

The History of Rock Music: 1989-1994

Raves, grunge, post-rock

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Grunge

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

The golden age of Seattle

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Grunge was one of the big phenomena of the 1990s, although it was largely confined to the United States. Grunge was essentially a revival of 1970s' hard-rock. However, it was also identified with the musical renaissance of Seattle, that suddenly became one of the world's centers for rock music, and "grunge" came to include just about any band that played in that city.

The road had been opened in the late 1980s by Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, Melvins and Mudhoney, with four distinctive styles that involved "hard" vibrations. Those were the four cardinal points of Seattle's grunge. Nirvana had turned grunge into a slot machine.

[Alice In Chains](#) (1) perfected a form of gloomy pop-metal and of power-ballad with **Facelift** (1990) and especially the stark melodrama of **Dirt** (1992), the intimate portrait of a drug addict. Layne Staley's psychotic vocals and Jerry Cantrell's sharp riffs transformed their confessions into bloodsheds.

Followers of their bittersweet hard-rock included [My Sister's Machine](#), with **Diva** (1992), [Truly](#), with **Fast Stories** (1995), and the most successful band of the second generation, the [Foo Fighters](#), formed by Nirvana's drummer David Grohl, Germs' guitarist Pat Smear and Sunny Day Real Estate's rhythm section, with the even poppier **Foo Fighters** (1995), which was truly a Grohl solo album.

A multitude of derivative bands appeared after Nirvana's 1991 success: [Love Battery](#), with the EP **Between The Eyes** (1990); [Green Apple](#)

[Quickstep](#), with **Wonderful Virus** (1993); [Sweet Water](#), with their second album **Superfriends** (1994); [Candlebox](#); etc.

Nearby Oregon had [Sprinkler](#) and [Pond](#), but mainly Everclear.

Few bands truly experimented with the format. [Hammerbox](#) (1) were possibly the most imaginative: their fusion of punk, country, blues, funk and metal elements on **Numb** (1993) was unrivaled.

[GodHeadSilo](#) (2), the duo of bassist Mike Kunka and drummer Dan Haugh, played nightmares not sounds. The gargantuan pieces of **Scientific Supercake** (1994) were catalogs of terrifying sounds borrowed from Chrome, Unsane and Melvins. **Skyward In Triumph** (1996) did not sound human at all, submerged by an irrational noise of galactic riffs, demonic screams and crushing cadences.

An even more claustrophobic atmosphere was penned by [Hammerhead](#) (1) with the ugly, post-hardcore sludge of **Ethereal Killer** (1993).

[Atomic 61](#) (1) wed the Melvins' apocalyptic sensibility to Jimi Hendrix's blues-rock on **Tinnitus In Extremis** (1993).

Portland's [Everclear](#) (1), the project of Art Alexakis, a sincere populist, bard of the misfits, expressed teenage angst via a mythological review of provincial life on **Sparkle And Fade** (1995) and especially **So Much For The Afterglow** (1997), the latter embellished with layers of keyboards, horns, strings and choirs. His mission peaked (morally, if not artistically) with the solemn and touching concept album **Songs From An American Movie** (2000), whose lush arrangements were almost symphonic.

Grunge in California

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Southern California, long the main center for heavy-metal, jumped on the bandwagon with Scott Weiland's [Stone Temple Pilots](#) (1), who virtually cloned Pearl Jam and Soundgarden, especially on second album **Purple** (1994), and [Blind Melon](#), two of the most successful grunge bands of the 1990s, but also two of the most derivative. More original were perhaps [Failure](#) on **Magnified** (1994).

[Tool](#) (3) was the most innovative band to emerge from grunge's second generation. **Undertow** (1993) announced their sinister, threatening and (in a subtle way) explosive blend of Led Zeppelin, grunge, heavy-metal and progressive-rock. The lengthy and brainy suites of **Aenima** (1996) displayed a shimmering elegance that was almost a contradiction in terms, but that was precisely the point: Tool's art was one of subtle contrasts and subdued antinomies, one in which existential rage and titanic will competed all the time. It was also a diary of primal angst, and the lyrical level truly paralleled the instrumental level. **Lateralus** (2001) expanded on that two-level approach, with tracks that, musically, were multi-part concertos or mini-operas, and, lyrically, were Freudian sessions that elicited all possible interior demons. In parallel, Tool's vocalist Maynard James Keenan was adapting grunge to the claustrophobic and neurotic

atmospheres of industrial music and post-rock on **Mer De Noms** (2000), the debut album by his supergroup A Perfect Circle.

An even more original assimilation of progressive-rock's language was carried out by a San Diego band that relocated to England, [God Machine](#) (1), on **Scenes From The Second Storey** (1993).

Grunge in New York

[Helmet](#) (1), formed by Band Of Susans' guitarist Page Hamilton, were the undisputed leaders of New York's grunge. **Strap It On** (1990) defined their sound: stormy, dense and dark; a dull, continuous, torrential noise that created a manic tension.

[Quicksand](#), formed by Gorilla Biscuits' guitarist Walter Schreifels, fused hardcore and grunge in a more straightforward manner on **Manic Compression** (1995).

[Surgery](#) (1) were to Helmet what the Rolling Stones were to the Kinks. The supercharged blues-rock frenzy of **Nationwide** (1990) and the savage and incendiary sound of EP **Trim 9th Ward Highrollers** (1993) had no class and no artistic pretenses: they simply displayed animal instincts.

[Barkmarket](#) (11) coined a form of "progressive grunge", an explosive mixture of Jesus Lizard and Sonic Youth that relied on David Sardy's uncontrolled histrionics (reminiscent of Mick Jagger at his worst) and guitar bacchanals à la Surgery to craft the chaotic, incendiary atmospheres of **Vegas Throat** (1991). And **Gimmick** (1993) added sound effects and samples to an already frantic cacophony.

Austria's [H.P. Zinker](#) (relocated to New York) offered a jazzy version of grunge on **Beyond It All** (1990).

[Scarce](#) (1), formed in Rhode Island by guitarist/vocalist Chick Graning on the ashes of Anastasia Screamed, penned the memorable **Deadsexy** (1995), one of the most melodic and melodramatic grunge albums of the era.

Grunge in Chicago

Chicago had actually co-pioneered the genre with [Urge Overkill](#), particularly on their second album, **Americruiser** (1990), a compromise between their experimental debut and the melodic style that would make them famous. Bands such as [Hum](#) and [Soil](#) kept it alive.

Out of Chicago also came the only hard-rocking band that could compete with the popularity of Seattle's grunge: the [Smashing Pumpkins](#) (2). **Gish** (1991) crossed the boundaries of grunge, progressive-rock and acid-rock, unifying the power of riffs and the subtlety of dynamics. **Siamese Dream** (1993) gave the idea psychological depth and dramatic emphasis: languid melodies were delivered in a neurotic register by Billy Corgan while James Iha's guitar screeched a wall of noise. They were more "recitations" than songs, and the band's achievement was to strike a balance between elegance and savagery. The monumental **Mellon Collie And The Infinite**

Sadness (1995) sounded like a series of uncontrolled urges to experiment with all sorts of formats (symphonic, acoustic, bubblegum, glam, easy-listening and avantgarde). The common denominator of these schizophrenic fits was the atmosphere, a disorienting blend of fairy tale and Freudian confession.

Soon in the Midwest a few crossover experiments tried to expand the horizons of the genre. Detroit's [Big Chief](#) fused grunge with funk, blues, hip-hop and soul on **Face** (1991); and Minneapolis' [Walt Mink](#) added jazz and psychedelia on **Miss Happiness** (1992).

In the south, grunge merged with the local tradition of "southern boogie" and with the countless flavors of blues, soul and gospel: Alabama's [Verbena](#), with **Souls For Sale** (1997); Georgia's [Collective Soul](#), with **Hints Allegations And Things Left Unsaid** (1994); Texas' [Toadies](#), with **Rubberneck** (1994); etc.

Grunge in the rest of the world

England's contingent was not as numerous and not as significant. [Bush](#) were the most successful thanks to **Sixteen Stone** (1994); and [Fudge Tunnel](#) were the most devastating with **Hate Songs In E Minor** (1991). On the other hand, the [Manic Street Preachers](#) merely watered down Guns N'Roses' street rock on **Generation Terrorists** (1992).

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