

The History of Rock Music: 1989-1994

Raves, grunge, post-rock

[History of Rock Music](#) | [1955-66](#) | [1967-69](#) | [1970-75](#) | [1976-89](#) | [The early 1990s](#) | [The late 1990s](#) | [The 2000s](#) | [Alpha index](#)

Musicians of [1955-66](#) | [1967-69](#) | [1970-76](#) | [1977-89](#) | [1990s in the US](#) | [1990s outside the US](#) | [2000s](#)

[Back to the main Music page](#)

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Between Individualism and Populism

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

Bleak folk, 1990-94

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In a sense, the 1990s "were" the decade of the singer songwriter, as more and more artists decided to go "solo" rather than look for a band. Both the technology (that allowed individuals to arrange their own compositions) and the loose networking of the post-punk generation (that favored more fluid partnerships) helped increase the number of musicians who recorded simply under their own name.

In general, singer-songwriters of the 1990s tended to be more subdued and humbler than in the 1980s and in the 1970s. Their masters were Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen, not Bob Dylan or Bruce Springsteen. One of the most influential styles of the 1990s was the moody and depressed one pioneered by Chris Isaak, Smog and American Music Club in San Francisco. It spread like a disease and almost became a stand-alone genre. Bleak dirges were strummed everywhere.

Georgia's [Vic Chesnutt](#) (2), confined to a wheelchair, shared with Smog the honor of having pioneered the style. **West Of Rome** (1992) and **Drunk** (1994) took southern gothic to a very personal and highly emotional level. Later his art became not only more pensive but also more austere via longer compositions and a penchant for sound that sometimes obscured the singing: **Silver Lake** (2003), with a full-fledged roots-rock band; **Ghetto Bells** (2005), with VanDyke Parks on accordion and Bill Frisell on guitar; **North Star Deserter** (2007), with a small orchestra of post-rock soundsculptors.

The Screaming Trees' [Mark Lanegan](#) (12) sculpted the agony of **Winding Sheet** (1990), a journey through the eternal damnation of a soul that was

both lyrical, existential and lugubrious. Even more rarified and metaphysical, **Whiskey For The Holy Ghost** (1993) ventured deeper inside in a tender and doleful register, halfway between Leonard Cohen and Nick Cave, while the atmosphere was reminiscent of David Crosby's first solo album, and occasionally claustrophobic like in Tim Buckley's psychedelic nightmares. Lanegan's dilated mind seemed to be imploding on the fragile **Scraps At Midnight** (1998).

In Los Angeles, [Mountain Goats](#) (3), John Darnielle's project, was a bizarre experiment for voice, acoustic guitar and cheap organ whose major career was devoted to concept albums such as **Zopilote Machine** (1994), **Sweden** (1995), and **Tallahassee** (2003), mostly about disintegrating relationships, which were as lyrically ambitious as musically humble.

In Oregon, Heatmiser's singer and songwriter [Elliott Smith](#) (1) employed spare, acoustic arrangements and anemically whispered lyrics on **Roman Candle** (1994) to pen tuneful vignettes of daily life that merged Nick Drake's melancholia and Simon & Garfunkel's romanticism. Smith kept delving deeper into the human psyche with **Elliott Smith** (1995), that focused on heroin addiction, and **Either Or** (1997), but then resorted to Brian Wilson-ian arrangements of violins, reeds and keyboards for **Xo** (1998).

In New York, [Jeff Buckley](#) (1) was condemned to re-live his father Tim's turbulent and brief life, but **Grace** (1994) boasted a denser sound, more reminiscent of Van Morrison's soul-jazz ballads.

Toronto's [Ron Sexsmith](#) (1) crystallized the idea in the naive/tender style of Tim Hardin and Paul Simon on **Ron Sexsmith** (1995), while wedding it to Jackson Browne's arduous meditations.

Dinosaur Jr's bassist [Mike Johnson](#) (2), who had also collaborated on Mark Lanegan's masterpieces, became the most credible candidate to the title of "Leonard Cohen of the 1990s" with the funereal ballads of **Where Am I** (1994), **Year Of Mondays** (1996), which marked the zenith of his angst, and **What Would You Do** (2002), which marked an emotional nadir.

His main competition for that title was Nebraska's [Simon Joyner](#) (4), a philosopher equipped with Leonard Cohen's deep baritone and doleful vision, but also with a much grander musical ambition. After formative works entirely played by Joyner in a spartan folk style, such as **Room Temperature** (1993), he turned to atmospheric textures with **Heaven's Gate** (1995), arranged with a small chamber ensemble, and achieved his maturity with the long oneiric elegies of **Songs for the New Year** (1997). The trilogy recorded with Mike Krassner, beginning with **Yesterday Tomorrow and In Between** (1998) and continuing with the lengthy ballads of **The Lousy Dance** (1999) and **Hotel Lives** (2001), progressively increased the complexity of his compositions, capitalizing on an impressive cast of distinguished jazz, folk and rock musicians (Ken Vandermark on clarinet, Fred Lonberg-Holm on cello, Jeb Bishop on trombone, Ernst Long on flugelhorn, Will Hendricks on vibes), that augmented a rock trio (Ryan Hembrey on bass, Glenn Kotche on percussions, Michael Krassner on guitar). It was a wedding of chamber and pop settings that transported the slow, hypnotic music to a

metaphysical dimension, while retaining a deeply-moving, humane dimension.

Suicidal dirges and stark odes to loneliness were the soundtrack of the 1990s. Notable albums in the style included: [Matt Keating's Scaryarea](#) (1994), from New York; [Dave Schramm's Folk Und Die Folgen](#) (1994), from New York; [Karl Hendricks' Misery And Women](#) (1994), from Pennsylvania.

Neo-pop, 1989-94

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However there was a powerful countercurrent. The century-old tradition of the pop songwriter, that had peaked in the period between the "Brill Building" and "Motown", was restored to its original glory by a new generation of shameless tunesmiths.

The scene was dominated by Boston's [Stephen Merritt](#) (14). His multi-faceted career began under the moniker [Magnetic Fields](#) as a humble amateur of pop music who vented his fear and nostalgia via formally impeccable melodies and arrangements. The formative **Distant Plastic Trees** (1991) and **The Wayward Bus** (1992), sung by Susan Anway, and his first masterpiece, **Holiday** (1993), which was also the first album sung by Merritt himself, coined a form of "introverted kitsch" that quoted the Sixties without sounding derivative and that employed electronic rhythm and instruments in a discreet manner. Despite being light like feathers, Merritt's ditties sounded like tributes to Brian Eno's early albums and to the classics of synth-pop. The concept album **The Charm Of The Highway Strip** (1994), his second masterpiece, perfected the idea. Leaving behind his synth-pop roots, Merritt wed the idyllic register of a Donovan, neoclassical orchestrations and the persona of a bashful lunatic. The algebraic precision of his musical artifacts was only apparently a continuation of Brian Wilson's and Van Dyke Parks' program: Merritt shunned their symphonic opulence and favored the small, intimate format of the chamber ensemble. **Get Lost** (1995) was, first and foremost, an exercise in laying out chamber instruments; but it was also his bleakest statement, and thus redeemed the indulgence with deeply felt emotions. At the same time, Merritt's mission was very much a thorough reexamination of the pop tradition, from Burt Bacharach to Phil Spector, from Tin Pan Alley to doo-wop: his ultimate sin of vanity, the colossal **69 Love Songs** (1999), was a catalog of variations on clichés of pop music. Merritt had managed a synthesis of historical proportions but he carried it out with the humble attitude of an everyman who hardly knew anything about history. In the meantime, he had also released albums as the 6ths and the Future Bible Heroes. The 6ths albums, **Wasps' Nests** (1996) and **Hyacinths and Thistles** (2000), were collection of sugary ditties performed by impressive casts of guest vocalists. The importance of arrangement and production had eventually taken over the importance of lyrics and melodies, and thus wrecked the whole idea of innocent, sincere, heartbreaking music. Most tunes on later albums such as **I** (2004), credited to the Magnetic Fields, **The Tragic Treasury** (2006), credited to the Gothic Archies, and **Distortion** (2008), credited again to the Magnetic Fields, did not serve any purpose other than Merritt's post-modernist strategies, but a few songs

revealed that he still had a soul, the soul that in the 1990s had conquered the indie-pop and pre-emocore generation.

In Britain, [David Gray](#) was a sophisticated bard in the tradition of Van Morrison who scoured a broad emotional and musical territory, from the passionate confessions of **A Century Ends** (1993) to the vibrant power-ballads of **Sell Sell Sell** (1996), from the fragile pop vignettes of **White Ladder** (2000) to the bleak introspection of **A New Day At Midnight** (2002).

Disguised as [Divine Comedy](#), Irish songwriter Neil Hannon rediscovered orchestral pop for the nostalgic operetta **Promenade** (1994) and then anchored **Casanova** (1996) to old-fashioned arias.

Several veterans of the alt-rock movement recorded albums in this "neo-pop" style.

Husker Du's [Bob Mould](#) (4) was unique in excelling both at dejected, personal statements and at catchy popular music. The cathartic self-flagellation of the mostly-acoustic **Workbook** (1989) led to the brutal and bitter introspection of the wildly electric **Black Sheets Of Rain** (1990), which evoked Neil Young's storming and martial nightmares. Both albums were trips into his fragile psyche, mythomaniac orgies that collapsed into the punk contradiction of a nirvana of eternal damnation. **Copper Blue** (1992), instead, credited to his new band Sugar, offered guitar-driven power-pop which was only slightly neurotic and alienated, and the solo **Bob Mould** (1996), on which he played every instrument, crowned his quest for a sound that was both the sound of his music and the sound of his psyche, and turned out to be his most melodic effort.

Violent Femmes' drummer [Victor DeLorenzo](#) (1) found an unlikely balance of country-rock, expressionist cabaret and noir soundtracks on **Peter Corey Sent Me** (1990).

[Frank Black](#) (1), the new alias of former Pixies' vocalist Charles "Black Francis" Thompson, now relocated to Los Angeles, indulged in his trademark "scream of consciousness" on his solo albums **Frank Black** (1993) and **Teenager Of The Year** (1994), still characterized by erratic structures and reckless melodies.

Scottish transplant [Chris Connelly](#) (1), who had played in Chicago's industrial combos Ministry and Pigface, reinvented himself as a pensive pop crooner on albums such as **Shipwreck** (1994) and **The Ultimate Seaside Companion** (1998), the latter credited to the Bells.

In Australia both the leaders of the Go-Betweens recorded solo albums, and at least [Grant McLennan](#)'s **Horsebreaker Star** (1995) lived up to their reputation.

Neo-folk: the men, 1990-94

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Los Angeles happened to be the next stop in the evolution of the genre.

[Beck](#) (2) Hansen turned eccentricity into stardom and changed the way singer-songwriters sounded and were perceived by the mainstream. With the carefree eclecticism of **Mellow Gold** (1994) Beck invented folk music for the age of hip-hop and proved that stylistic confusion can appeal to the masses. A more organic approach to the fusion of folk, blues, rap, garage-rock and pop enhanced the overall sound of **Odelay** (1996). The fact that his lyrics were free-form associations, and only vaguely hinting to social reality, was somehow consistent with his superficial approach to musical integration (an operation that other musicians had carried out at a deeper level). **Mutations** (1998), reminiscent of Radiohead's subtle orchestrations, and **Midnite Vultures** (1999), a sort of tribute to soul music, rapidly removed the sheen from one of the decade's most over-rated artists.

Beck may have learned his tricks from an obscure and insane folksinger, [Paleface](#), whose **Paleface** (1991) was a bizarre product of the anti-folk movement.

Far more original was the artistic mess concocted by former Red Hot Chili Peppers' guitarist [John Frusciante](#) (1) on **Niandra Lades And Usually Just A T-Shirt** (1994), a neurotic and hysterical version of Daniel Johnston halfway between agonizing blues and demented singalongs.

Neo-populists, 1989-93

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The populists (à la Bruce Springsteen, Tom Petty, John Mellencamp, etc) were mainly veterans of the punk generation.

A witty populist, sadly overlooked, delighted Canada: Blue Rodeo's keyboardist [Bob Wiseman](#) (1) penned the hilarious philosophizing of **In Her Dream** (1989) in an eclectic range of styles, and the desolate heartbreak of **Theme and Variations** (2006).

The greatest of this (not so wild) bunch was perhaps [Freddy Johnston](#) (3), a New York transplant who introduced himself as Neil Young gone cow-punk on the effervescent, edgy and eclectic **Trouble Tree** (1990), but then was rapidly converted to a smoother and streamlined sound. The bleak stories of betrayal, failure and guilt on **Can You Fly** (1992) and **This Perfect World** (1994), featuring guitarist Marc Ribot, cellist Jane Scarpantoni and drummer Butch Vig, relied on impeccable melodies, as if Simon & Garfunkel were playing funeral music. By the time **Never Home** (1997) came out, Johnston had transformed into a more superficial pop auteur.

The solo work of former Dream Syndicate's vocalist [Steve Wynn](#) (1) favored melancholy and introverted confessions at the intersection of Lou Reed, Bob Dylan and Neil Young. **Kerosene** (1990) was too obviously derivative, but **Melting In The Dark** (1996) let loose his passion for Sixties garage-rock, which overflowed on the propulsive, noisy and emphatic **My Midnight** (1999). Wynn's quest for a balance of youthful punk-rock and adult roots-rock, of a music capable of roaring, sweating and bleeding, culminated with **Here Come The Miracles** (2001), a survey

of his emotional territory, a varied set of solemn, mournful, upbeat, tender, romantic, rough, demonic and harsh ballads and rave-ups.

Firehose's and Minutemen's bassist [Mike Watt](#) (1) entrusted the vignettes of **Ball-Hog Or Tugboat** (1994) to an extraordinary cast of vocalists.

The Replacements' [Paul Westerberg](#) remained a bard of ordinary anguish, but only **Suicaine Gratification** (1999) went close to fully realizing his vision.

Neo-blues, 1991-94

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White blues singer-songwriters were obscured by the stars of lo-fi pop and neo-pop. Canada's [Sue Foley](#), a Bonnie Raitt-soundalike, came to prominence with **Young Girl Blues** (1992) but matured as a songwriter with **Walk In The Sun** (1996). Texas' [Chris Whitley](#) used his spectacular guitar technique to vent teenage angst on **Living With The Law** (1991) the way punk's anti-heroes did. Los Angeles' [Ben Harper](#) (1), an eclectic African-American folksinger, debuted with **Welcome To The Cruel World** (1994), a monumental exercise in stylistic excursion.

[continues...](#) | [back...](#) | [Index](#)