

The History of Rock Music: 1995-2001

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

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Exuberance

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

The top economist in the world, Alan Greenspan, famously described the behavior of the stock market as "irrational exuberance". In many ways that expression could be used to label the behavior of the youth of the era. They were growing up inside an (economic) bubble, but they didn't know. They partied like no generation ever had, without knowing that they were as vulnerable as the previous ones. There was a general belief that things could only get better. The difference between mainstream music and alternative music had become the difference between optimism and pessimism.

The last gasps of Brit-pop, 1996-97

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The leaders of the second generation of Brit-pop were the [Super Furry Animals](#), whose distinctive feature was the lush, elaborate arrangements. **Fuzzy Logic** (1996), a witty version of Suede's glam-pop, laid the foundations for the more ambitious Brian Wilson-ian constructs of **Rings Around The World** (2001) and especially **Phantom Power** (2003).

The ultimate product of Brit-pop was the [Spice Girls](#), as hyped and inept as any of the Mersey-beat groups of 30 years earlier, despite selling more than 20 million copies of the awful albums **Spice** (1996) and **Spiceworld** (1997).

Reacting to Brit-pop, 1996-99

[Trembling Blue Stars](#), the project of former Field Mice's frontman Bob Wratten, continued Field Mice's "bedroom-pop" on a more personal basis, notably on their third album **Broken By Whispers** (1999), a parade of elaborate and sumptuous ballads dwelling halfway between Lycia's gothic

depression and the Cure's somber existentialism.

Scotland's [Usurei Yatsura](#) were unusual in that they embraced Pavement's lo-fi approach on **We Are** (1996).

The [Delgados](#) (1) started out from the same premises on **Domestiques** (1997), but then turned to sumptuous orchestral pop, a style that peaked on **The Great Eastern** (2000).

The mellow, whining and evocative pop of the Smiths staged a comeback towards the end of the decade. It was best represented by the [Doves](#) (1) with the slow, mellow ballads of **Lost Souls** (2000) and the impeccable orchestrations of **Last Broadcast** (2002).

Radiohead inspired the "post-pop" generation of 1997-98, notably [Six By Seven](#), whose **The Things We Make** (1998) was basically a neurotic version of the "Madchester" sound of the Stone Roses; and [Coldplay](#), whose **Parachutes** (2000) was mainly a display of dynamic and emotional ranges.

The stylistic evolution of [Broadcast](#) (1) from the singles compiled on **Work And Non Work** (1997), that juxtaposed cheesy electronica, childish vocals and noir atmospheres, to the cubistic remixes of pop stereotypes on **Haha Sound** (2003) fostered the decline of Stereolab's space-age pop.

These bands laid the foundations for the success of [Add N To X](#) (12), a British trio on analog keyboards whose retro-futurism was inspired by Tangerine Dream, Suicide, Cabaret Voltaire, Kraftwerk and Devo. **On the Wires of Our Nerves** (1998) evoked a dark, claustrophobic, teutonic fantasy of mechanical monsters gone mad. It wasn't electronica the way Led Zeppelin's music was not blues. They discovered a rougher and deeper dimension of electronica, just like Led Zeppelin had discovered a rougher and deeper dimension of blues. They discovered "hard electronica" just like Led Zeppelin discovered "hard rock". **Avant Hard** (1999), instead, put aside the uncompromising sonic onslaught for a more mature symphony of tones and textures; whereas the poppy, danceable, electronic rock'n'roll of **Loud Like Nature** (2002), drowned in an orgy of digital cacophony, heralded a new form of post-industrial decadent futuristic punk cabaret.

[Bent](#)'s **Programmed To Love** (2000) in England was the best post-modernist essay that Air never wrote.

The sound of [Clinic](#) (1), notably the singles later compiled on **Three Piece** (2001) and the mini-album **Internal Wrangler** (2000), bridged the Sixties-revival of the 1990s with the new wave of the late 1970s.

[Muse](#), fronted by operatic vocalist and shoegazing guitarist Matthew Bellamy, hit the jackpot with the grandiose sound of **Origin of Symmetry** (2001).

Japanese Kitsch 1996-99

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Surprisingly, it was in Japan that bands excelled at this parodistic and futuristic approach to kitsch and muzak. Pizzicato Five had shown the way.

[Cibo Matto](#) (1), the duo of Miho Hatori and Yuka Honda, specialized in musical satire inspired by junk food and implemented via a casual assembly of jazz, hip-hop, funk and dissonances. **Viva La Woman** (1996) performed a clownish postmodernist massacre of stereotypes.

[Fantastic Plastic Machine](#) (1), the creature of producer Tomoyuki Tanaka, debuted with **Fantastic Plastic Machine** (1998), a collection of ultra-hip, glamorous cross-cultural tunes composed via a montage of clichés of western pop music.

[Buffalo Daughter](#) (1) wed both a retro and a progressive ideology. **Captain Vapour Athletes** (1996) and especially **New Rock** (1998) delivered ebullient, quirky synth-rock for electronic keyboards, turntables and samplers.

Multi-instrumentalist [Cornelius](#) (1), born Keigo Oyamada, composed "pop tunes" by overdubbing "found" samples and stereotypical music, achieving on **Fantasma** (1997) and, partially, on **Point** (2002) a kind of eclectic postmodernist nonsense. The most creative aspect of his compositions was how elements of "musique concrete" (found noises that were sampled, looped and refined) got to be integrated with the rhythmic and melodic infrastructure of the songs without sacrificing their aural appeal.

[Ooioo](#) (1), the side-project of Boredoms's drummer Yoshimi "P-We" Yokota and a few of her female friends that began as an exercise in hyper-deconstruction of kitsch, juxtaposed all sorts of musical debris in the suites of **Feather Float** (1999) and **Taiga** (2006), vaguely reminiscent of the aesthetic ambitions of progressive and psychedelic music but insanely playful.

USA Kitsch, 1995-99

While not as successful as Air, [April March](#) (Elinore Blake) in Los Angeles pursued similar routes to disorienting pop muzak with the eclectic and campy **And Los Cincos** (1998) and **Chrominance Decoder** (1999).

By bridging the Pixies' eccentric pop with new wave's eccentric dance music, Wisconsin's [Garbage](#) (1), a trio of veteran producers (including Butch Vig on drums) fronted by sexy and trashy vocalist Shirley Manson, obtained the success that had eluded the Pixies with their **Garbage** (1995).

North Carolina's [Squirrel Nut Zippers](#) reached further back in time, to the ballroom blues-jazz combos of the 1940s and the calypso of the 1950s, on their second album **Hot** (1996).

Joey Burns and John Convertino of Calexico highlighted the melancholy country and blues meditations of **The Shadow Of Your Smile** (1995), by the [Friends Of Dean Martinez](#) (1), a work centered on the atmospheric picking of Naked Prey's guitarist Bill Elm.

The [Aluminum Group](#) performed the unlikely wedding of Burt Bacharach's easy-listening and Tortoise's post-rock on **Plano** (1998).

The Scud Mountain Boys' vocalist Joe Pernice in Boston turned to pop orchestration with the [Pernice Brothers](#) on **Overcome By Happiness** (1998).

Texas' [Spoon](#), the vehicle for Britt Daniel, evolved from the neurotic, Pavement-influenced **Telephono** (1996) to the linear punk-pop of **Girls Can Tell** (2001) to the minimalist power-pop of **Gimme Fiction** (2005) and **Ga Ga Ga Ga Ga** (2007), almost the opposite of Phil Spector's "wall of sound".

Nebraska's the [Faint](#) refined their synth-driven nostalgic exercise in retro-futurism until they became stars of the electroclash generation with **Danse Macabre** (2001),

The prolific San Diego-based singer-songwriter and guitarist [Rob Crow](#) launched a slew of parallel projects, starting with the progressive hardcore of [Heavy Vegetable](#), documented on **The Amazing Undersea Adventures Of Aqua Kitty And Friends** (1994). He built a bizarre sound around vintage keyboards as [Optiganally Yours](#) on **Spotlight On Optiganally Yours** (1997) and **Presents Exclusively Talentmaker** (2000). An acoustic quartet named [Thingy](#) penned the avant-melancholia of **To The Innocent** (1999). Then he found a compromise of sort in [Pinback](#)'s somnolent lullabies at the border between post-rock, new wave, psychedelic-rock and folk-rock, first on **This Is Pinback** (1999) and especially the EP **Offcell** (2003). Pinback kept twisting the formula of power-pop until they achieved a slightly angular format of lo-fi song on **Summer In Abaddon** (2004) and **Autumn of the Seraphs** (2007).

Elephant 6, 1996-98

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The breakthrough in this quest for the perfect melody came from the south, from Georgia and Louisiana, where a group of bands (the "Elephant 6" collective) started the single most influential school of the decade in pop music. Robert Schneider, founder of the movement and founder of the [Apples In Stereo](#) (1), was the Phil Spector of this generation: the songs on **Tone Soul Evolution** (1997) were miracles of pop metabolism, incorporating one century of melodic tricks.

Will Hart's [Olivia Tremor Control](#) (2) struck an elegant balance between retro-Sixties sound and state-of-the-art production techniques on **Dusk at Cubist Castle** (1996) and **Black Foliage** (1999), which were, first and foremost, tours de force of eccentric and oneiric pop arrangements. Each song was a mini-collage of oddities and spaced-out harmonies, and the albums in their entirety could be viewed as one giant, frantic collage, a work of pop-art à la Andy Warhol.

[Neutral Milk Hotel](#) (1), Jeff Mangum's creature, codified that style on **In the Aeroplane Over The Sea** (1998), one of the most perfect pop albums of all times, thanks to drummer Jeremy Barnes and multi-instrumentalist

Julian Koster.

[Elf Power](#)'s **A Dream In Sound** (1999), their best album, was fundamentally bubblegum music: cheesy pop for brainless people. Nonetheless, it was the elegance and the decorum that still made it unique even within that garbage can.

The works by [Of Montreal](#), or Kevin Barnes, such as **The Gay Parade** (1999), were whimsical collections of carefully-crafted pop tunes assembled and sequenced in a way to compose a flamboyant psychedelic vaudeville. Having moved towards baroque and lively digital and electronic arrangements with **The Sunlandic Twins** (2005), his ninth album **Hissing Fauna Are You The Destroyer?** (2007) even set existential depression to the beats of dance music.

These bands dramatically raised the qualitative standard of pop songs, a fact clearly visible in popsters of the next generation: [Ladybug Transistor](#) (1), the project of New York-based vocalist Gary Olson, particularly with the sumptuous arrangements of **Beverley Atonale** (1997) and **The Albemarle Sound** (1999), featuring guitarist Jeff Baron and keyboardist Sasha Bell; Art DiFuria's [Photon Band](#) (1), from Pennsylvania, with the sophisticated and encyclopedic **All Young In The Soul** (1998); [Flake](#) in New Mexico, with **Flake Music** (1997); [Marcy Playground](#) in Minnesota, with **Marcy Playground** (1998); and [Superdrag](#) in Kentucky, with **Regretfully Yours** (1996).

Teen-pop 1995-99

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But the real million-sellers in the USA were the "teen pop" sensations of the south: Florida's [Backstreet Boys](#), whose **Backstreet Boys** (1995) sold some 13 million copies in five years, Oklahoma's [Hanson](#), Louisiana's [Britney Spears](#), whose **Baby One More Time** (1999) sold ten million copies in just one year, New York's [Christina Aguilera](#), whose **Christina Aguilera** (1999) boasted more robust vocals and an explicit sexual image, Florida's [N'Sync](#), whose second album **No Strings Attached** (2000) sold more than one million copies on the first day it was released and spawned the career of Justin Timberlake, whose solo debut **Justified** (2002) sold even more.

[Natalie Imbruglia](#) became one of Australia's all-time best-sellers with **Left of the Middle** (1997).

International Kitsch, 1997-99

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Outside Britain and Japan, there were other significant centers of "futuristic kitsch".

French duo [Air](#) (1), Nicolas Godin and Jean-Benoit Dunckel, indulged in the nostalgic sound of vintage analog keyboards on **Moon Safari** (1998), a work marked by a zany campiness that exuded Pink Floyd's psychedelic

majesty, jazz's subdued ambience, random quotations from the history of soul, funk and disco music, and more than a passing mention of Burt Bacharach's and Ennio Morricone's scores.

[Stereo Total](#), the project of Berlin-based vocalist and electronic wizard Brezel Goering, concocted a goofy, anarchic, exuberant, multi-ethnic (and multi-linguistic) fusion of new wave, punk-rock, disco music and synth-pop, bridging girl-groups, funk, Giorgio Moroder and the Ramones, which turned **Monokini** (1997) into the sonic equivalent of a Marx Brothers movie.

Beanfield (1998) proved that the heart of Munich-based Michael Reinboth, better known as [Beanfield](#), was in jazz fusion, but his subconscious was still entangled in the genres of his childhood.

[Le Hammond Inferno](#), the project of Berlin-based producers and disc-jockeys Marcus Liesenfeld and Holger Beier, mimicked Pizzicato Five on **Easy Listening Superstar** (1999).

Starting with **Intervision** (1997), Finnish-born singer and multi-instrumentalist [Jimi Tenor](#) played kitsch music (and sang in a sexy falsetto) to a techno beat with an approach that was the musical equivalent of Andy Warhol's pop art but that mocked everybody from soul to glam.

A satirical, kitschy synth-pop style was coined in Sweden by [Aqua](#) (1) on the exuberant **Aquarium** (1997).

The [Concretes](#) were the heirs of the Cardigans in the realm of the atmospheric Nordic pop ballads. **The Concretes** (2003), when they had become an eight-piece ensemble, transposed that style to the fragile and ebullient sound of the 1960s, wrapping them in lush orchestrations that, in scope, went beyond chamber pop and towards a "maximalist" form of pop music.

North-American kitsch 2000

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A spectacular revival of the pop tune took place at the turn of the century throughout the USA and Canada.

Fronted by vocalist and keyboardist Jenny Lewis and vocalist and guitarist Blake Sennet, Los Angeles-based [Rilo Kiley](#) played mellow country-pop muzak on their second album **The Execution of All Things** (2002).

San Francisco's [Aislars Set](#) evoked the age of Phil Spector and the girl groups on **The Last Match** (2000).

[Mates Of State](#), the San Francisco-based duo of drummer Jason Hammel and keyboardist Kori Gardner, penned romantic ballads for boy/girl harmonies and vintage keyboards on **My Solo Project** (2000).

Minnesota's [Lifter Puller](#), featuring vocalist Craig Finn and guitarist Tad Kubler, used the synthesizer to ornate the ambitious quasi-concept **Fiestas & Fiascos** (2000).

New York-based British-born androgynous vibrato baritone [Antony Hegarty](#) debuted with the noir, expressionistic ambience and the sophisticated arrangements of **Antony & The Johnsons** (2000), reminiscent of Roxy Music; while **I Am a Bird Now** (2005) was surprisingly a warm, intimate and humane portrait of his obsessions.

Trivial punk-pop still existed, best represented by the third album **Dressy Bessy** (2003) of Colorado's [Dressy Bessy](#), but was becoming less and less relevant.

Zumpano's vocalist Carl Newman formed the [New Pornographers](#), a supergroup of sorts with Neko Case and Destroyer's Dan Bejar. **Mass Romantic** (2000) and **Electric Version** (2003) were manuals of gleeful melodies, retro arrangements, multi-part harmonies, bouncy guitars and peppy rhythms.

Dan Bejar's [Destroyer](#), based in Vancouver, packaged quirky parades of impeccable pop tunes filled with the pathos of glam-rock on albums such as **This Night** (2002), achieving an almost delirious, baroque zenith with the lush, electronic **Your Blues** (2004) and the lean **Destroyer's Rubies** (2006).

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