

The History of Rock Music: 1989-1994

Raves, grunge, post-rock

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Progressive Sounds

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

East Coast 1988-94

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At the beginning of the 1990s, Phish, more than anyone else, established alternative rock on mainstream radio. Phish were more than just a surrogate of the Grateful Dead for the 1990s. They legitimized a return to the aesthetics of progressive-rock, particularly on the East Coast.

In the age of hardcore punk-rock, the aesthetics of [Phish](#) (22), a quintet based in Vermont, bordered on the suicidal. Nonetheless, the band became one of the most significant phenomena of the decade. Phish focused on the live concert, a concept that had been anathema during the 1980s, and rediscovered the guitar solo, the ornate keyboard arrangements, prog-rock tempo shifts, group improvisation and the whole vocabulary of intellectual hippie music, as proven with the lengthy tracks on the cassette **Junta** (1988). The encyclopedic tour de force of **Lawn Boy** (1990) focused on mostly-instrumental melodic fantasies that quoted from an endless list of genres. Guitarist Trey Anastasio inherited Frank Zappa's clownish compositional style, which blended rock, jazz and classical music in pseudo-orchestral fashion, while his cohorts inherited Grateful Dead's dizzy jamming style, and keyboardist Page McConnell added a strong and elegant jazz accent. Their art of stylistic montage peaked with **A Picture Of Nectar** (1992). Its kaleidoscopic suites balanced the melodic center of mass and the centrifugal forces of the instrumental parts, while surfing through an impressive catalog of styles, juxtaposing kitsch sources (exotica, lounge, easy-listening, doo-wop) and chamber duets or jazz solos. The smoother and slicker sound of **Hoist** (1994) closed the epic phase and opened the commercial one in the lighter vein of the Band, the Doobie Brothers, Little Feat and the Allman Brothers. Phish, the first creative group to be completely indifferent to the punk aesthetics, had just

changed the world.

[Blues Traveler](#) (1) were a simpler, domestic, rootsy version of Phish. **Blues Traveler** (1990) offered a judicious mixture of ballads and jams, and the band would eventually match and surpass Phish's commercial success.

[Motherhead Bug](#) (10) was a bizarre orchestra (accordion, trumpet, saxophone, percussion, trombone, violin and piano), led by multi-instrumentalist David Ouimet, that performed soundtracks for imaginary films. **Zambodia** (1993) was influenced by the music-hall, the circus, cartoons, marching bands, nursery rhymes and Sullivan's operettas. It was the equivalent of the Penguin Cafe' Orchestra for the new generation. Their offshoot [Sulfur](#) (1), formed by Ouimet and vocalist and keyboardist Michele Amar, carried out a similar work of stylistic collage, but the mood of **Delirium Tremens** (1998) was tragic rather than comic, and the atmosphere evoked Beckett's absurd theater.

The [Spin Doctors](#) became stars with the jovial and catchy ditties of **Pocket Full Of Kryptonite** (1991), that recycled stereotypes of funk, soul, blues, reggae, and rock music.

One of the leading groups of instrumental neo-prog came out of Boston: [Cul De Sac](#) (12). The lengthy tracks on **Ecim** (1992) bridged German rock of the 1970s, John Fahey's transcendental folk, Terry Riley's minimalism and Pink Floyd's psychedelic ragas. Their most innovative work, **China Gate** (1996), increased the doses of jazz and world-music, thus achieving both a convoluted and a hypnotic state of mind. The narrative largely revolved around the counterpoint between Robin Amos' atonal synthesizer and Glenn Jones' post-surf guitar. On **Crashes To Light** (1999) that contrast, enhanced with sophisticated arrangements, became a slick texture that enhanced the melodic center of mass, and even lent the music a spiritual overtone, halfway between trance and fairy tale.

Florida's [Home](#) (1) stood out from the crowd, thanks to a broad stylistic range (from cinematic prog-rock instrumentals to spastic pop songs) and to a focus on mundane events of the youth of the USA (like a more serious Frank Zappa). Works such as **IX** (1995), containing the operetta *Concepcion*, **X** (1996), arranged by the Devil's Isle Orchestra (horns, strings and choir), **Netherregions** (1998), their most deranged excursion, **XIV** (2000), a set of richly-arranged madrigals of abstract, psychedelic music, and **Sixteen** (2006), a concept on sex, called the bluff on rock music, both lyrically and musically.

British progressive music 1989-92

The [Ozric Tentacles](#) (13), "the" progressive band of the 1990s (although it began releasing cassettes in the mid 1980s), took Gong's legacy (fusing jazz-rock, hard-rock and acid-rock into an energetic, shining and variegated sound) and copied Mike Oldfield's invention (collating melodic and stylistic events into elegant fantasies) to produce a synthesis that sounded both ambitious and natural. Unrelenting rhythms, gurgling synthesizers, stratospheric guitars and exotic atmospheres permeated **Pungent Effulgent** (1989), and the effect was both vibrant and hypnotic.

The "band" was an open ensemble, anchored to the pillars of guitarist Ed Wynne, keyboardist Joie Hinton, drummer Merv Pepler, flutist John Egan and percussionist Paul Hankin. The quantity of ideas and experiments, each realized with slick magisterial precision, was overwhelming on **Erpland** (1990), an instrumental tour de force recorded by a ten-unit ensemble (including two electronic keyboards, a sampler, four percussionists, flute, bass and guitar) and displaying an almost baroque elegance. The Ozric Tentacles had mastered, at the same time, the melodic ingenuity of classical music, the fluidity of jazz-rock and the drive of hard-rock. The sound was so cohesive and shimmering as to evoke Colosseum's jams. **Strangeitude** (1991) blended as many sources but also added dance beats to its galloping symphonic poems and colorful festivals of sounds. Far from being improvised, its intricate collages were clockwork mechanisms. **Jurassic Shift** (1993) continued to move towards the taste of the time via increasing nods to ambient, cosmic, new-age and ethnic music.

British saxophonist [Kevin Martin](#) launched a number of projects that explored the unlikely marriage of jazz, industrial, dub and punk-rock. The three lengthy jams of **Possession** (1992) and especially the chaotic nightmares of **The Anatomy Of Addiction** (1994), both credited to [God](#) (1), were relatively old-fashioned excursions in mood reconnaissance and neurotic stream of consciousness; but [Techno Animal](#) (11), a collaboration with Godflesh's guitarist Justin Broadrick, unleashed the destructive force of **Ghosts** (1990), a meeting of Foetus, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Anthony Braxton and one of the most powerful works of its time; a vision that was matched by the brutal and visceral sound of **Under The Skin** (1993), credited to [Ice](#) (1). Techno Animal's **Re-Entry** (1995), instead, delved into the claustrophobic darkness of ambient dub, summoning the likes of Jon Hassell, Bill Laswell and Brian Eno. **Tapping The Conversation** (1997), a collaboration between Kevin Martin and Dave Cochrane credited to [The Bug](#) (2), crafted an obsessive sense of fear through a psychophysical torture of extreme hip-hop and dub deconstruction. The massive, grinding, claustrophobic digital arrangements of the Bug's **London Zoo** (2008) would be perceived by the crowd of 2008 as an extreme form of dubstep (a genre that he had basically invented with the first Bug album).

[Roger Eno](#) attempted a music at the border between classical, jazz and prog-rock with the ensemble Channel Light Vessel (featuring Kate St John, Bill Nelson, Laraaji and Mayumi Tachibana) on **Automatic** (1994) and **Excellent Spirits** (1996).

Solo 1990-94

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More spices were added to the progressive-rock scene by New York-based instrumental virtuosos. [Marc Ribot](#) (1), who had played with the Lounge Lizards, John Zorn, Tom Waits, and the Jazz Passengers, demonstrated his fluid style, capable of bridging cacophony and melody in a smooth and swinging manner, on **Rootless Cosmopolitan** (1990), featuring jazz masters Don Byron on clarinet and Anthony Coleman on keyboards, and one of the few albums to evoke Peter Green's **End Of The**

Game. Ribot followed that achievement with the minimalist noir jazz of **Requiem For What's His Name** (1992) and the relentless sonic (and frequently dissonant) assault of **Shrek** (1994).

[Nicky Skopelitis](#) (2), who had played with Anton Fier, Bill Laswell and Sonny Sharrock, concocted a subtle form of ethnic funk-rock, orchestrated for small multi-national ensembles, on **Next To Nothing** (1989) and **Ekstasis** (1993), the latter featuring bassist Jah Wobble and Can's drummer Jaki Liebezeit.

Blind Idiot God's guitarist [Andy Hawkins](#) (1) penned the four abstract extended improvisations of **Azonic Halo** (1994) at the border between free jazz, heavy metal and droning music.

[Buckethead](#) (1), Brian Carroll's extravagant project, specialized in a goofy fusion of heavy-metal, funk and psychedelic music, which he administered on Frank Zappa-esque concept albums devoted to cyberpunk themes, such as **Bucketheadland** (1992) and **Dreamatorium** (1994), credited to Death Cube K. His best album, **Day Of The Robot** (1996), marked a more serious exploration of ambient and dance music. Despite a hiatus as Guns N' Roses' guitarist, Buckethead continued to reshape his futuristic funk-metal fusion on albums such as **Monsters And Robots** (1999), **Cuckoo Clocks Of Hell** (2004), **Island Of Lost Minds** (2004) and **Kaleidoscalp** (2006).

A unique case, [Loren Mazzacane Connors](#) (2) devoted his career to a solo instrumental music that transcended stylistic boundaries, particularly when it crafted abstract country/blues/gospel/folk meditations on **Come Night** (1991) and **Evangeline** (1998). A spectral, purer, zen-like quality, amid a John Fahey fixation, characterized the more ambitious multi-part suites of **The Little Match Girl** (2001) and **Sails** (2006).

Just like in the previous decade, a number of Frank Zappa alumni launched solo careers based on unique (and uniquely iconoclastic) styles. [Ant-Bee](#) (11), Billy James' project, was responsible for one of the most crazed albums of the decade, **Pure Electric Honey** (1990), that wed Brian Wilson's flair for eccentric arrangements with Frank Zappa's passion for deviant dynamics, and mixed up the result with techniques borrowed from musique concrete and psychedelic freak-outs. **Lunar Muzik** (1997), that collected veterans of the Mothers Of Invention (Bunk Gardner, Don Preston and Jimmy Carl Black), Gong (including Daavid Allen himself), Alice Cooper and Hawkwind (Harvey Bainbridge), was another madhouse party.

The compositions of [Mike Keneally](#) (1), whether the sprawling ones on **Hat** (1994) or the microscopic ones on **Boil That Dust Speck** (1995), whether the poppy ditties of **Sluggo!** (1997), his best album, or the all-instrumental tracks of **Nonkertompf** (1999), sounded like sprightly fragments of rock operas.

[Gary Lucas](#) (1) was instead a veteran of Captain Beefheart's band. The swirling, cyclical structures of **Skeleton At The Feast** (1991) overflowed with otherworldly guitar inventions.

Run On's guitarist [Alan Licht](#) concentrated on anarchic and dadaist noise

with the lengthy improvisations of **Sink The Aging Process** (1994), **Rabbi Sky** (1999) and **Plays Well** (2001).

King Crimson's bassist [Tony Levin](#) fused world-music and chamber jazz on **World Diary** (1995).

Former Frank Zappa's and Missing Persons' drummer [Terry Bozzio](#) (1) lived several lives in parallel, performing solo drum improvisations, such as the ones on **Drawing the Circle** (1998), as well as composing surreal symphonic music worthy of his master, notably the two **Chamberworks** (1998) for drums and orchestra.

Thinking Plague's guitarist [Bob Drake](#) (1) recorded highly original instrumental albums of avantgarde roots-music: **What Day Is It** (1993), a post-modernist deconstruction of country clichés; **Little Black Train** (1996), a reckless venture into progressive bluegrass; **Medallion Animal Carpet** (1999), a wild ride down the dark but fascinating alleys of a very perverted musical mind, one that evoked the lunacy of the Residents and of the Holy Modal Rounders; and **The Skull Mailbox** (2001), which focused on pop melody, but Drake had enough imagination, and enough perversion, to turn each melody into a musical nonsense.

West Coast 1990-91

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Mixing demented novelty tunes and goofy instrumental workouts, San Francisco's [Primus](#) (13) seemed to emulate Frank Zappa's versatile and iconoclastic irreverence. **Frizzle Fry** (1990) was typical of their capricious art: like an amusement park, it was a combination of rollercoaster rides, comedy shows, relaxing strolls and childish games. The changes in speed, mood and fashion were as abrupt as virtuoso, thanks to the inventions of bassist Les Claypool (one of the all-time greats), to the quirkiness of former Possessed guitarist Larry Lalonde, and to the monumental support of drummer Tim Alexander. King Crimson-ian instrumental convolution was offset by funny lyrics and a self-demystifying attitude. The intellectual puzzles became popular songs on **Sailing The Seas Of Cheese** (1991) and **Pork Soda** (1993), when the fusion of heavy-metal, funk, jazz and music-hall reached an almost mechanical efficiency. The trio's sonic exploration in **Tales From The Punchbowl** (1995) was more adventurous, but also highlighted the limits of the pop format.

Faith No More-associates [Mr Bungle](#) (1) were inspired by Frank Zappa and George Clinton on their debut, **Mr Bungle** (1991).

Seattle-based multi-instrumentalist [Amy Denio](#) (2) led and collaborated with a number of bizarre jazz-rock projects in the vein of the Canterbury school, notably the [Tone Dogs](#) (1), whose **Ankety Low Day** (1990) was a quirky flight of the imagination, and [Degenerate Art Ensemble](#), that straddled the line between jazz, classical and rock. **Tongues** (1993) set forth her ambitious program of deconstruction of world folk music, that can evoke Pere Ubu's abstract sonatas for accordion and synthesizer as well as Dario Fo's onomatopoeic theater. This led to a string of albums, culminating in **The Danubians** (2000), that were dominated by Denio's

bizarre phonetic wordplay and by her spirited accordion playing. With these works she proved to be a devil of a composer, of an arranger, of a performer, and of a conductor.

The same scene spawned Portland's [Caveman Shoestore](#) (1), a guitar-less trio formed by vocalist and keyboardist Elaine DiFalco and by veteran jazz players Fred Chalenor (bass) and Henry Franzoni (drums). Their **Master Cylinder** (1992) ran the gamut from pop melody to Soft Machine-esque jazz-rock to dadaistic cacophony to Art Bears-esque lieder.

The [Thessalonians](#) (1), based in San Francisco and featuring percussionist Larry Thrasher, guitarist David James and keyboardists Kim Cascone, Don Falcone and Paul Neyrinck, performed live improvisations for electronic and acoustic instruments, documented on **Soulcraft** (1993), that were the ultimate cybernetic-psychedelic ragas. Falcone's own [Melting Euphoria](#) were disciples of Ozric Tentacles' cosmic-progressive rock.

[Zazen](#) (formed by four veterans) added Eastern overtones to the style of Yes and Genesis on **Mystery School** (1991).

Virginia 1992-94

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During the 1990s, progressive-rock staged a come-back (although it had never truly disappeared), and mainly in the USA. Throughout the decade, Virginia and the Washington area were the epicenter, with bands such as [Echolyn](#) (1), whose **Suffocating The Bloom** (1992) contained the 11-movement suite *A Suite For The Everyman*, and [Boud Deun](#), whose best album was probably **Astronomy Made Easy** (1997). They were typical of the genre, derivative of the Canterbury school and of King Crimson.

The most creative group was perhaps Bill Kellum's [Rake](#) (11). After the two lengthy improvisations of **Rake Is My Co-Pilot** (1994) that evoked a demented form of free-jazz rather than conventional prog-rock, Rake indulged in **The Art Ensemble Of Rake** (1995), four lengthy suites that ran the gamut from minimalistic repetition to distorted guitar workouts to blues bacchanals to bubbling Moogs to ghostly ambience. **Intelligence Agent** (1996) betrayed the band's stylistic debts towards Pink Floyd, Jimi Hendrix, Mahavishnu Orchestra and Can.

On the other hand, the most successful Virginia act was the racially integrated [Dave Matthews Band](#), whose collections, such as **Under The Table And Dreaming** (1994), offered a sophisticated blend of jazz-rock, world music, folk and rhythm'n'blues.

Noise-punk-jazz 1992-94

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[God Is My Co-pilot](#) (1) inherited Half Japanese's miniaturized dementia. **I Am Not This Body** (1992) packed 34 brief, childish and dissonant pieces that parodied all sorts of genres. Their chaotic approach bordered on free-jazz cacophony, and on party music for a madhouse.

In San Francisco, the [Molecules](#), formed by former Rat At Rat R guitarist Ron Anderson, had already done something similar on **Steel Toe** (1991). Ditto for [Love Child](#) in New York and their **Witchcraft** (1992).

God Is My Co-pilot's idea was pursued, among others, by [Spiny Anteaters](#) in Canada, especially on their third goofy, amateurish **Last Supper** (1998), and by [Blowhole](#) in Seattle, on **Gathering** (1995), that also featured Amy Denio.

Chicago's [Flying Luttenbachers](#) (12), the quintet of drummer Weasel Walter (the only stable member), saxophonists Chad Organ and Ken Vandermark, trombonist/bassist Jeb Bishop, guitarist Dylan Posa, explored the punk-funk-jazz-rock fusion pioneered by the Pop Group and the Contortions, as well as the epileptic noise-jazz of John Zorn, on **Constructive Deconstruction** (1994) and **Destroy All Music** (1995). A new line-up recorded the even more spastic and chaotic **Revenge** (1996), the six-movement suite **Gods Of Chaos** (1998) and the free-jazz chamber music for cello, trumpet, clarinet, violin and percussion of **The Truth Is A Fucking Lie** (1999), while Walter alone penned the delirious *Rise Of The Iridescent Behemoth*, off **Systems Emerge From Complete Disorder** (2003).

Boston's [Debris](#) were a punk-jazz outfit featuring horn players next to a power-rock trio and improvising chaotic jams in the vein of Frank Zappa and Henry Cow on **Terre Haute** (1993).

International progressive music 1992-96

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In France, [Philharmonie](#) experimented with the unusual format of a guitar trio, particularly on **Les Elephantes Carillonneurs** (1993). The creative and unorthodox aesthetics of the Canterbury school was revived by [Xaal](#), a French instrumental progressive trio whose most ambitious work was **Second Ere** (1995).

The Belgian instrumental combo [Die Anarchistische Abendunterhaltung](#) (DAAU), formed by four classically-trained musicians (violin, cello, clarinet and accordion), played a hybrid of baroque chamber music, Frank Zappa-inspired jazz and Slavic folk music on the acoustic and drum-less **Die Anarchistische Abendunterhaltung** (1995).

In Canada, [Slow Loris](#)' **The Ten Commandments And Two Territories** (1996) straddled the border between free-jazz and acid-rock.

Sweden continued to enjoy a fertile progressive scene. For example, [In The Labyrinth](#), i.e. Peter Lindahl, blended neoclassical and ethnic music on **The Garden Of Mysteries** (1994).

Norway's [Motorpsycho](#) (1) offered perhaps the most eclectic take on the cliches of psychedelic hard-rock on monumental albums such as **Demon Box** (1993) and **Timothy's Monster** (1994). They displayed musical ambitions that went beyond the power guitar riff, and often ended in quasi-symphonic magniloquence. The four colossal suites of **Little Lucid**

Moments (2008) stood as virtually a recapitulation of jam-oriented rock music from the 1960s to the 1990s.

Australian duo [Pablo's Eye](#) wed Brian Eno, David Sylvian and Miles Davis with the jazzy ethnic ambient music. **You Love Chinese Food** (1995).

In Japan, [Happy Family](#) betrayed the influence of King Crimson, Frank Zappa, Magma and Univers Zero on their second album, **Toscco** (1997).

Italian-Swiss guitarist [Luigi Archetti](#) (2) debuted with the brief demential/dissonant guitar vignettes of **Das Ohr** (1993) in the vein of Fred Frith, while the cubistic and dissonant post-psychedelic music of **Adrenalin** (1994) originated at the intersection of abstract electronic music, convoluted prog-rock, tribal folk music, loose free-jazz and demented chamber music. **Cubic Yellow** (1999), credited to the [Hulu Project](#), added sampling, electronics and drum machines to his eclectic and surreal guitar soundscapes. The electronic watercolors of **Transient Places** (2004) bordered on ambient, droning and microtonal music, an idea that peaked with the atonal "concrete" symphony of **Februar** (2005).

After 1991, when the Berlin wall fell, Eastern Europe developed a very creative brand of rock music, often indebted towards the local folk traditions and often looking to the avantgarde. [Uz Jsme Doma](#), in the Czech Republic, were perhaps the most adventurous with their progressive-rock performed with punk-rock fury, that freely mixed cabaret, folk, noise, ethnic, classical and dance music on albums such as **In the Middle of Words** (1990).

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