

The History of Rock Music: 1995-2001

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

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Glitch Music and Digital Minimalism

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

Glitch Music, 1994-2000

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In the second half of the 1990s, a new style was born in Europe that employed digital events (such as the "glitches" of defective compact discs) to produce disconcerting ambient music and even "dance" music. Glitch music originated from Germany (Oval) and Britain (Autechre).

Markus Popp's [Oval](#) (1) had the idea of applying the avantgarde technique of musique concrete to the static, droning, ethereal fluxes of ambient music. **Systemisch** (1994) "composed" tracks by using the "glitches" of defective compact discs as an instrument (an adaptation to the digital age of the ideas of Czech artist Milan Knizak), thereby inventing a whole new musical genre ("glitch music"). The "mechanical" effect of compositions such as the 25-minute *Do While* (1996), off **94 Diskont** (1996), was akin to the aesthetics of Futurism. Oval's Popp and Mouse On Mars' Jan Werner pursued a similar strategy of accident-prone electronic music under the moniker [Microstoria](#) on works such as **Init Ding** (1995).

Another precursor was [Pita](#) (2), the project of Austrian electronic musician Peter Rehberg, who contributed to formalize the "glitch" aesthetics with **Seven Tons For Free** (1996), a concerto for pulse signals, and **Get Out** (1999), which was the cacophonous equivalent of a romantic symphony. [KTL](#) (2), his collaboration with Sunn O))), Stephen O'Malley (playing "strings, FX and amps"), coined a new art of textural nuances that sounded like the equivalent of the "cosmic music" of the 1970s updated to the digital age. **KTL** (2006) juxtaposed two antithetical methods: the 24-minute computer-based *Estranged* fused the glitch aesthetic and the doom-droning aesthetic into an eerily futuristic soundscape of shadows and echoes, while the 40-minute guitar-based suite *Forest Floor* consisted in a

stoic attempt at modulating a melody out of chaos and dissonance. **KTL 2** (2007), an even gloomier and louder cosmic/psychological journey into some obscure place of the mind, wove a massive sound sculpture out of layers and layers of wavering drones.

Finland's digital composer [Mika Vainio](#) imported the wildest forms of electronic music (Pierre Henry's musique concrete, Morton Subotnick's dadaistic electronica, Suicide, Kraftwerk, Throbbing Gristle, Einsturzende Neubauten) into the format of ambient dance music. Brian Eno's **Before And After Science** was the main influence on the surreal vignettes of **Metri** (1994) and **Olento** (1996), credited to Vainio's solo project **0** (or, better, the symbol used in computer science for the digit zero). [Pan Sonic](#) (3), mostly a duo of Vainio with Ilpo Vaisanen, specialized in samples-driven minimal techno. Their albums **Vakio** (1995), **Kulma** (1997) and especially the poetic **A** (1999) evoked futuristic wastelands roamed by faint signs of life (digital beeps, echoes, scrapes, warped beats, clicks, clangs, radio frequencies) amid a lot of silence. The "arctic" beat became their trademark. The four-disc set of **Kesto** (2004) was both a compendium of state-of-the-art techniques (the vehicle) and a Dantesque journey from organic and violent structures to chaotic stasis (the message). In a sense, this album was also a compendium of the civilization of 2004, a representation of the contemporary zeitgeist, of the state of humanity. It was not an album for people to listen to, but a message to be decoded by future generations. The albums credited to Mika Vainio in person, such as **Onko** (1998) and **Ydin** (1999), revealed the avantgarde composer of cacophonous concertos. There was beauty in the monotonous minimalism of Vainio's art, just like in haiku and epigrams. [Angel](#) (1), a collaboration between Ilpo Vaisanen of Pan Sonic, Dirk Dresselhaus of Schneider TM and cellist Hildur Gudnadottir, yielded the romantic ambient droning glitchy industrial music of the 70-minute piece **In Transmediale** (2006).

[Alva Noto](#) (born Carsten Nicolai in Germany) was one of the composers who switched to the computer. His audio installations, documented by albums such as **Prototypes** (2000), employed techniques as diverse as minimalistic repetition, abstract soundpainting, musical pointillism and industrial noise, but, ultimately, subscribed to a notion from Physics, that the vacuum is alive and that reality hides in the interstices of the spacetime grid.

[Vladislav Delay](#) (11), born Sasu Ripatti in Finland, employed slow-motion, glacial, watery, organic pulsations, often with an undercurrent of Terry Riley's minimalist repetition, to craft the digital landscapes of **Ele** (1999). **Multila** (2000) specialized in distant tremors of breezes that pick up glitches along the way. **Anima** (2001), his 61-minute masterpiece, was a prime example of digital soundscaping that draws inspiration from both musique concrete and industrial music. Melodic fragments and disjointed noises coexisted and blended into each other in a sort of "call and response" format. Delay's alter-ego [Uusitalo](#) performed four lengthy techno suites on **Vapaa Muurari Live** (2000) that sounded like techno's version of Terry Riley's minimalism, while [Luomo](#) was Ripatti's creative disco/house project, documented on **Vocalcity** (2000). Delay pursued its ambient dub/glitch aesthetic with surgical precision on **The Four Quarters** (2005) and **Whistleblower** (2007), works of meticulous

production and cryptic coldness, while Uusitalo's **Karhunainen** (2007) did to techno what Luomo had done to house.

France's [Tone Rec](#) (1) harked back to French musique concrete of the 1950s. Digitized noise, hypnotic loops, raw statics, dub-like bass lines, and post-techno beats populated **Pholcus** (1998).

[Ryoji Ikeda](#) (1) wed LaMonte Young's living drones and Pan Sonic's glitch electronica on his trilogy of +/- (1997), **0 Degrees Celsius** (1998) and **Matrix** (2000).

[Nobukazu Takemura](#) concocted jams of minimal glitch techno such as *Pendulum*, on **Funfair** (1999), credited to his alter-ego Child's View, *On A Balloon*, on **Scope** (1999), and *Souvenir In Chicago*, on **Sign** (2000), with members of Tortoise.

[Neina](#) (Japanese keyboardist Hosomi Sakana) proved to be a subtle follower of Oval with **Subconsciousness** (2000).

[Nerve Net Noise](#), the Japanese duo of Tsuyoshi "Tagomago" Nakamura and Hiroshi Kumakiri, specialized in minimalist, glitch and noise music produced with homemade analogue synthesizers on the provocative **160/240** (1998) and on the concept album about the lifestyle of teenage girls **Various Amusements** (2001).

Russian-born Swedish-based laptop player Ivan "[Coh](#)" Pavlov (2) turned to ambient glitch soundsculpting with the intimidating **Enter Tinnitus** (1999) and especially with the four **Seasons** (2003) for processed instruments and noise. The bleak three-movement suite of **Netmork** (2002) and the 24-minute EP **Patherms** (2006) refined his art of cryptic audio signs and gave it an existential meaning. His technique peaked with **Strings** (2007), which completed the mission by emphasizing the expressionistic overtones.

Norwegian electronic duo [Jazzkammer](#) (John Hegre and Lasse Marhaug) established themselves as the Scandinavian version of Merzbow with the insane digital mayhem of **Hot Action Sexy Karaoke** (2000) but then veered towards glitchy ambient music with the 32-minute piece of **Pulse** (2002) and even doom ambient music à la Sunn O))) with the 35-minute piece of **Panic** (2006).

The San Francisco school

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[Matmos](#) (2), the San Francisco-based electronic duo of Drew Daniel and Martin Schmidt, pioneered the use of "organic" samples (noises, not instruments) to compose dance music. More importantly, **Matmos** (1997) bridged three levels of the electronic avantgarde: the chaotic and atonal bleeps and squeaks of the electronic poems of the 1960s, the dilated and warped structures and rhythmic patterns of the German avant-rockers of the 1970s, and Pierre Henry's "musique concrete" of the 1950s. **A Chance To Cut Is A Chance To Cure** (2001), based on sounds taken from hospitals, was even playful and effervescent. In the meantime, the duo had

experimented with traditional instruments on **The West** (1999), a work that basically "remixed" the history of the United States and let a "human" quality transpire through the dense jelly of the digital "arrangements".

[Kid 606](#) (1), Venezuela-born San Francisco-based digital composer Miguel Trost-Depedro, topped Matmos' madness on **Down With The Scene** (2000), an edgy collage of white noise, sampled voices and frantic breaks. The schizo-chaotic **The Action Packed Mentalist Brings you the Fucking Jams** (2002) for terminal post-ecstasy nervous breakdowns abused the notion of creating dance-music out of samples, of employing cut-up art to achieve dance nirvana.

Joshua [Kit Clayton](#) (1), also from San Francisco, added dub-like echo effects and robotic rhythms à la Neu to the usual blend of stormy electronics, found sounds and digital glitches on **Nek Sanalet** (1999) and especially **Lateral Forces - Surface Fault** (2001).

San Francisco-based dj [Sutekh](#) crafted **Fell** (2002), a laptop-based excursion into free-form glitch/techno music.

[Electric Birds](#), the project of Bay Area-based computer composer Mike Martinez, sculpted the lyrical glitch-ambient laptop music of **Gradations** (2002).

Glitch-pop, 1997-2000

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The dance music of British dj Matthew [Herbert](#) (1) replaced drum-machines and synthesizers with beats and melodies manufactured out of random noises of everyday life, an idea pioneered on **Around The House** (1998), that employed the sounds of household objects, and transferred to the song format with the electronic jazz ballads of **Bodily Functions** (2001) and **Scale** (2006). Herbert refrained from simply sampling instruments. Each melody and rhythm was meticulously constructed in the studio. Herbert shared with Matmos the honor of having pioneered the use of "organic" samples (noises, not instruments) to compose dance music. The sound of everyday life became not only the source but also the meaning of his art.

[Boards Of Canada](#) (1), i.e. the duo of Scottish electronic musicians Michael Sanderson and Marcus Eoin, were among Autechre's most original followers, capable of secreting the sound of **Geogaddi** (2002), straddling the border between ambient, new age, glitch and hip-hop music.

The ambient glitch-pop presented on **Soup** (1998) by [Bola](#) (the project of English electronic musician Darrel Fitton) was similar in scope to Boards Of Canada's: wrapped in spectral breakbeats and lush electronic ambience.

[Max Tundra](#) (1), the solo project of British electronic musician Ben Jacobs, represented the singer-songwriter as it evolved into a computer technician. Each instrumental piece on **Some Best Friend You Turned Out To Be** (2000) and each vocal song on **Mastered By Guy At The Exchange** (2002) was a smooth albeit energetic and chaotic digital collage

that mined soul, funk and/or synth-pop of past ages and transposed them into contemporary cacophony, manufactured by painstakingly assembling electronic sounds and samples of live instruments (all played by Jacobs himself). Computers enabled him to dispel the notion that chaos means dissonance.

Of all the musicians who worked on "jazztronica" perhaps the most successful hailed from Germany. [Kammerflimmer Kollektief](#) (3), a German collective led by Thomas Weber, not only fused jazz, rock and electronica but also emphasized the visceral aspect of each on **Maander** (1999). Then **Hysteria** (2001), **Cicadidae** (2003) and **Absencen** (2005) coined a sound that was the equivalent of ECM's jazz-rock for the era of glitch music an elegant balance of post-rock, droning ambient, glitch techno, sampling and improvised music.

Digital minimalism, 1995-2000

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[Bernhard Guenter](#) (13) represented the link with the classical avantgarde. The guru of digital, dissonant minimalism, he sculpted sub-atomic soundtracks that picked up the sounds from the crevices between one quantum event and the next one. His **Un Peu De Neige Salie** (1993) and **Details Agrandis** (1994) were works of musique concrete that manipulated noises of ordinary life to the point that they became unrecognizable, and then turned them into cold, dark, monolithic structures of silence, terrible depths from which there emerge unidentified and barely-audible bursts of "implied sound". **Time Dreaming Itself** (2000) and **Then Silence** (2001) opened a new phase of sonic exploration, "active" rather than "passive", and frequently reminiscent of Morton Feldman. **Redshift - Abschied** (2002) bridged this hyper-minimal music and chamber music.

German musician [Thomas Brinkmann](#) (1) transposed the minimal aesthetic of glitch music into the subliminal ideology of dub music on **Klick** (2001), the natural link between sound sculpting and dance-floor beats. **Klick Revolution** (2006) continued the program of **Klick** with another set of subliminal, anemic, dilapidated techno music assembled out of defective vinyl records.

By expanding the principle of the remix, German composer [Ekkehard Ehlers](#) conceived music composition as a samples-driven art reminiscent of Burroughs' cut-up technique. [Autopoieses' La Vie A Noir](#) (1999), a duo with Sebastian Meissner, employed jazzy film-noir soundtracks and his **Betrieb** (2000) used classical music to build expressionistic sonic architectures.

German laptop musician Sebastian Meissner used a similar principle to craft the abstract glitch music of [Random Industries' Selected Random Works](#) (2000) and the ambient music of [Random Inc's Jerusalem Tales Outside the Framework of Orthodoxy](#) (2001), based on vintage recordings made by Jewish and Palestinian musicians. That program terminated with the "pop ambient" of his works as [Klimek](#), such as **Milk & Honey** (2004), basically beat-less minimal techno "extracted" from

acoustic sources.

Inspired by the desire to communicate with the otherworld via the microsounds hidden in silence, Swedish composer [Carl Michael von Hausswolff](#) achieved a noble fusion of glitch, ambient and cosmic music on **Stroem** (2001).

The microscopic exploration of the space between sounds and silence conducted by Washington-based disc-jockey [Richard Chartier](#) (1), particularly on his fourth solo album **Series** (2000), highlighted the relationship between digital minimalism, "silence music" à la Bernhard Guenter and "deep listening" à la Oliveros. "Micro-textured" albums such as **Of Surfaces** (2002), **Tracing** (2006) and **Incidence** (2006) simultaneously austere and angelic, were fundamentally studies in what one does not hear when listening to music.

New York-based composer [Taylor Deupree](#) redefined digital minimalism as a form of sporadic musique concrete, like a panorama that is periodically disturbed by brief catastrophic events, on **Occur** (2001).

Australian guitarist [Oren Ambarchi](#) explored minimal events, silence and static sound on **Suspension** (2001) by manipulating the sounds of his guitar via a number of electronic and digital devices. Overdubbing live instruments and manipulating them with a mixing board, Ambarchi achieved the fragile melancholia of **Grapes From The Estate** (2004) and **Pendulum's Embrace** (2007).

Australian electronic composer [Pimmon](#) (Paul Gough) specialized in sound manipulation and sample collaging that yielded the wastelands of ghostly, minimal glitch-pop documented on **Waves And Particles** (1999) and **Kinetica** (2000).

Australian digital musician [Philip Samartzis](#) set the very background noise that sound engineers try to remove from a recording (tape hiss, vinyl crackles, electrical buzzes, radio interference and so on) against a vast stark backdrop of unnerving silence on compositions such as the 39-minute piece of **Windmills Bordered By Nothingness** (1999), the 18-minute *Microphonics*, off the compilation **Grain** (2003), and the six untitled movements of **Soft And Loud** (2004).

Japanese techno veteran [So Takahashi](#) crafted the ambient glitch electronica with spare beats and found sounds of **Nubus** (2000).

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