

## The History of Rock Music: 1995-2001

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

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### Depression

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

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#### *Desperate songwriters, 1996-99*

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The dejected tone of so many young songwriters seemed out of context in the late 1990s, when the economy was booming, wars were receding and the world was one huge party. They seemed to reflect a lack of confidence in society, in politics and, ultimately, in life itself.

First there was the musician who could claim the title of founder of this school in the old days of the new wave. [Mike Gira](#) (2) basically continued the atmospheric work of latter-period Swans. His tortured soul engaged in a form of lugubrious and apocalyptic folk, which constituted, at the same time, a form of cathartic and purgatorial ritual. After his solo album **Drainland** (1995), which was still, de facto, a Swans album, assisted by Jarboe and Bill Rieflin, Gira split the late Swans sound in two: Body Lovers impersonated the ambient/atmospheric element, while Angels Of Light focused on the orchestral pop element. On the one hand, Gira crafted the sinister and baroque layered instrumental music of Body Lovers' **Number One Of Three** (1998) and the subliminal musique concrete of **Body Haters** (1998). On the other hand, Angels Of Light's ethereal and supernatural folk music of **How I Loved You** (2001), a concept on sex, and **Everything Is Good Here Please Come Home** (2003), which explored simultaneously the personal, historical and political planes, renewed the similarities with Nico's stately, pagan, ancestral lied. Basically, the Body Lovers were the culmination of the Swans' experiments with magniloquent production (the "male" component of their sound), while Angels Of Light was the continuation of Jarboe's "female" component of the group's sound.

Ohio's Jason Molina, better known as [Songs:Ohia](#) (1), evolved from the

cliche' of the melancholy cry of a tortured soul towards a sinister form of depression. The suicidal dirges and stately odes of **Songs:Ohia** (1997) transformed into the philosophical psalms of **The Lioness** (2000) and the metaphysical requiem of **Ghost Tropic** (2000), which in turn led to the seven lengthy meditations of **Didn't It Rain** (2002).

Los Angeles' [Duncan Sheik](#) (1) wrapped the chronic mood of desperation and heartbreak of **Duncan Sheik** (1996) into an "ambient folk-rock" style that merged lush string arrangements and the acoustic style of the troubadours.

In Seattle the stark albums of [Damien Jurado](#) (1), such as **Waters Ave S** (1997) and **Ghost Of David** (2000), were imbued with Tom Waits-grade spleen, Chris Isaak-infected apathy, Smog-tinged fatalism, and, mostly, music of moral emptiness.

[Johnny Dowd](#) in upstate New York penned the gloomy "murder ballads" of **Wrong Side of Memphis** (1998).

New York-based guitarist and electronic keyboardist [Greg Weeks](#) debuted a hushed, subdued, minor-key and melancholy bedroom style, somewhat reminiscent of Nick Drake, on **Fire In The Arms Of The Sun** (1999).

[Dakota Suite](#), the project of English singer-songwriter Chris Hooson, best represented by **Signal Hill** (2000), was an intimate, pessimistic philosopher in the vein of Nick Drake but gifted with a flair for mixing soul, folk and jazz in the vein of Van Morrison.

Irish singer-songwriter [Adrian Crowley](#) (1) penned the quiet nightmare of **A Strange Kind** (1999).

### ***Baroque songwriters, 1996-2000***

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The existential spleen knew no musical boundaries. The trend towards more and more eccentric and eclectic arrangements continued in the second half of the 1990s but was rarely matched by an optimistic mood. In fact, the "baroque" songwriters might have better reflected the zeitgeist of the "dotcom" era, an economic boom that fundamentally failed to create happiness.

A Brian Wilson fixation permeated the work of Australian expatriate [Richard Davies](#) (3), who attained a magical balance of Syd Barrett, David Bowie and Donovan on his collaboration with Eric Matthews, **Cardinal** (1995), credited to [Cardinal](#), a classic of chamber pop, and then crafted the austere **There's Never Been A Crowd Like This** (1996) and the surreal **Telegraph** (1998), whose vocal harmonies are reminiscent of Crosby Stills & Nash.

His partner in Cardinal, Boston's [Eric Matthews](#), indulged in VanDyke Parks-style orchestrations on his own **It's Heavy In Here** (1995).

Michigan's humble [Brendan Benson](#) penned baroque songs in the tradition of Todd Rundgren on **One Mississippi** (1996) and **Lapalco** (2002).

Jellyfish's [Jason Falkner](#) played all the instruments on his shimmering **Author Unknown** (1996).

The [Eels](#) (12), the project of Los Angeles-based songwriter Mark Oliver Everett, worked out a storytelling style that was both humble and sophisticated on **Beautiful Freak** (1996), locating his tone and arrangements somewhere between Beck and the Flaming Lips. **Electro-Shock Blues** (1998), a bleak concept album and a moving requiem for friends who died, upped the ante by adopting Tom Waits' skewed orchestral arrangements and topping Neil Young's manic depression. By exploiting the disorienting sonic events generated by keyboards, samplers and turntables, and by integrating jazz and neoclassical motifs, Everett coined a solemn, disturbing, jarring form of folk music. By the time of the autobiographical concept **Blinking Lights And Other Revelations** (2005), Everett had refined his ability to modulate a monotonous discourse into graceful, colorful, mesmerizing calligraphy.

Virginia's Mark Linkous, best known under the moniker [Sparklehorse](#) (2), created studio miracles such as **Vivadixiesubmarinetransmissionplot** (1995) and **It's A Wonderful Life** (2001), which coupled oddly original music with melancholy overtones, something that harked back to the Pearls Before Swine.

Soon, eccentric arrangements became as important as the words and the refrains. Ambitious arrangements reached a paradoxical peak at the end of the decade: Sunny Day Real Estate's [Jeremy Enigk](#), with **Return Of The Frog Queen** (1996); Washington's [Sea Saw](#), with **Magnetophone** (1996); New York's Dean "Illyah Kuryahkin" Wilson, with **Thirtycabminute** (1999); Chicago's [Fruit Bats](#), i.e. Eric Johnson, with the lazy, laid-back campfire ballads of **Echolocation** (2000).

Ohio's [Joseph Arthur](#) (1) wed electronica and folksinging on the eclectic **Big City Secrets** (1997), although he made his point more poignantly with the simpler and catchier songs of **Come To Where I'm From** (2000).

Boston's [Jack Drag](#) (1), John Dragonetti's project, penned **Unisex Headwave** (1997), an eclectic work that ran the gamut from blues to pop to psychedelia to hip-hop.

In Canada, [Rufus Wainwright](#) (1), the son of Loudon Wainwright III and Kate McGarrigle, went beyond Brian Wilson with **Rufus Wainwright** (1998), an erudite, melodramatic extravaganza that mixed Italian opera, Sullivan's operettas, French cabaret, Broadway show-tunes, and early Brian Eno. Wainwright progressed from vaudeville to opera with **Poses** (2001).

**Visual Audio Sensory Theatre** (1998), or [VAST](#), the project of San Francisco-based multi-instrumentalist Jon Crosby, epitomized unrelenting melodrama and symphonic arrangements.

Nebraska's [Bright Eyes](#) (1), the brainchild of Conor Oberst, signaled the maturity of this movement with the multiple refracting moods and sounds of **Fevers And Mirrors** (2000). Oberst's other band [Desaparecidos](#) concocted an incendiary fusion of garage-rock and emo-core with strong

sociopolitical overtones on **Real Music Speak Spanish** (2002).

By borrowing ideas from Debussy, Stravinsky and Hindemith rather than Van Dyke Parks or Brian Wilson, San Francisco's [Her Space Holiday](#), the brainchild of Marc Bianchi, coined a form of grand, symphonic pop on albums such as **Manic Expressive** (2001).

San Francisco's [For Stars](#) rediscovered soft rock of the 1970s on **Windows for Stars** (1999).

Jason Lytle's [Grandaddy](#) (1), from Modesto (California), served quirky pop a' la Sparklehorse on **Under The Western Freeway** (1997), which became almost futuristic on the socio/sci-fi concept album **The Sopotware Slump** (2000).

Stone Temple Pilot's vocalist [Scott Weiland](#) (1) became the eccentric bard of **12 Bar Blues** (1998), another example of stylistic fusion and futuristic folk.

**Watch It Happen** (1999) and especially **A Tall-Tale Storyline** (2001), by [Mazarin](#), the project of Philadelphia's singer-songwriter Quentin Stoltzfus (Azusa Plane's drummer), were miracles of lush, eccentric studio production that still maintained the aural quality of a lo-fi bedroom production.

After two collections of lo-fi vignettes and an electronic experiment, Michigan's [Sufjan Stevens](#) (1) reinvented himself as a sophisticated arranger with the meticulously crafted concept album **Michigan** (2003) and especially **Illinois** (2005), a 22-song cycle entirely scored and arranged by Stevens himself.

Boston's singer-songwriter [Ben Kweller](#) bridged Jonathan Richman's jovial lo-fi pop and Elton John's elegant grand pop on **Sha Sha** (2002).

Australia's [Ben Lee](#) adopted a high-tech instrumentation of computers, keyboards, samplers and drum-machines on **Breathing Tornados** (1998).

The surreal songs of Swedish singer-songwriter [Nicolai Dunger](#) (2) were influenced by the holy triad of Robert Wyatt, Tim Buckley and Van Morrison, especially on **Eventide** (1997), boasting neoclassical arrangements. After the trilogy of **Blind Blemished Blues** (2000), **A Dress Book** (2001) and **Sweat Her Kiss** (2002), Dunger perfected his fusion of soul, jazz and rock with the lavish arrangements of strings, horns, piano and percussion on **Soul Rush** (2001). Under the moniker [A Taste Of Ra](#), Dunger delivered the six-movement suite **Morning Of My Life** (2007), the ultimate realization of Van Morrison's blues-jazz-folk fusion for small chamber ensemble.

[Badly Drawn Boy](#) (i.e. Damon Gough) was introduced as the British version of Beck by a series of amateurish, lo-fi, poignant bedroom-style EPs, later compiled on **How Did I Get Here** (1999). However, his sprawling 18-song album **The Hour of The Bewilderbeast** (2000) was instead a lushly arranged work that owed more to Radiohead than to his generation's singer-songwriters.

### *Dementia, 1998-2000*

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The recordings of [Danny Cohen](#), a veteran Los Angeles-based freak (of Frank Zappa's generation) began to surface only at the turn of the century thanks to **Museum Of Dannys** (1999) and **Dannyland** (2004). His songs were basically twisted folk lullabies arranged for studio effects and delivered in a Tom Waits-ian tone.

[MC Trachiotomy](#) (2), a collaborator of the dreadful Mr Quintron, was a Louisiana "rapper" whose albums **Robot Alien or Ghost** (1999) and **W/Love from Tahiti** (2002) are madcap collages highlighted by terrible production, drunk vocals, sub-standard percussion and cryptic lyrics. The latter (73 minutes long) is the musical equivalent of a hurricane, devastating a vast stylistic territory: swamp blues, reggae balladry, lounge muzak, big-band swing, Broadway show tunes, and free-form jamming.

Chicago harbored two wacky satirists in the vein of David Peel. [Bobby Conn](#) (1) displayed the wicked, twisted, frequently obnoxious wit of street performers: **Bobby Conn** (1997) was a wild, uncensored ride in a labyrinth of genres, and the concept album **The Golden Age** (2001) sounded like a parody of his generation. [Lonesome Organist](#) (multi-instrumentalist Jeremy Jacobsen) evoked early Frank Zappa with **Collector Of Cactus Echo Bag** (1998), a post-modernist merry-go-round of quotations.

Indiana's isolated [Dave Fischhoff](#) (1) virtually invented a new form of folk music, barely audible and mostly indecipherable, with **Winston Park** (1998).

[Keuhkot](#), a one-man band from Finland (Kalevi "Kake Puhuu" Rainio), created one of the most confused, demented and visceral hodgepodes of musical and non-musical events since the time of [Wild Man Fischer](#) with his fourth album **Peruskivi Francon Betonia** (2002), which fulfilled the promise of his solo debut **Mita Otat Mukaan Muistoksi Sivistyksesta** (1996).

In Italy the sloppy, grotesque and eclectic garage-folk of [Bugo](#) (Cristian Bugatti) bridged Beck and Jon Spencer Blues Explosion on **La Prima Gratta** (1999) and especially on the double-disc tour de force **Golia & Melchiorre** (2004).

### *Rootsy songwriters, 1996-99*

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Protagonists of the country-rock renaissance included: in Seattle, [Gerald Collier](#) (1), with the agonizing **I Had To Laugh Like Hell** (1996), and [Pedro The Lion](#), the project of David Bazan, with **It's Hard To Find A Friend** (1998); in Oregon [Varnaline](#), the project of Space Needle's guitarist and multi-instrumentalist Anders Parker, with the hard-rocking **Varnaline** (1997); in Ohio, [Tim Easton](#), with **Special 20** (1998); and in Georgia, [Kevn Kinney](#), the former Drivin'N Crying' singer, with

**MacDougal Blues** (1990).

New York's [Jim White](#) transcended the genre on **Wrong-Eyed Jesus** (1997), a sophisticated exercise in the southern gothic genre.

San Francisco's [Richard Buckner](#) (1) pursued Joe Ely's "outlaw" country with a voice reminiscent of Townes Van Zandt on **Bloomed** (1995) and particularly on the concept album **Devotion And Doubt** (1997), backed by Giant Sand and Marc Ribot.

**Duet For Guitars #2** (1999) by Oregon's Matt "[M](#)" [Ward](#) (1) was too introverted to be even classified as alt-country: it was just a very personal form of moaning. The songs of **End Of Amnesia** (2001), harkening back to pre-war country, blues and gospel music, brought to the surface the nostalgic and naive elements that were working their way through Ward's psyche. Even when he converted to a full-band sound on **Post-war** (2006), the way he constructed his songs was still an abridged version of the history of USA popular music.

The alt-country movement spawned singer-songwriters such as Chicago's [Robbie Fulks](#), with **Country Love Songs** (1996); and Nashville's [Josh Rouse](#), with **Dressed Up Like Nebraska** (1998).

Chicago-based violinist [Andrew Bird](#) (2) engineered a brilliant mixture of cabaret, dancehall music, jump blues, Appalachian folk, swing bands and orchestral easy-listening on the albums credited to the [Bowl Of Fire](#), notably on their third album **The Swimming Hour** (2001). His art peaked with the dizzying stylistic whirlwind of **The Mysterious Production Of Eggs** (2005) and **Armchair Apocrypha** (2007). If Will Oldham was the troubadour of alt-country, Jeff Buckley was the intimate psychologist, Devendra Banhart was the gentle psychedelic bard, Rufus Wainwright was the sophisticated popsmith, Andrew Bird is all of them at the same time: a master of deeply-felt singing, a master of layered arrangements, a master of lyrical imagery, a master of celestial melodies, a master of the bizarre and of the subtle.

Waxwing's leader [Rocky Votolato](#) penned solo acoustic albums of simple albeit competent folk-rock and country-rock such as **Rocky Votolato** (1999) and **Makers** (2006) that magnified his ragged and powerful voice.

Chisel's vocalist [Ted Leo](#) toyed with the experimental lo-fi folk music of **Tej Leo (?) Rx/Pharmacists** (1999), in which simple themes were drenched into samples and electronics, but then turned into yet another populist bard à la Bruce Springsteen or Tom Petty on his best effort, **Hearts of Oak** (2003).

[Knotworking](#), the moniker of the Albany (New York)-based Edward Gorch, specialized in gentle, sparse, acoustic folk ballads halfway between Cat Stevens and Leonard Cohen, notably on his second album **Notes Left Out** (2002).

In Brazil, [Vinicius Cantuaria](#), influenced by the new wave, offered a personal synthesis of "Tropicalia", mellow jazz and soul music on **Sol Na Cara** (1997) and **Tucuma** (1999).

The Italian dynasty of singer-songwriters ("cantautori") was continued at the turn of the century by [Ivano Fossati](#), with **Discanto** (1990), and [Vinicio Capossela](#)'s **Canzoni a Manovella** (2000).

### *The female psyche, 1996-2000*

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The 10,000 Maniacs' chanteuse [Natalie Merchant](#) (1) conceived the fragile, tender, sensual melodies set to sophisticated folk-jazz arrangements of **Tigerlily** (1995).

With the mostly-acoustic and autobiographical **Pieces Of You** (1995), San Diego-via-Alaska's [Jewel](#) Kilcher manufactured a pseudo-hippie persona akin to Joni Mitchell and her proud soprano.

[Patty Griffin](#) inherited the mantle of Lucinda Williams on **Living With Ghosts** (1996), for voice and guitar, until **Children Running Through** (2007) fulfilled the promises of her grating country-pop-gospel fusion.

[Cat Power](#) (3), the project of New York-transplant Chan Marshall, debuted with the somber and spartan **Myra Lee** (1996) and the desolate, suffocating **What Would The Community Think** (1996). The latter formulated an art that took the shy pessimism of auteurs such as Nick Drake and Laura Nyro to a new dimension of introspection. Its sketchy vignettes and self-analyses coined a subtle and almost embarrassing format, that turned the listener into a voyeur peeping through the keyhole. Marshall was, at the same time, the cameraman and the actress: she played the role of a tormented heroine while she was filming herself playing that role. Her songs were as much acting as they were singing. Marshall's cinematic genius peaked with the song cycle of **Moon Pix** (1998), enhanced with the ambient, free-form arrangements of Dirty Three's Jim White and Mick Turner. The emotional intensity packed by her half whisper in the gloomy lieder of **You Are Free** (2003) bordered on the suicidal.

Another New Yorker, [Fiona Apple](#) (1), conveyed the anguish of her generation (she was still a teenager) on the piano-driven **Tidal** (1996), boasting a cabaret-like blend of blues, soul and jazz, and **When The Pawn Hits The Conflicts** (1999), enhanced by Jon Brion's idiosyncratic arrangements that mixed the old-fashioned and the futuristic.

San Francisco-based [Hannah Marcus](#) (2) penned some of the most otherworldly atmospheres, reminiscent of Laura Nyro's ominous elegies, Nico's glacial soliloquy, Tim Buckley's folk-jazz fusion, Lisa Germano's painfully childish introspection, Jane Siberry's abstract self-reflections, as well as of Patti Smith's delirious stream of consciousness, especially on her second and fourth albums, **Faith Burns** (1998) and **Desert Farmers** (2004).

[Lili Haydn](#), a vocalist and violinist who sang with Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and performed with the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, concocted an austere blend of classical, folk, jazz, rock and pop on **Lili** (1997).

The melancholy whisper of [Edith Frost](#) (11) breathed real life into the hypnotic lullabies of **Calling Over Time** (1997), arranged by Chicago luminaries such as Eleventh Dream Day's Rick Rizzo, Gastr Del Sol's David Grubbs and Jim O'Rourke. Its natural evolution was the chamber pop of **Telesopic** (1998): Frost bled angelic melodies in a shy and introverted voice, which were captured in a web of timbres (cello, violin, flute, accordion, trombone, organ) and perturbed by psychedelic guitar effects. She did to folk music what the first Velvet Underground album did to rock music: carve a bleakly subliminal, darkly metaphysical, cruelly hellish space beneath an apparently innocent surface.

The works of Ohio-based singer-songwriter [Jessica Bailiff](#) (2) were, de facto, collaborations with Low's guitarist Alan Sparhawk. **Even In Silence** (1998) set her dilated, ethereal vocals and her intimate bedroom confessions, against the backdrop of an unfocused, loose instrumental noise. She was the first to fuse folk, ambient, psychedelia and slo-core. The litanies and lullabies of **Jessica Bailiff** (2002), oddly devoid of structure, had a supernatural quality.

[Heather Duby](#) (10) owed half the artistic success of **Post To Wire** (1999) to the oneiric orchestrations of Pell Mell's Steve Fisk, soundscapes that metabolized all sorts of styles while the singer borrowed from Nico, Enya and Bjork her emotional charge.

Crowsdell's vocalist [Shannon Wright](#) (1), an accomplished pianist, penned the austere chamber folk elegies of **Flight Safety** (1999), the nightmarish, emphatic, almost expressionistic music of **Maps Of Tacit** (2000) and, best of all, the theatrical, neoclassical meditations of **Dyed In The Wool** (2001).

Boston's [Ill Ease](#), the project of New Radiant Storm King's drummer Elizabeth Sharp, pursued Beck's beat-based lo-fi folk-rock on **Circle Line Tours** (1999).

Seattle's [Laura Veirs](#) specialized in simple but profound collections of rural folk tales, notably on her fourth and fifth albums, **Carbon Glacie** (2004) and **Year of Meteors** (2005).

[Mirah](#) Yom Tov Zeitlyn, a singer-songwriter from Olympia, explored an intriguing hybrid of Liz Phair's sexy postures, Juliana Hatfield's introverted confessions and Lisa Germano's girlish anxiety on her second album **Advisory Committee** (2002).

Los Angeles native [Mia Doi Todd](#) found a balance between philosophical concerns and progressive dynamics on her second album **Come Out Of Your Mine** (1999) that laid the foundations for the lengthy and cryptic meditations of **Zeroone** (2001). Todd embraced electronics and jazz for **Gea** (2008), highlighted by the eleven-minute suite *River of Life/The Yes Song*.

Los Angeles' [Meredith Brooks](#) bridged the aesthetic of street singers and riot grrrls with the post-feminist anthems of **Blurring The Edges** (1997).

Los Angeles-born but New York-based troubadour [Nina Nastasia](#) whispered tunes soaked in subdued, interior aching (not unlike Nico) and

wrapped them in understated arrangements for a country/folk ensemble (with both strings and winds) on **Dogs** (1999) and **The Blackened Air** (2002).

[Neko Case](#) (1), a part-time member of the New Pornographers, emerged out of the alt-country legion crooning and serenading in a broad range of vocal styles to pen the mood pieces of **Blacklisted** (2002).

Ohio's transgendered keyboardist, accordionist and harpist [Baby Dee](#) used her androgynous voice to craft the warm and fragile piano-based lullabies and ballads of **Little Window** (2000) and **Love's Small Song** (2002) that hinted at the artsy cabaret of Kurt Weill and Tom Waits.

[Shivaree](#) (1), the brainchild of Los Angeles-based vocalist Ambrosia Parsley, hired arrangers Duke McVinnie and Danny McGough to populate the ballads of **I Oughtta Give You A Shot In The Head** (2000) with a little zoo of quirky noises, keyboard drones and irregular beats.

In Britain, [Sally Doherty's Sally Doherty](#) (1996) focused on multi-layered vocals (inspired by Cocteau Twins' dream-pop and Enya's wordless lullabies) set to a lush acoustic music reminiscent of Michael Nyman's minimalistic repetition, ancient musical forms and ethnic folk.

[Beth Orton](#) (1) bridged folk music, trip-hop and Bjork's orchestral pop on **Trailer Park** (1997) and especially **Central Reservation** (1999), spicing her pensive ballads with electronic arrangements, while **Comfort of Strangers** (2006) chartered a psychological territory halfway between Joni Mitchell's austere meditations and Cat Power's naive confessions.

Not only did British commanding singer [Holly Golightly](#) devote herself to retro midtempo garage-rock starting with **Good Things** (1995), but she did it better than any man, basically transposing the male-dominated sound of the early 1960s to a female-fronted perspective.

Transglobal Underground's vocalist [Natacha Atlas](#) (1) speculated on that band's seductive world-fusion on **Diaspora** (1995), **Halim** (1997) and especially **Gedida** (1999).

Icelandic singer-songwriter [Emiliana Torrini](#) dabbled in trip-hop with Bjork-inspired electronic arrangements on **Love In The Time Of Science** (1999).

At the turn of the millennium, France raised a new generation of songwriters, inspired by the post-rock styles of the late 1990s. Soundtrack composer [Yann Tiersen](#) coined a new kind of disjointed folk music with the surreal arrangements that envelop the shy tunes of **La Valse Des Monstres** (1995) and **Le Phare** (1998). Israeli-born singer-songwriter [Keren Ann Zeidel](#) fused folk, jazz and hip-hop on **La Biographie de Luka Philipsen** (2000).

A young singer from Colombia, [Shakira](#) Mebarak, became one of the best-sold Latin artists of all times first with **Donde Estan los Ladrones?** (1998) and then with **Laundry Service** (2001), both characterized by a sprightly fusion of Latin, Arab and rock music, as well as by her guttural singing. her stylistic melange progressed from the relatively earthly

*Whenever Wherever* (2001) to *La Tortura* (2005) to the sophisticated rhythmic collage of *Hips Don't Lie* (2006).

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