

The History of Rock Music: 1989-1994

Raves, grunge, post-rock

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Noisier than Rock

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

New York's legacy 1990-94

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The 1980s had witnessed a more or less subliminal process of deconstruction of rock music: angular melodies, irregular rhythms, strident counterpoint. The instruments and the line-up were consistent with the stereotype of rock'n'roll but the result was almost antithetical: brainy, un-hummable, depressing and mostly instrumental. During the 1990s this form of intellectual rock was recognized as a major vehicle for the message of a musician, the same way that a memorable melody had been the main vehicle for most musicians of the 1960s.

The influence of Sonic Youth was perhaps the most visible. Mostly unknown during the 1980s, Sonic Youth came slowly to represent "the" quintessential alternative band. An even more "alternative" act, Pussy Galore, was a close second. No surprise, then, that a few of the new leaders emerged from those two bands. [Bewitched](#) (1) were formed by Pussy Galore's drummer Bob Bert, and recorded a boldly experimental work, **Brain Eraser** (? 1990 - jul 1990).

Jon Spencer's wife Cristina Martinez led [Boss Hog](#) (1), that re-invented party-music first on **Cold Hands** (? 1990 - nov 1990), featuring Honeymoon Killers' bassist Jerry Teel and Unsane drummer Charlie Ondras, and then on **Whiteout** (? 1999 - aug 1999), both clever revisitations of rock stereotypes.

Like Pussy Galore, the [Jon Spencer Blues Explosion](#) (3) was a bass-less trio playing careless, amateurish, skeletal and grotesque blues. The difference is that Spencer had dispensed with the "punk-rock" factor. A stylist of bad taste, Spencer carried out a postmodernist deconstruction of the blues, first on the cacophonous and viscerally crude **Jon Spencer Blues Explosion** (jul/dec 1991 - apr 1992), which was virtually an insult to the great bluesmen of the past, then with the childish **Extra Width** (jul/dec 1992 - may 1993), and finally with the streamlined **Orange** (? 1993/? 1994 - oct 1994), which was in many ways his most accomplished (albeit not innovative) collection. These works contained psychotic rave-ups, demented jamming and scary vocals, which represented a

"hip" kind of background music for the distorted values of the post-punk generation. The sophisticated sloppiness of **Now I Got Worry** (? 1996 - sep 1996) and **Acme** (? 1998 - oct 1998), the first Spencer album that featured a bass, further diluted the original outrage and presented a more civilized (i.e. less beastly) con-man.

[Spongehead](#) (2), a guitar-sax-drums trio, crafted a loose fusion of blues, funk and jazz that resembled Pere Ubu's abstract pop-art on the tentative **Potted Meat Spread** (? ? - ? 1988) and on the more mature **Legitimate Beef** (? 1989 - ? 1990). Dave Henderson's tenor sax and Doug Henderson's atonal guitar worked wonders on **Curb Your Dogma** (? 1993 - oct 1993), an emotional as well as technical miracle that ran the gamut from expressionist psychodramas to rowdy pow-wows. **Infinite Baffle** (? ? - apr 1996) even applied the group's recipe to roots-rock with boogie overtones à la ZZ Top.

New York, which had been the birthplace of noise-rock, had the most varied and crowded scene of noise-rock bands: the [Dustdevils](#), fronted by the unpleasant vocals of Jaqi Dulany; [Babe The Blue Ox](#), with the odd dynamics of **[Box]** (? 1993 - ? 1993); [St Johnny](#) (1), whose **High As A Kite** (summer 1992 - aug 1993) was derivative of Sonic Youth; [Bunny Brains](#), who delivered the creative chaos of **Bunny Magick** (? 1993/? 1994 - ? 1994); [Versus](#) (1), whose **Secret Swingers** (dec 1995 - jul 1996) fused Television's transcendental acid-rock and Sonic Youth's atonal pop; [Lotion](#) (1), with the mildly psychedelic **Nobody's Cool** (late 1995 - mar 1996); [Sleepyhead](#), disciples of Sonic Youth who moved on to psychedelic folk.

Overall, noise-rock was a metropolitan, intellectual affair, relatively removed from the populist issues of the heartland of the USA.

The legacy of apocalyptic hardcore 1989-92

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Chicago's noise-rock was heavily influenced by the subculture of hardcore, and by Big Black's apocalyptic noise. [Jesus Lizard](#) (13) summarized the style better than anyone else. The historical line-up of Scratch Acid vocalist David Yow, Scratch Acid bassist David Sims, Phantom 309's drummer Mac McNeilly, and guitarist Duane Denison, was the vanguard of a new kind of hardcore punk-rock that had absorbed funk, noise and industrial music. The EP **Pure** (dec 1988/jan 1989 - aug 1989) and the full-length **Head** (dec 1989 - may 1990) were dramas of macabre hyper-realism, immersed into urban neurosis as viewed from Yow's sick mind. **Goat** (sep 1990 - feb 1991), their most accomplished work, found a magical balance between Yow's psychotic mumbling and screaming (and perverted visions), Denison's elegant vocabulary of grinding, scathing, sobbing and lashing sounds, and a repertory of ever-mutating epileptic rhythms. The quartet penned lugubrious, visceral, vulgar, truculent and abrasive nightmares. A less disordered and less pathological affair, **Liar** (may 1992 - sep 1992) was still highly energetic, sometimes chaotic, and always galvanizing. The instrumental technique refined on **Down** (? 1994 - aug 1994) stood as an impressive contribution to redefining the very essence of rock music. But their music was, first and foremost, a music of fear, the fear of a young urban population whose life was reduced to a series of agonizing spasms. The central character of their stories, a sort of mythological psychopath, was the collective subconscious of that population. If punk-rock had been the sound of a battlefield, the sound of Jesus Lizard was the sound of the wounded who rattled in the cold of the night.

Nebraska's [13 Nightmares](#) bridged the ferocious Detroit school of MC5 and the Minneapolis school of the Replacements on **Shitride** (? 1989 - ? 1990).

In Minnesota [Flour](#) (1), the project of former Rifle Sport's bassist Peter Conway, recorded albums such as **Luv 713** (? 1989 - ? 1989) that wed Big Black's violence with dance beats and heavy-metal riffs.

A Southern version of extreme hardcore was heralded by [Phantom 309](#) (1), based in Mississippi but led by Indiana's guitarist and vocalist John Forbes, a band that applied the hardcore propulsion to a blues and rockabilly foundation on **A Sinister Alphabet** (fall 1988 - aug 1989).

Among the most oppressive followers of Jesus Lizard's convoluted power-rock were Missouri's [Dazzling Killmen](#) (2), no less brutal but a little jazzier. The cross-fire between vocalist Nick Sakes and guitarist Tim Garrigan, and the rhythm section's jarring movement, molded the infernal atmospheres of **Dig Out The Switch** (may 1992 - ? 1992). The band relished horror psychodramas of ferocious intensity, an art that culminated on **Face Of Collapse** (sep 1993 - feb 1994).

Jesus Lizard's main disciples in Chicago were perhaps [Shorty](#), led by guitarist Mark Shippy and vocalist Al Johnson, with the eerie violence of **Thumb Days** (nov 1992 - apr 1993).

[Unsane](#) (11), formed in New York by Jon's brother Chris Spencer and drummer Charlie Ondras, concocted a dissonant and violent form of rock'n'roll that borrowed the sheer impetus of hardcore but emptied it of any emotion and melody. The catastrophic riffs, hammering rhythms and uncontrolled vocals of **Unsane** (jan 1991 - apr 1992) performed glacial and relentless surgery on the body of a zombie. Cascades of atrocious sounds destabilized its songs and generated a form of hysterical tribalism. Compared with Sonic Youth, the music was spasmodically tragic, not calmly intellectual. Vincent Signorelli replaced Ondras (who had died prematurely) on **Total Destruction** (jan 1993 - jan 1994), another work drenched in superhuman angst, another bleak, claustrophobic and painful vision of subhuman life. Even compared to the extreme sound of Big Black, Unsane's music was a further step down the stairway to hell, and the damned weren't even crying anymore.

San Diego's [Three Mile Pilot](#) (2), a guitar-less trio of vocals, bass and drums led by singer Pall Jenkins (Paolo Zappoli), revived Jesus Lizard's post-hardcore dejection on **Na Vucca Do Lupu** (oct 1991/jun 1992 - ? 1992), a brutal and passionate work, and **Chief Assassin To The Sinister** (nov 1993/jan 1994 - sep 1994), a tortured, stark and obscure testament.

Kansas City's [Season To Risk](#) played similar heavy, tortured music on albums such as **In A Perfect World** (summer 1994 - may 1995).

Los Angeles' [Distorted Pony](#) (1) delivered the gloomy, heavy and terrifying wall of noise of **Punishment Room** (jan 1992 - apr 1992), while [Slug](#) wed Big Black to an assortment of turntables and hip-hop rhythms, not to mention the monster assault of two basses, on **Swingers** (? 1992 - ? 1992).

San Francisco-based [Oxbow](#) (3), fronted by nightmarish vocalist Eugene Robinson, concocted an insane free-form collage of atonal instruments, vocal rants, noise, angst-ridden punk energy and sheer nonsense on **Fuckfest** (? 1989 - ? 1990) and especially **King of the Jews** (early 1991 - apr 1991) and **Serenade in Red** (? 1996 - ? 1997). After a long hiatus, **An Evil Heat** (? ? - feb 2002) even included a 32-minute coda of musique concrete for distorted guitar and moribund groove, *Glimmer Shine*.

In New York, both [Drunk Tank](#) (1) with the bleak **Drunk Tank** (mar 1991 - sep 1991), and [Cell](#), with **Slo Blo** (? 1992 - jan 1993), further explored the edges of this style.

These bands increasingly mixed noise-rock, grunge and industrial music.

Midwest introversion, 1993-94

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Several Midwestern bands took advantage of the harmonic revolution of noise-rock to craft personal, introverted and disturbing styles.

Indiana's [Antenna](#), formed by former Lemonheads' and Blake Babies' guitarist John Strohm, evolved into [Velo-DeLuxe](#) (1), whose **Superelastic** (? 1994 - oct 1994) better represented the leader's fusion of roots-rock, power-pop, the Velvet Underground and My Bloody Valentine.

Ohio's [Brainiac](#) (2) concocted a surreal hybrid of new wave and industrial music. Abandoning the punk-rock verve of their Devo-inspired debut album **Smack Bunny Baby** (? 1993 - jul 1993), the short demented songs of **Bonsai Superstar** (aug 1994 - nov 1994), featuring new guitarist John Schmersal, revealed a lighter, gentler version of Pere Ubu, the Pixies and Sonic Youth. Chaotic and retro, that album capitalized on those masters' innovations but, thanks to Tim Taylor's naive synthesizer and to a childish aesthetic, discarded the apocalyptic overtones. **Hissing Prigs In Static Couture** (nov 1995 - mar 1996) was a better organized madhouse, despite the relentless, frantic chaos.

East Coast dissonance, 1992-95

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Later into the decade, a new generation of bands came around playing non-linear, dissonant song-oriented music, and North Carolina (namely, Chapel Hill) was its epicenter. [Polvo](#) (12), which were in many ways the leaders of this school, resurrected Television's guitar counterpoint, which straddled the line between neurosis and ecstasy, between western existentialism and eastern transcendentalism, but pushed it to the brink of cacophony and chaos. The effect was to give "atonal" a "subliminal" meaning. The intricate and repulsive guitar collisions of Ash Bowie and Dave Brylawski propelled **Crane Secret** (jan 1992 - may 1992) inwardly, while shifting and incoherent tempos lent the journey a Freudian intensity, and twisted melodies plunged the "stories" into the realm of Alice In Wonderland. A more erudite effort, **Today's Active Lifestyles** (dec 1992 - apr 1993) was, de facto, a series of dissonant micro-concertos, which in turn evoked a gallery of abstract miniatures, not unlike Captain Beefheart's masterpieces. **Exploded Drawing** (oct 1995 - apr 1996), possibly their masterpiece, perfected their manual of harmony. While the surface still sounded like a spastic version of Henry Cow, the nonchalant and detached way with which the players secretly toyed with elements of raga, blues and folk amounted to a jungle of improper signs, to a semiotic disaster of the same magnitude as Arto Lindsay's and Mayo Thompson's most heretical endeavors. The more careful arrangements of **Shapes** (? 1997 - sep 1997) revealed that the scaffolding of their sonic kaleidoscope bore psychedelic stigmata. Shunning the over-extended progressive/acid format, Polvo advanced the concept of noise in the format of the pop song more than anyone else since Sonic Youth.

Boston boasted an equally original scene. Live Skull's vocalist Thalia Zedek and guitarist Chris Brokaw (ex-Codeine) formed [Come](#) (1) to indulge in noisy Royal Trux-ian blues jamming and neurotic Neil Young-ian ballads. **Don't Ask Don't Tell** (feb/mar 1994 - oct 1994) was a collection of nightmarish streams of consciousness.

The [Supreme Dicks](#) (11) were among the most intriguing practitioners of the aesthetic that equates "creative" and "primitive". The theatrical bacchanals of **The Unexamined Life** (? 1993 - sep 1993) managed to combine ideas from the Holy Modal Rounders, Kurt Weill and Lou Reed. That kind of drunk, dissonant folk music evolved towards the avantgarde and psychedelia on **The Emotional Plague** (? ? - apr 1996), a vastly more ambitious work that resorted to sparse, dilated and warped structures.

In Pennsylvania, [Latimer's LP Title](#) (? 1994 - nov 1994) was typical of Sonic Youth's nation-wide influence.

Two of the most original bands were from Washington (and not coincidentally related to Unrest). [Tsunami](#) (1), the band of ebullient singer Jenny Toomey, played frantic and muddled roots-rock on **Deep End** (jul 1992 - may 1993). [Pitchblende](#) (1), the band of guitarists Justin Chearno and Treiops Treyfid, molded a vehement and jagged attack on **Kill Atom Smasher** (? 1992 - apr 1993).

Broc's Cabin (? ? - mar 1991), by Florida's [Rein Sanction](#), was bleak and ominous like a cross between voodoo and noise-rock.

Atlanta's [Pineal Ventana](#) offered a bold mixture of improvisation, tribal drumming, saxophone drones and edgy screaming on **Living Soil** (mar 1995 - jul 1995).

International noise-rock, 1992-94

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England was awash in Brit-pop, but still managed to deliver some of the most creative bands of the era.

[Gallon Drunk](#) (11) was one of the most aggressive and intimidating outfits of its time. **You, The Night... And The Music** (fall 1991 - ? 1992) served rock'n'roll and rhythm'n'blues played by a pack of rabid wolves, skewed tribal dances derailed by awkwardly distorted guitar and organ and by demonic changes of tempo and mood. The album revived the lascivious and sinister musical universe of Birthday Party, the Cramps and the Scientists, but in a more catastrophic setting, and amid mutant echoes of Creedence Clearwater Revival and Bo Diddley. The slightly jazzier and more rational **From The Heart Of Town** (? 1993 - ? 1993), featuring reed player Terry Edwards, turned that wild flight of the imagination into a style.

[Therapy?](#) (1) unleashed another brutal work, **Nurse** (aug 1992 - oct 1992), a trip in a Freudian maze. The style of [Jacob's Mouse](#) (1) was even looser. Their **No Fish Shop Parking** (? 1991 - ? 1991) was a cauldron of noise-rock styles. The [Faith Healers](#) (1), featuring guitarist Tom Cullinan, imitated Pixies and Sonic Youth on **Lido** (mar 1992 - mar 1992). [Prolapse](#) (1) specialized in angular and abrasive noise-rock, which on the early albums, such as **Backsaturday** (jul 1995 - nov 1995), sounded like vitriolic indictments of pop music. [Boyracer](#) behaved like childish hellraisers on **More Songs About Frustration And Self-Hate** (mar 1994 - may 1994), that contains brief songs played with full-throttle clumsiness and clownish nerdiness. [Rosa Mota](#) unleashed the triple guitar assault of **Wishful Sinking** (end 1994 - jan 1995).

The "Halifax school" in Canada was briefly a phenomenon. Representative albums were **Love Tara** (apr/jun 1993 - nov 1993), by [Eric's Trip](#) (1), which included Rick White and Julie Doiron, and [Jale's Dreamcake](#) (? 1994 - jul 1994). The group to emerge from this crowd was [Sloan](#), that from the noise-pop hybrid of **Smeared** (dec 1991 - jan 1992), a

synthesis of the musical zeitgeist of the time, via the Sixties tribute of **One Chord To Another** (? 1996 - jun 1996) to the pop behemoth **Never Hear The End Of It** (? 2006 - sep 2006) cultivated a fixation for the most naive form of melody.

Germany's [18th Dye](#) explored noir atmospheres via noise-rock on their second album **Tribute To A Bus** (? 1994 - apr 1995).

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