

The History of Rock Music: 1995-2001

Drum'n'bass, trip-hop, glitch music

([Versione italiana](#))

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The Late 1990s: Globalization

The new world order yielded an era of global growth on a scale that had never been witnessed in the world. Asia, in particular, staged one of the most spectacular economic booms in history, with China leading the way (China had been one of the most isolated communist countries until the early 1980s). Many in the West fell to the illusion of perennial prosperity. Many in the developing world sensed the end to poverty and starvation.

Bill Clinton, elected in 1992, the youngest president of the USA since John Kennedy and the first "baby boomer" to become president, well represented the new era, that basically amounted to one long huge party. The economic expansion during his eight years was the longest in the history of the USA.

The demographics had also changed significantly: in 2000 the population of the USA was 280 million, and most of the growth took place in the South and the West. The most populated state was now California with over 30 million people, and Los Angeles (which a century earlier was a town of 100,000 souls) had become the second largest metropolis in the country.

The USA was rocked by one of the most influential inventions of all time, the Internet. Throughout the decade, more and more innovative software changed the way people lived their lives. In 1991 the World-Wide Web invented by Tim Berners-Lee in Geneva debuted on the Internet. From that moment on, an endless stream of new companies progressively demolished the "American way of life": Marc Andreessen's Netscape in 1994 to browse the World-Wide Web; Jerry Yang's Yahoo in 1994 to search the Web; Craig Newmark's Craigslist in 1995 to serve the community; Amazon.com in 1997 to sell books over the Internet; Al Lieb's and Selina Tobaccowala's Evite in 1997; Larry Page's and Sergey Brin's Google in 1998; Pierre Omidyar's Ebay in 1998; Shawn Fanning's Napster in 1999 (a system to share music files); Jimmy Wales' Wikipedia in 2001, a collaborative encyclopedia edited by the whole Internet community. A new economy appeared in the USA, the "net" economy, whose drivers were the "dot.com" companies. By 1999, the US had 250 billionaires, and thousands of new millionaires were created every year by an ebullient stock market. By 2000 e-mail had become pervasive, replacing traditional ("snail") mail and even telephones as the main medium of long-distance communication.

Novels and films speculated on the ideas of "cyberspace" (the space of data, that could be interpreted as a universe of its own) and "virtual reality" (a computer simulation of real life in cyberspace).

Even in the middle of the boom the USA society remained one of the most violent in the world, particularly for young people. In 1999 a new worrisome phenomenon took hold of the USA: 13 students and teachers died during a high-school shooting at Columbine, Colorado.

Internationally, the security of the USA was no longer threatened by major powers but by a small group of terrorists: Al Qaeda, led by an Islamic fanatic from Saudi Arabia, Osama bin Laden, from his base in Afghanistan. In 1993 they tried to blow up New York's World Trade Center, and in 1998 they bombed two USA embassies in Africa, killing scores of people.

The economic boom ended soon, and with a bang. In April 2000 the stock market for high-technology companies crashed, wiping out trillions of dollars of wealth. The mood turned to gloom when, at the end of the decade, George W Bush of the Republican Party became president on a technicality, beginning one of the most divisive presidencies of all times.

Thus the world, and in particular the USA, went through one of the most breathtaking decades in memory. The 1990s were roughly the equivalent of the roaring 1920s: a senseless party before a big crisis.

Generation X

However, the new generation, dubbed "Generation X" (people born between the mid 1960s and 1981), was living largely in the shadow of the generation of their parents, the "baby boomers", the most analyzed generation in history. The contrast was not encouraging for the kids. The Baby Boomers grew up in the 1950s, in a world of unlimited economic opportunities, while the Generation X grew up in the 1980s, in a world of economic recession, AIDS, drugs, climate change and street gangs. The Baby Boomers grew up in a world of stable families, while the Generation X grew up in a world of pervasive family breakdown. Their parents were turning to spirituality and environmentalism, having been "reborn" in the 1980s after having "changed" the world in the 1960s. When the generation Xers became adults, the world was dominated by Baby Boomers: a baby boomer (Microsoft's founder Bill Gates) had become the world's richest man, and a baby boomer had become the world's most powerful man (USA president Bill Clinton).

There was also a stark contrast between Generation X and their baby-boomer parents in the way body and mind were perceived. Their parents had fostered aerobics and the culture of gyms, but mainly as devices to enhance inner, psychological health, not just bodily health. Generation X seemed only interested in the bodily part, so much so that this was a generation in which the traditional relationship between smoking cigarettes and doing drugs was reversed: kids were more likely to do drugs (that hurts your mind) than smoke cigarettes (that hurts your body). They were more likely to engage in random sexual activities (that may terminate their emotional life) but always using "protection" (to avoid contracting AIDS, that would terminate their physical life). The "gym culture" was by now pervasive: it was important to look good (as opposed to boast one's mental skills), to be artificially athletic (as opposed to being knowledgeable), to perform courageous acts for the sake of proving one's fitness (as opposed to accomplishing something for the sake of an ideal).

When it comes to the rest of the world, an important shift took place in the mindset of this generation. The influx of immigrants from non-Christian parts of the world (India, Middle East, Far East) abolished the Christian monopoly on moral values, creating a higher degree of cultural relativism. Generation X was less prejudiced against non-European cultures.

Fast forward

Musically, the ebullient atmosphere of the age and the introduction of digital sound-making devices finally led to the birth of truly new genres: post-rock, trip-hop, drum'n'bass, glitch music, etc. If the early 1990s had been devoted to revisiting the past, the late 1990s laid the foundations for a completely different future. What these new genres had in common was a sense of alienation and disorientation. While the huge party was punctuated by the thumping rhythms and catchy melodies of house and pop music, the new genres hinted at a latent existential malaise. They expressed the growing gap between the (jubilant) collective psyche and the (subdued) individual psyche. The arts embraced a form of neo-expressionism under the pretense of post-modernism.

Popular music at the turn of the millennium was also characterized by the confluence of two revolutionary trends. The first was world music. The 1990s had been the decade of world music, when Western musicians pillaged the rhythms, melodies and timbres of other ethnic cultures. In reality, Western musicians had only scratched the surface of the vast repertoire of sounds created over the centuries by the rest of the world. The exploration and integration had just begun. The second trend was electronic/digital music. New instruments had always determined musical revolutions, because, tautologically, they allowed for new forms of music. The electronic/digital "instrument" was bound to have an even bigger impact because the new forms of music that it enabled were virtually infinite. It also released the musician from the burden of finding a "band" and a "producer" before being able to deliver her music to the audience.

The commodization of atmosphere

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Two trends were the two sides of the same coin. One was widespread among the pop crowd, that veered towards more and more sophisticated arrangements, longer songs, complex stories. The other one was typical of the avantgarde crowd, that veered towards ever more abstract soundscapes, whether of colossal post-psychedelic drones or of futuristic electronic cacophony, with a direction that was clearly towards an ever greater reliance on computers. The age of chamber pop and of digital soundscapes was basically the same age. Both deemphasized the central power of the melody and decentralized sound so that peripheric elements (whether acoustic timbres or artificial sounds) became more and more relevant. The aesthetic principle was the same of so much "atmospheric" music of the past, except that now it didn't require an orchestra and a sophisticated producer. In the new century, crafting atmospheres had become as commonplace as writing software.

The loser was the punk generation. That momentum had clearly drained away. What was left of the punk aesthetic was the sloppiness not the fury. Both singer-songwriters, one-man bands, regular bands and avantgarde combos often displayed a preference for a casual, careless attitude in delivering music (even though sometimes it had been painstakingly composed). That was punk's true legacy: another nail in the coffin of the Western musical tradition of aiming for the perfect combination of sounds.

The Age of Mediocrity

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The boom of independent music at the turn of the millennium had changed the dynamics of the music industry. At about the same time, the CD (cheap to manufacture) replaced the vinyl album (expensive to manufacture). Shortly thereafter, the Internet allowed musicians to directly distribute their music, thus bypassing the selection of the old-fashioned "record label".

Unfortunately, the combined effects of these phenomena resulted in a boom of mediocrity. Among independent/avantgarde musicians, it became

commonplace to release just about anything they recorded or just thought of recording. Needless to say, only a few minutes of the hours of recording that they released were truly indispensable.

Among mainstream musicians, it became commonplace to release an album that contained only one or two songs worthy of being released. The rest was filler, but was filler that increased the price of the release, i.e. the profits of the label and of the artist.

Both sides shamelessly took advantage of technology that allowed to print and distribute albums very easily. The cost of printing compact discs kept going down, and the Internet allowed to bypass the traditional, cumbersome marketing and distribution processes. The net result was a flood of poor-quality recordings.

The music press soon revealed itself to be part of the problem, not of the solution. Instead of helping screen and select the few outstanding recordings, countless magazines, fanzines and webzines promoted just about every recording as a masterpiece, no matter how trivial, derivative and amateurish it was. Basically, anyone could make a CD and count on at least ten critics writing a good review of it; which was enough to sell enough copies to break even. The free marketing provided by the music press increased the motivation of musicians to release as much as possible. It was one of the few infallible business plans of the age. The music press was in turn rewarded with free promo CDs: Darwinian competition forced critics to compete for access to promos (no reviews, no advertisers). Thus the musician (not the music critic) held the reins of power and could "blackmail" the music critic into writing positive reviews.

The whole scene was the ultimate in capitalism and consumerism. The idealism of the hippie age and of the punk age had been buried for good.

Mediocre artists were soon releasing their eighth or eleventh album, and with worldwide distribution. But then the very meaning of music-making had changed. More and more artists came to view music-making as simply an endless refinement for one simple idea. De facto, their music was wallpaper. Their first album introduced a mood, a tone, a style, and usually did so without having enough experience, skills or simply help from the producer. The following albums refined that very same trademark sound. The songs were mostly faceless. Each album was simply a repeat of the previous one with slightly different melodies, lyrics and arrangements. The listener could purchase any of their albums and find the same product, except that more recent "releases" of that product were likely to be more refined. The motivation to innovate became inversely proportional to the low cost of making albums.

The Disappearing Album

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On the other hand, it was unfair to compare the quality of the "albums" released during the vinyl era (when making and distributing an album was an expensive process) with the quality of the "albums" released during the CD era (when making and distributing an album had become a cheap

process). No wonder that the average quality of albums in the 1960s was so much higher than in the late 1990s: in the 1960s record labels could not afford to release an artist's album until it contained the best music that the artist could produce. The "album" of the 1990s, instead, was merely a snapshot of the artist at the time the artist made that album.

Ultimately, the "album" was rapidly becoming an obsolete concept.

The 1990s saw the apex and the downfall of the music industry. In 1979 Sony and Philips had invented the compact disc (CD), a digital storage for music, and the same year Sony had launched the "Walkman" portable stereo. In 1981 MTV debuted on cable tv. During the 1980s these innovations spread and redesigned the way music was marketed and sold. As the new paradigm took hold, the music industry seemed to enjoy its best time ever. In 1996 Mariah Carey's *One Sweet Day* topped the U.S. charts for an unprecedented 16 weeks, breaking all the Presley and Beatles records. In 1997 Elton John's *Candle in the Wind* became the best-selling song of all times, overtaking Bing Crosby's *White Christmas*. In 1999 'N Sync set the new record of sales in the first week of a new release (2.4 million copies)

In 1999 the world's music market was worth 38 billion dollars. The music world was ruled by five "majors" (Universal, Warner, Sony, EMI, BMG) that controlled 95% of all albums sold in the world, and 84% of the 755 million albums sold in the USA. The USA accounted for 37% of world sales, Japan for 16.7%, Britain for 7.6%, Germany for 7.4%, France for 5.2%, Canada for 2.3%, Australia for 1.7%, Brazil for 1.6%, Holland for 1.5%, Italy for 1.4%. Basically, the compact disc had helped the music industry to multiply its revenues.

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