat O'Hearn, drummer Terry Bozzio).

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