

The History of Rock Music 1989-1994

Raves, grunge, post-rock

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Female Rock

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

Psychedelic feminism, 1989-92

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The early 1990s marked a dramatic change in the gender balance. Not only did many female singer-songwriters emerge, but their artistic achievements generally ranked higher than those of the men. The emergence of the female auteur was partly a consequence of the riot-grrrls movement and partly a sign of a changing social and psychological landscape.

The ladies had their own styles (plural). First of all, at the turn of the decade, an eccentric figure of lo-fi psychedelic storytellers emerged out of New York's underground lofts.

Multi-instrumentalist [Azalia Snail](#) (12) devoted her career to enigmatic and arcane reconstructions of the hippie era. **Snailbait** (1990) featured a parade of folk-psychedelic vocal impersonations as well as erratic guitar playing with no rhythm section, and peaked with a 23-minute collage of singing, distorted tapes, found noises and assorted turbulence, *So Much More To Go*. **Burnt Sienna** (1992) indulged in psychedelic effects, amid distorted vocals and dissonant music, leading to the chaotic **Fumarole Rising** (1994), the culmination of her program of disintegration of the pop song.

The Swans' vocalist [Jarboe](#) (11) resumed that band's apocalyptic folk on **Thirteen Masks** (1992), a set of majestic odes, oneiric visions, psychodramas, fairy tales, religious psalms and ethnic nightmares that ran the gamut from purely acoustic to subtly electronic. While not as magical and emotional, the vocal tour de force of **Sacrificial Cake** (1995) upped the ante: each song "was" a different voice, and the album as a whole

sounded like a grotesque conventicle of personas.

Already early in her career, [Lida Husik](#) (22) couldn't decide whether she wanted to be a popster or a sound painter. **Bozo** (1991), produced by Kramer, was a collection of ethereal and dreamy lullabies for voice, guitar, organ and beats. Each song was programmed to sink slowly into the listener's subconscious, like a magic potion. **Your Bag** (1992), on the other hand, was devoted to experimental compositions based on collage techniques. Both albums were drenched in hallucinogens. As she emerged from the haze of drugs, Husik turned to the political stance of **The Return Of Red Emma** (1993), which sounded like a theater piece set to a vast catalog of possible musics. Leaving behind the hallucinated nightmares of her acid-induced early years, Husik regressed to the childish folk tunes of **Joyride** (1995) and **Fly Stereophonic** (1997), which were also her most touching works (particularly the former), while, at the same time, venturing into electronica with the astral lounge music of **Green Blue Fire** (1996), a collaboration with ambient specialist Beaumont Hannant, and with the trance-collages of **Mad Flavor** (1999), which were, first and foremost, aural experiences.

Post-feminism, 1989-95

At the same time, the ladies (particularly in New York and Los Angeles) continued the stark and intellectual self-searching saga inaugurated by Joni Mitchell.

Composer, pianist and vocalist [Robin Holcomb](#) (11), a staple of New York's jazz avantgarde (Wayne Horvitz's wife and main composer for his New York Composers' Orchestra), debuted with the mostly instrumental improvisations of **Larks They Crazy** (1989), accompanied by the supergroup of Horvitz, Doug Wieselman, Marty Ehrlich, David Hofstra and Bob Previte. A similar ensemble wove the delicate tapestry of **Robin Holcomb** (1990) for her simple, sweet melodies, sung in a register which evoked Nico's glacial and melancholy lament. With these brainy nursery rhymes she achieved a unique fusion of classical, jazz and folk music. Further removed from her jazz roots, **Rockabye** (1992) was a collection of sophisticated songs delivered by an aristocratic chanteuse.

One of the most moving voices of the decade was a humble violinist from Indiana: [Lisa Germano](#) (122). Her albums were comparable to the harrowing ending of a thriller. Rather than songs, the carefully assembled elements of **On The Way Down From The Moon Palace** (1991) were humble concertos that straddled the line between country, classical and new-age music. Her mournful melodies were reminiscent of Pachelbel's *Canon* and Albinoni's *Adagio* while the instrumental setting was a lesson in psychology. **Happiness** (1993) "universalized" her grief, but also climbed one tier down into her personal hell. Past, present and future merged in her feeble and confused stream of consciousness. **Geek The Girl** (1994) was both a self-portrait and an allegorical concept. It was both an epic diary of insecurity and a Dantesque journey into the psyche of a girl. It was her most atmospheric work, but also her most personal. In telling the story of her story, and making it the story of all (women's) stories, she performed the miracle of a kind of simplicity bordering on madness. The majestic dejection of the episodes worked like the

exhausting grief of a lengthy funeral. In the process, Germano reenacted Nico's most lugubrious nightmares as well as Leonard Cohen's saddest fables. Her songs had become pure existential shivers. **Excerpts From A Love Circus** (1996) saw the light at the end of the tunnel, although the scene was still unfocused. Leaving behind the claustrophobic excesses of the previous albums, Germano entered a less creepy landscape. Rather than soliloquies, these songs sounded like dialogues between her touching voice and her ghostly violin. But the romantic interlude ended with the maniacal intensity of **Slide** (1998), back to the inner wasteland that ever more eccentric arrangements likened to Alice's Wonderland.

Los Angeles-based vocalist and pianist [Tori Amos](#) (3) fused Kate Bush's operatic falsetto, Joni Mitchell's piano-based confessional odes and Cat Stevens' romantic piano figures on **Little Earthquakes** (1991). Its ballads were simple but profound, personal but universal, melodic but discordant, thus achieving a synthesis of emotional states, not only of musical styles. The violence of hyper-realism seemed to prevail over the fairy-tale magic of introversion on **Under The Pink** (1994), a work derailed by syncopated rhythms, dissonant lashes, gospel organs, hysterical fits, orchestral flourishes and moody vocals. Leveraging the experiments of that album, the harpsichord-obsessed **Boys For Pele** (1996) sounded like a work of uncontrolled musical genius: it indulged in timbric juxtaposition, but mostly for its own sake. Backed by a rock'n'roll band and enhanced by electronic arrangements, Amos eventually chose a simpler career, starting with the much more accessible (and trivial) **From The Choirgirl Hotel** (1998).

The powerful and disorienting vocals of South Carolina's [Danielle Howle](#) increased the appeal of her deep thoughts on her second album, **About To Burst** (1996).

Los Angeles' street singer [Sheryl Crow](#) was the best seller of the bunch thanks to the hummable shuffles of **Tuesday Night Music Club** (1994).

However, the most influential female singer-songwriter of the 1990s was not Anglosaxon: Sugarcubes' singer [Bjork](#) (2) Gudmundsdottir came from Iceland, of all places. **Debut** (1993) employed massive doses of electronic keyboards and synthetic rhythms (conducted by producer Nellee Hooper of Soul II Soul) to sculpt dance-pop tunes that combined the savage, vital spirit of rhythm'n'blues with the psychic devastation of the post-industrial age. Along the way, Bjork garnered debris of gospel, jazz, house, hip hop, Broadway show-tunes, etc. Her eccentric vocal style, which was the musical equivalent of cinematic acting, dominated **Post** (1995), an album that focused more openly on the groove and that the producers (Hooper, 808 State's Graham Massey, Howie B and Tricky) turned into a hodgepodge of fashionable sounds. Her traumas sounded more sincere on **Homogenic** (1997), which was also her most cohesive album, while her crooning on **Vespertine** (2001) merely admitted her fundamental travesty of kitsch, easy listening and orchestral pop of the past. In a sense, her definitive statement was **Medulla** (2004), which she recorded with no instruments: just her voice and studio wizardry.

British avantgarde oboe player [Kate St John](#) (1) concocted an elegant fusion of chamber music and free-jazz on **Indescribable Night** (1995).

The pop-soul divas continued to rule the best-sellers' charts, notably [Mariah Carey](#), one of the most successful artists of all times.

Confessional songwriters, 1992-94

The veterans were influential in shaping the musical landscape for women by reinventing the confessional vein of Suzanne Vega.

[Juliana Hatfield](#) (12), the Blake Babies' bassist and vocalist, continued to offer a moderate view of youth's troubles. **Hey Babe** (1992) was a masterpiece of whim and contrarian morals, penned by girlish voice, modest melodies, and graceful guitar rock. The self-pitying and self-loathing themes that recurred throughout the album painted a charming and anthemic biography of a teenager growing up. That existential implosion began to show a muscular side on **Become What You Are** (1993), whose sound ranged from folk-rock to hard-rock, and Hatfield definitely lost her (musical) virginity with **Only Everything** (1995), which submerged her artful whining with loud and furious riffs.

[Kristin Hersh](#) (2) carried out a solo parallel career to her band Throwing Muses with the acoustic collections **Hips And Makers** (1994), a tender and shy self-tribute via a stream of consciousness that reached the depths of her soul, and **Strange Angels** (1998), two albums of a music that was as cold as ice, as ascetic as a nun's rosary. **Sky Motel** (1999), on the other hand, sounded like a Throwing Muses reunion, and broke the spell.

Poi Dog Pondering's violinist [Susan Voelz](#) enveloped the mournful ballads of her second album **Summer Crashing** (1995) in a solemn haze.

Grrrrrls, 1990-94

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Several female musicians bridged the gap between the "riot-grrrls" movement and the scene of modern singer-songwriters. Propelled by the success of their decade-old anti-folk movement, these musicians took on a wilder, angrier, more sarcastic tone.

[Lois Maffeo](#), one of the leaders of Olympia's "riot grrrls" movement, best summarized her age on the acoustic **Butterfly Kiss** (1992), featuring Bratmobile's drummer Molly Neuman and the Young Marble Giants' bassist Stuart Moxham.

Buffalo's fiercely independent folksinger [Ani DiFranco](#) (3) reached maturity with her fifth album, **Out Of Range** (1994). Her songs vibrated with raw energy and emotion, bit with sarcasm and wit, and pondered with angst and depression. DiFranco's art was both personal and social: while she hunted her post-menstrual demons, she also delved into poignant commentary. Her staccato acoustic guitar was no less original, a highly emotional fusion of Delta-blues and Appalachian folk picking. Parables and rants acquired new life with the less spartan format of **Not A Pretty Girl** (1995) and especially the "noisy" **Dilate** (1996) and the jazzy **To the Teeth** (1999), that also emphasized her ductile classy vocals, while **Little**

Plastic Castle (1998), that presented a kinder, gentler folksinger who was less at war with society and more at ease with her own life, was even sprightly and goofy.

The music of mad Englishwoman [Polly Jean Harvey](#) (1) was born at the crossroad between punk rage and a nervous breakdown. Dominated by her vulgar, hysterical voice, reminiscent of Patti Smith and Sinead O'Connor, the country-blues bacchanals of **Dry** (1992) and especially **Rid Of Me** (1993) tore apart very personal and often scabrous dirges. Harvey's soul struggled between pleasure and pain, affection and libido, frustration and desire, and ultimately exposed a psyche that was metaphorically nymphomaniac. **To Bring You My Love** (1995) and **Is This Desire** (1998) evolved her style towards labyrinthine production jobs that increased the doses of electronics and downplayed the role of Harvey's voice, as she ended up sounding more like a spectator than a protagonist.

Chicago's [Liz Phair](#) (11) came to prominence with a highly intellectual post-modernist and post-feminist exercise, **Exile In Guyville** (1993), theoretically a diary of brutal confessions (and superficially a hyper-realistic orgy of lust) but in practice a vast fresco of the women of her generation, musically modeled after the Rolling Stones' masterpiece but also quoting everybody from Bob Dylan to Juliana Hatfield. Less cynical and more romantic, **Whip-Smart** (1994) and especially **Whitechocolatespaceegg** (1998) focused on her eclectic musical skills. Phair now engaged in a more oblique approach to her sexual and moral appetites, to reconciling sex and love, an approach which revealed her as an impressive innovator of the folk-rock idiom.

[DQE](#) (1), the project of Atlanta-based singer-songwriter and guitarist Grace Braun, erupted highly personal, visceral, unpleasant confessions via a frantic vocabulary of shrieks, yelps, roars, whispers and wails on **But Me I Fell Down** (1994).

The rebellious stance of these performers influenced Til' Tuesday's [Aimee Mann](#), who resurrected a changed woman on her second solo, **I'm With Stupid** (1995).

A turning point was represented by the success of a Canadian teenager and former disco diva, now transplanted in Los Angeles and acquainted with the punk ethos, [Alanis Morissette](#) (10). Her carefree vocal style and romantic exuberance, enhanced by producer Glen Ballard's edgy rock and hip-hop arrangements (which enlisted the likes of the Red Hot Chili Peppers' Dave Navarro and Flea), transformed the songs of **Jagged Little Pill** (1995) into generational and gender anthems.

The avantgarde

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There were also extreme forms of experimentation on the female voice, that took advantage of the experiments of Meredith Monk, Joan LaBarbara and Diamanda Galas (not coincidentally all women).

[Anna Homler](#) (1) invented her own language, both a vocal language and

an instrumental language, to simulate international timeless folk music. **Do Ya Sa' Di Do** (1992) and **Piewacket** (2001), by the project Puppetina, a collaboration with multi-instrumentalist Stephanie Payne, were in some way the vocal equivalent of the Penguin Cafe Orchestra.

A synthesis of sorts was offered by [Pamela "Z" \(1\) Brooks](#) in projects such as **Echolocation** (1988) and the ones composed between 1986 and 1997 and collected on **A Delay Is Better** (2005): the operatic vocal acrobatics were reminiscent of Meredith Monk while the setting within the context of live electronic music followed Diamanda Galas' example, although extended to sampling and found percussion. Rather than focusing on a dramatic persona (as Galas does), her large-scale multi-media pieces *Parts of Speech* (1995) and *Gaijin* explore universal ambience and the collective subconscious.

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