

The History of Rock Music: 1989-1994

Raves, grunge, post-rock

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The Second Coming of Industrial Music

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

Chicago's Industrial Music, 1989-92

Towards the end of the 1980s, Chicago became the epicenter of the new industrial genre (Ministry's, not Throbbing Gristle's), thanks to a plethora of bands. The most infernal atmosphere and beats were packed on **Disco Rigido** (1989), the debut album by [Die Warzau](#) (1).

Chicago also benefited by the work of former Killing Joke's drummer Martin Atkins, whose supergroup [Pigface](#) (1) interpreted industrial music as a producer's product, not unlike the producer of hip-hop: rhythm and noise form the foundation for a slew of guest vocalists such as Chris Connelly, Trent Reznor (Nine Inch Nails), Nivek Ogre (Skinny Puppy), Mary Byker (Gaye Bykers On Acid) and En Esch (KMFDM) to deliver shocking lyrics on albums such as **Fook** (1992).

From this fertile soil Trent Reznor's [Nine Inch Nails](#) (12) were born, and the fate of industrial music changed dramatically. Reznor created a persona that was a cross of Dostoevsky's "demons", Goethe's Werther, Nietzsche's "ueber-mensch", and De Sade's perverts. Technically, Reznor took elements from Throbbing Gristle, Pere Ubu, Foetus and Ministry and filtered them through the new computer technology. Reznor thus changed the very meaning of "rock band": the band was him, singer and arranger. Brutal music, nihilistic lyrics and claustrophobic atmospheres turned **Pretty Hate Machine** (1989) into the manifesto/diary of an entire generation. Few albums better summarize the spirit of the 1990s than **The Downward Spiral** (1994). Each song is both a battlefield for the highest possible density of truculent sound effects and a largely-autobiographical ode-psychodrama. The thundering polyrhythms, the chaotic and cacophonous orgies, the grotesque "danse macabres", the chamber blues pieces, the harsh counterpoints and the mournful melodies were carefully assembled to deliver the sense of a man without a past or a present or a

future, a man who was a pure abstraction in search of meaning, pure form in search of content. Reznor's industrial music was never a well-defined genre: it was merely a label for heavily-arranged post-guitar rock music when sound-sculpting becomes mood-sculpting. Reznor retreated towards a simpler format, albeit using the same tools (psychotic screaming, killer synths, metallic percussions and brutal distortions), on the double album **Fragile** (1999). Reznor showed that he was not interested in angst for the sake of angst, and cared more for meditation on his own angst; that he was not indulging in insanity but merely puzzled by it.

Followers of Nine Inch Nails in Chicago included [Filter](#), i.e. Richard Patrick and Brian Liesegang, who were most effective on **Short Bus** (1994) and [Stabbing Westward](#), with **Ungod** (1994).

[Electric Hellfire Club](#), on the other hand, indulged in the gothic-dance version of the genre with **Burn Baby Burn** (1993).

But even in Chicago the fad was dying out. A few years later the cyberpunks were already old-fashioned, and "industrial music" was mutating into something far less consumable. [Illusion Of Safety](#), the project of Dan Burke and Jim O'Rourke, specialized in macabre anguish on albums such as **Cancer** (1992).

Post-industrial music, 1989-92

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New York's [Cop Shoot Cop](#) (12) carried out a devastating attack against the conventions of popular music with **Consumer Revolt** (1990). Their songs were terrifying kammerspielen of the post-industrial age: noisy, percussive and unstable bacchanals. Ominous bass lines wove fear against a wall of guitar distortions and lugubrious organ drones. Melodies were torn apart by sudden bursts of noir-tinged big-band swing à la Foetus, by demented collages of sound effects, by piercing guitars and obsessed drumming. Proving that their fury was not only an uncontrollable urge, **White Noise** (1991) was an encyclopedic work, whose songs quoted the most disparate traditions without belonging to any of them. The band learned to play on **Ask Questions Later** (1993), and thus revealed their "blues" soul, despite drowning it into a catastrophic landscape of fractured rhythms, grotesque noise and desolate vocals.

Texas' [Angkor Wat](#) (11), led by guitarists Adam Grossman and Danny Lohner, coined the futuristic grindcore of **When Obscenity Becomes The Norm** (1989) that was both epic, hysterical and apocalyptic, while **Corpus Christi** (1990) was a more psychological work of morbid atmospheres.

[Steel Pole Bath Tub](#) (2) in San Francisco adopted an abrasive and psychological sound/stance that basically fused psychedelic trance, anthemic punk-rock and heavy-metal bloodshed on **Butterfly Love** (1989) and the EP **Lurch** (1990). An even darker mood envelops their most mature album, **Tulip** (1990), the definitive document of their depressed hyper-realism.

Their tape-oriented side-project [Milk Cult](#) (2) made ample use of samples,

loops, rhythm boxes, filtered vocals and electronic sounds, but, unlike SPBT, the results are humorous, not tragic. Dada and Salvador Dali would be proud of the sketches on **Burn Or Bury** (1994) and **Project M-13** (2000), that deconstruct and satirize genres while offering a different take on reality. Humor and avantgarde coexist and complement each other.

Boston's [Think Tree](#)'s **Like The Idea** (1992) mixed folk, cacophony, free jazz, dance beats, orchestral sounds and electronic techniques.

The most original group was [Girls Vs Boys](#) (11), formed in Washington by Soulside's guitarist Scott McCloud, drummer Alexis Fleisig and bassist Johnny Temple, plus Edsel's keyboardist Eli Janney (Silas Greene). Their hardcore roots were erased by Janney's bleak, noir and jazzy soundscapes on **Tropic Of Scorpio** (1992), a work that explored the morbid, expressionist backdrop of industrial music rather than its brutal undertones. Janney doubled on bass for the more cohesive **Venus Luxure No.1 Baby** (1993), which alternated between calm, atmospheric meditations and devastating bursts of power, the former radiating infernal spleen and the latter charging with atonal guitar and dissonant keyboards on top of spasmodic rhythms (hammering bass lines and catastrophic drumming). Nick Drake' mortal anemia met Big Black's harsh, abrasive psychodramas. **Cruise Yourself** (1994) and **House Of GVSB** (1996) focused on the ugliness of that sound, leveraging denser kaleidoscopes of sound effects. McCloud later pursued his sonic research with a new project, [New Wet Kojak](#) (2), whose **New Wet Kojak** (1995) and **Nasty International** (1997) were dark, textural studies that mixed electronics and jazz to create eerie atmospheres reminiscent of Robert Wyatt and Morphine.

Aggro and beyond, 1990-94

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Born as one of the sub-genres of the new wave, industrial music had explored a wide and wild spectrum of styles, from dance music to white noise.

Throughout the 1990s, the brutal style of Nine Inch Nails (NIN) was pervasive in the USA. Industrial music became a mass phenomenon with NIN's visceral punk ethos applied to mechanical rhythms and arrangements. At the same time, the influence of KMFDM's "aggro" style was less obvious but no less ubiquitous, with most bands trying different variations on the idea of fusing heavy-metal guitars and machines. Finally, Ministry's epileptic style was the equivalent of a cultural totem.

Texas' [Skrew](#) (2), formed by Angkor Wat's frontman Adam Grossman, propelled the hysterical frenzy of **Burning In Water Drowning In Flame** (1992) with keyboards, samplers and drum-machines, while the Ministry-like synthesis of torrential dance beats and sinister grunge riffs achieved a claustrophobic sense of grandeur on **Dusted** (1994), an album that sounded like a diary of madness via the many voices of the leader (rap, gospel, opera, etc).

New York's [Sister Machine Gun](#) (1), the project of keyboardist Chris

Randall, offered a more melodic version of KMFDM on **Torture Technique** (1994).

San Francisco's [Grotus](#) showed new ways of fusing industrial music and rock music by utilizing a battery of synthesizers, samples, turntables and real drums on **Slow Motion Apocalypse** (1993).

New York's [Chemlab](#), with **Burn Out At The Hydrogen Bar** (1993), Los Angeles' [Ethyl Meatplow](#), with **Happy Days Sweetheart** (1993), San Francisco's [Hate Dept](#), with **Meat Your Maker** (1994), Los Angeles' [Drown](#), with **Hold On To The Hollow** (1994), were among the pioneers of a genre that was rapidly replacing hardcore as the vehicle of choice for venting existential angst.

San Francisco's [Xorcist](#) (Peter Stone) was the most successful of the gothic dance acts, best heard on **Damned Souls** (1992).

Texas' [Mentallo & The Fixer](#) (2) fused synth-pop, EBM and dissonant electronics for the infernal visions of **Revelations 23** (1993) and **Where Angels Fear To Tread** (1994), a case of unstable retro-chic.

Britain's [Cubanate](#) (1) blended anthemic guitar riffs, devilish electronic pulses and sub-human screams like no one else on **Cyberia** (1994).

In Europe, aggro progressed thanks to works such as **Excluded** (1990) by Denmark's [Klute](#) (Claus Larsen of Leather Strip), and **Transmission Pervous** (1995) by Germany's [Steril](#).

EBM or "electro" (Cabaret Voltaire, Front Line Assembly, Skinny Puppy, Front 242) became more abrasive, brutal and visceral with **Brainstorming** (1992) by Germany's [Yelworc](#) (Domink van Reich), **Solitary Confinement** (1992) by Denmark's [Leather Strip](#) (Claus Larsen), **Stored Images** (1995) by Belgium's [Suicide Commando](#) (i.e., Johan Van Roy), **Bunkertor 7** (1995) by Germany's [Wumpscut](#) (Rudy Ratzinger).

Industrial nightmares, 1990-96

Several "industrial" musicians were turning to the original concept of Throbbing Gristle: pure noise.

[Namanax](#), the project of Philadelphia-based multi-instrumentalist Bill Yurkiewicz, produced loud noise through the layering of multiple sources of sound on **Multi-Phase Electrodynamics** (1993).

The percussive pandemonium of San Diego's [Crash Worship](#) (1) was quite unique and hardly documented on **Triplemania II** (1995). Their live raves in warehouses were based on ritualistic non-stop drumming.

Seattle's [Tchkung](#), too, staged tribal shows that offered vivid views of industrial decay, accompanied by political rants on **Tchkung** (1995).

Germany's [Genocide Organ](#), the brainchild of Wilhelm Herich, used power electronics to terrifying effect on **Leichenlinie** (1989). An affiliate project also devoted to electronic industrial horror, [Anenzephalia](#) (German electronic musician Michael Rief) progressed from the naive **Fragments**

Of Demise (1993) to the imposing eight-movement symphony of **Noehaem** (2003).

Britain added relatively few new names to the ranks. Perhaps the only significant addition to the canon came from [Towering Inferno](#) (1), who summarized twenty years of experiments with the terrifying multimedia opera **Kaddish** (1994).

[Omit](#), the project of New Zealand's isolated electronic musician Clinton Williams, refined a hybrid of Throbbing Gristle's early industrial music and Klaus Schulze's cosmic music on bleak works such as **Interior Desolation** (1999), recorded in 1996.

Digital hardcore, 1992-94

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Several bands had been toying with a fusion of techno and rock. For example, Los Angeles' [Babyland](#) played techno with the fury of punk-rock on **You Suck Crap** (1992).

A far stronger synthesis was achieved in Germany by [Atari Teenage Riot](#) (10), the project of Berlin's programmer and anarchist Alec Empire (Alexander Wilke) and two vocalists (Carl Crack and Hanin Elias). The "digital hardcore" (supersonic beats, heavy-metal riffs, agit-prop lyrics and videogame-ish sound effects) of **Delete Yourself** (1995) straddled the line between punk-rock and techno. On his own, [Alec Empire](#) (2), the angry young man of techno, toyed with all sorts of styles, notably: the all-electronic **Les Etoiles Des Filles Mortes** (1996), which displayed the influence of avantgarde composer Karlheinz Stockhausen and had gothic overtones; the glacial ambient noise of **Low On Ice** (1995); the cubistic, psychedelic downtempo music of **Hypermodern Jazz 2000.5** (1996); the "drill and bass" of **The Destroyer** (1996); and the nightmarish free-jazz electronica of **The Curse of the Golden Vampire** (1998), a collaboration with Techno Animal's mastermind Kevin Martin.

"Gabber" was a subgenre of hardcore electronic dance-music that evolved in the Netherlands by fusing elements of industrial, techno and punk, and therefore strictly related to digital hardcore. It was characterized by frenzied pace, overdriven bass drums, distorted synthesizers and brutal vocals; and indulged in the kind of violent themes usually associated with the punk-rock or black-metal scenes. The single that pioneered it was *We Have Arrived* (1990) by [Mescalinum United](#) (German producer Marc Trauner).

Japanese cacophony, 1993-94

[Space Streakings](#) (11) were the greatest disciples of the great tradition of Zeni Geva and Boredoms. **Hatsu-Koi** (1993) concocted an ebullient amalgam of jazz, noise, electronica, hip-hop and hardcore that sounded like a music-hall sketch performed on doomsday. And the end of the world came with **7-Toku** (1994), the soundtrack of absolute chaos, of Babel-like confusion, of decades frantically played back in the last few seconds of civilization. Its cacophonous fantasies were the last rational

beings in an ecosystem of grotesque mutations.

[Ground Zero](#), the brainchild of guitarist and turntablist Otomo Yoshihide, transposed Zeni Geva's noise-core to the age of sampling. **Null And Void** (1993) was typical of their improvised symphonies for noise and samples, while **Revolutionary Pekinese Opera** (1995) was virtually a post-modernist essay, a piece of music constructed out of samples of an opera and of snippets of television commercials and soundtracks.

A few bands specialized in fast-paced noise-core that mixed the speed of hardcore and the cacophony of industrial music. Representative albums of this brutal, possessed, loud and frenzied style included: **Scratch Or Stitch** (1995) by [Melt-Banana](#) (1), **God Is God** (1995) by [Ultra Bide](#) (1), and **Missile Me** (1996) by [Guitar Wolf](#).

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