

The History of Rock Music: 1995-2001

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

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Confusion

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

Post-depression roots-rock 1995-1999

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Dance clubs of the late 1990s reflected the general euphoria of the new generation of white-collar engineers, all of them aspiring millionaires. The rock bands rooted in the white and black traditions of the land, instead, reflected the down-to-earth attitude of the working class. Precisely because it was an age of rapid change, that was making old lifestyles obsolete and creating totally new ones, in which people were learning to shop on-line and talk on cellular phones and telecommute, it was also an age of personal confusion, of identity crisis, of insecurity.

Uncle Tupelo bred two offshoots. Jay Farrar's [Son Volt](#) were mostly a vehicle for their leader's philosophizing: **Trace** (1995) was a concept album that analyzed the collective subconscious of the people of the Mississippi river. Jeff Tweedy's [Wilco](#) (3) expanded Uncle Tupelo's vocabulary towards the Byrds' folk-rock, Neil Young's mournful ballads, the Rolling Stones' drunk rhythm'n'blues, the Band's domestic gospel-rock, Bob Dylan's **Blonde On Blonde** and Big Star's baroque pop on their second album, **Being There** (1996). Jay Bennett's keyboards helped pen arrangements that left their roots way behind. **Summer Teeth** (1999), the natural evolution of that idea, was thus a studio product that relied heavily on electronic sounds, and **Yankee Hotel Foxtrot** (2002), their most experimental album, was a majestic nonsense of eccentric arrangements, skewed melodies and lyrical meditations that bridged the Beach Boys' **Pet Sounds** and Radiohead's **OK Computer** while also delivering a very poignant meaning.

In New York, Shannon Wright's [Crowdsell](#) contaminated Pavement's style with roots-rock on **Dreamette** (1995), while Eef Barzelay's [Clem Snide](#)

embodied the minimalist aesthetic of alt-country, notably on their second album **Your Favorite Music** (2000).

North Carolina's [Whiskeytown](#) (1), a punkier Uncle Tupelo (or a countryfied Replacements) who relied on the combined talents of vocalist Ryan Adams, violinist Caitlin Cary and guitarist Mike Daly, penned perhaps the best of the batch, **Strangers Almanac** (1997).

Seattle's [Citizens' Utilities](#) (1), on the other hand, crafted a baroque form of country-rock, relying on three-part vocal harmonies as much as on tension-filled dynamics and eccentric instrumental touches, with **Lost And Foundered** (1996), **No More Medicine** (1997), their most poignant work, and **Sunbreak** (1999).

Boston's [Scud Mountain Boys](#), fronted by Joe Pernice, were almost score on **Massachusetts** (1996).

Boston's [Willard Grant Conspiracy](#) (1) played elegant, evocative and melancholy country music on the introspective monolith **3am Sunday @ Fortune Otto's** (1996) that evolved into the solemn and depressed ballads of **Mojave** (1999), which often sounded like Chris Isaak interpreting Neil Young's *Harvest* or Bob Dylan's *Knocking On Heaven's Door*.

Boston's [Wheat](#) (1) penned the graceful, melancholy folk-rock of **Medeiros** (1997) and **Hope And Adams** (1999).

Punk-rock and bluegrass were fused by [Bad Livers](#) in Ohio, for example on the intimidating **Hogs On The Highway** (1997); and by [Split Lip Rayfield](#) in Kansas, for example on the grotesque **In The Mud** (1999). Ohio's [Moviola](#) struck a balance between country-pop and heavily-distorted acid-rock on **The Year You Were Born** (1996).

Boston's [Dropkick Murphys](#) were the Pogues of the 1990s, detonating traditional Irish songs and even appropriating the sound of bagpipes on **Do Or Die** (1997).

Ohio's [Appalachian Death Ride](#) (1), an open ensemble of eight to ten musicians, sounded like the USA version of the Mekons on the punkish **Appalachian Death Ride** (1996) and especially the visceral, anthemic **Hobo's Codebook** (2003).

Washington's [Quix*o*tic](#), a trio with Slant 6's guitarist Christina Billotte, vocalist Mira Billotte and bassist Mike Barr, achieved an odd hybrid of Nico's ghostly singing and Sleater-Kinney's rabid roots-rock on their second album **Mortal Mirror** (2002).

[Doo Rag](#), a duo from Arizona, played blues-punk with demented ferocity and sardonic humor on **What We Do** (1996). Their vocalist-guitarist [Bob Log](#) continued his unorthodox career with collections of "devoluted" (à la Devo), spastic, sloppy, out-of-tune country blues, saloon boogie and garage rock set to a frantic drum-machine beat, notably on **Trike** (1999).

Populism 1994-99

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A vibrant sector of roots-rock favored the route opened by Tom Petty: folk-rock and power-pop with populist overtones. Bands that played in this style included: Ohio's [Throneberry](#), with **Sangria** (1994); Texas' [Fastball](#), with their second album **All The Pain Money Can Buy** (1998); San Diego's [Supernova](#), with **Ages 3 And Up** (1995); Los Angeles' [Possum Dixon](#), with **Star Maps** (1996). New York's late bloomers [Nada Surf](#) started out in 1996 with a trite brand of populism but the gently melodic gems exuding anger and frustration of **Let Go** (2003) coined a new standard for the genre.

Colorado's [Sixteen Horsepower](#) (1) attacked the sonic icons of America's rural traditions (whether Louisiana's zydeco or Kentucky's bluegrass) from the vintage point of California's "acid" folk-rock on **Sackcloth & Ashes** (1996); and the painstakingly orchestrated elegies of **Low Estate** (1997) shifted the focus towards David Eugene Edwards' noble empathy.

[Third Eye Blind](#) looked for a middle path between hard-rock and folk-rock on **Third Eye Blind** (1997).

Seattle's [Modest Mouse](#) (2) was the vehicle for Isaac Brock's honest, heart-felt vignettes on **This Is A Long Drive For Someone With Nothing To Think About** (1996), a sprawling chronicle of everyday life in the 1990s. His portraits of drifters, losers and disillusioned fools became much sharper and more musically assured on **The Lonesome Crowded West** (1998), and his most experimental work was **Sharpen Your Teeth** (2002), released by his side-project [Ugly Casanova](#) (1), featuring Black Heart Procession's Pall Jenkins and Califone's Tim Rutili.

Georgia's [Drive-by Truckers](#) (1) seemed to belong to another era with their good-humored blend of roots-rock, ranging from cow-punk to southern boogie. The double-disc **Southern Rock Opera** (2001) was an explicit tribute to the three-guitar sound of Lynyrd Skynyrd. **The Dirty South** (2004) was another concept devoted to myths of the south.

Philadelphia's [Marah](#) composed a saga of life in their hometown via the com/passionate vignettes of **Let's Cut The Crap And Hook Up Later On Tonight** (1998), a diverse and exuberant rock'n'roll album.

[My Morning Jacket](#) from Louisville (Kentucky) specialized in simple country-rock melodies highlighted by luscious arrangements and haunting vocals on **The Tennessee Fire** (1999). Alt-country, southern-rock and power-pop met on **At Dawn** (2000), a monolith that packed enough refrains and riffs for an entire bar-band dynasty. Their method turned into a luscious sonic exploration of ordinary states of mind on **Z** (2005).

Rocky Votolato's [Waxwing](#) played roots-rock with punkish overtones on **For Madmen Only** (1999) in a style reminiscent of the Replacements, although **One For The Ride** (2000) steered towards U2's arena rock.

Los Angeles' [Earlimart](#), the brainchild of singer-songwriter Aaron Espinoza, ranked among the best disciples of the Pixies on **Kingdom of Champions** (2000) before turning to the baroque folk-rock of **Everyone Down Here** (2003), with string arrangements by Fred Lonberg-Holm.

If "post-rock" was the key to understanding the 1990s, "pre-rock" (of the kind pioneered by Royal Trux) was the key to understanding the early 2000s. Michigan's [White Stripes](#) (1), the guitar and drums duo of Jack White and Meg White came up with the idea on their second album **De Stijl** (2000) of offering a wealth of sonic extracts of blues music without actually playing blues music. **White Blood Cells** (2001) refined that idea into a catchy synthesis of roots-rock and hard-rock, performed with the kind of "detached enthusiasm" that pervaded the revisionists of the time.

Chamber folk 1996-2000

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In the mid 1990s, following the example of Lambchop, a new evolution of roots-rock led to a form of "chamber folk", a folk/country style that employed an expanded instrumentation and loitered at the border between noise-rock and post-rock.

Nebraska's [Lullaby For The Working Class](#) (11), led by vocalist/guitarist Ted Stevens and multi-instrumentalist Mike Mogis, used an arsenal of acoustic instruments to pen fragile, post-modernist folk songs that expanded on Palace Brothers' melancholy alt-country concept. The sounds of the instruments were scattered like ambient sounds on **Blanket Warm** (1996), turning each song into an impressionistic painting. The sound of **I Never Even Asked For Light** (1997) was sleepy and abstract, often hypnotic, as it lulled elusive melodies in a sea of warm tones; and **Song** (1999) further reduced the pace, plunging in a serene slumber. The effect fell halfway between Van Morrison's **Astral Weeks** and Hindemith's kammermusik.

Los Angeles' [Geraldine Fibbers](#) (2), fronted by former Ethyl Meatplow's vocalist Carla Bozulich, bridged the gap with urban culture in the desolate, hyper-realistic stories of **Lost Somewhere Between The Earth And My Home** (1995). The subversive power-pop of **Butch** (1997), featuring jazz guitarist Nels Cline, embedded rootsy melodies into alien structures.

Chicago's [Pinetop Seven](#) (1), Darren Richard's project, specialized in majestic and post-apocalyptic ballads arranged in a sophisticated style encompassing a wide range of settings, especially on their third album **Bringing Home The Last Great Strike** (2000).

Ohio's [Mysteries Of Life](#), featuring Antenna's rhythm section of Jacob Smith and Freda Boner, offered another imitation of Van Morrison's neoclassical folk-soul with **Keep A Secret** (1996).

Multi Kontra Culti Vs Irony (2002), the second album by New York-based multinational quintet [Gogol Bordello](#) (Ukrainian vocalist Eugene Hutz, Russian fiddler Sergey Rjabtzev, a Russian accordionist, an Israeli guitarist and an Israeli saxophonist) was a moral and musical tribute to a nation of immigrants at the sound of a blazing Slavic and gypsy punk-pop.

Colorado's [DevotchKa](#), equipped with violin, accordion, sousaphone and trumpet, concocted a rare hybrid of alt-country, gypsy music and Ennio Morricone-like ambience on **Supermelodrama** (2000), adding mariachi

horns on **How It Ends** (2004) to create a sort of Latin-gypsy-rock.

[Dengue Fever](#), fronted by Cambodian vocalist Chhom Nimol and featuring saxophone and keyboards, perfected a nostalgic fusion of world-music and psychedelic-rock of the Sixties on their second album **Escape From Dragon House** (2005).

British folk-rock

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Folk-rock in England was revitalized by [Fire & Ice](#)'s baroque **Runa** (1996), a set of languid and emphatic ballads imbued with the spirit of northern fairy-tales and embellished with keyboards and horns.

[Scott 4](#) experimented with hip-hop tinged folk-rock on **Recorded In State LP** (1998).

An original variant of roots-rock was experimented by [Gomez](#) on **Bring It On** (1998), an album that relied on studio-production technique more than on traditional songwriting.

Scotland boasted much more original purveyors of folk-rock. [Belle And Sebastian](#) (2), one of the leading bands of the second half of the decade, rediscovered Donovan's gently whispering vocals, and his naive blend of melodic and poetic elements. **Tigermilk** (1996) focused on the intense pathos of low-key tunes, an apparent oxymoron that Stuart Murdoch's recitation and neoclassical arrangements with piano, flute, harpsichord and cello (Isobel Campbell) turned into a new form of art. His fragile, modest style acquired a shimmering look and feel on **If You're Feeling Sinister** (1997). Many more instruments contributed to the magic of **The Boy With The Arab Strap** (1998) and **Fold Your Hands Child** (2000), but the lush arrangements rarely interfered with Murdoch's heart-wrenching lullabies.

[Appendix Out](#), the project of singer-songwriter Ali Roberts, focused on elegant and cadaveric music for dramatic meditations on the spartan **The Rye Bears A Poison** (1997) and on the more seductive **Daylight Saving** (1999), a marvel of discreet chamber arrangements.

[Arab Strap](#), the project of vocalist Aidan Moffat and multi-instrumentalist Malcolm Middleton, indulged in the moody and disorienting atmospheres of **Philophobia** (1998).

In the 2000s Gary Lightbody's brainchild [Snow Patrol](#), from Scotland via Northern Ireland, would take the fragile folk-rock of Belle And Sebastian, turn it into the bombastic experience of **Final Straw** (2004) and propel it to the top of the charts.

Psych-folk 1996-99

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At the turn of the century several groups and singers launched a revival of the psychedelic folk music of the hippies.

[Amps For Christ](#), a prolific albeit erratic Los Angeles-based group led by instrument builder Henry Barnes, practiced "cosmic-folk" music characterized by the distorted electronic sounds produced by Barnes' home-made instruments. Albums such as the double-LP **The Plains Of Alluvial** (1995), the 34-song **Beggars Garden** (1997) and the 39-song double-disc **Electrosphere** (1999) were cauldrons of very short-term ideas that rarely managed to coalesce.

The New York-based [Tower Recordings](#) collective (including Tim Barnes and Pat Gubler) harked back to English pagan folk on albums such as **Furniture Music For Evening Shuttles** (1998). [P.G. Six](#) was the more or less solo project of Pat Gubler, who pursued a kind of progressive folk music akin to both Incredible String Band's psychedelic folk and John Fahey's raga-folk, although enhanced with both electronic and natural sounds, on **Parlor Tricks and Porch Favorites** (2001).

[Fursaxa](#) (1), the project of prolific Philadelphia-based singer-songwriter Tara Burke, indulged in psychedelic folk music on albums such as **Mandrake** (2000), her archetypical set of hymns for keyboards, dulcimer, guitar and voice, **Madrigals in Duos** (2004) and especially **Amulet** (2005), containing four extended pieces. By the time that **Lepidoptera** (2005) and **Kobold Moon** (2008) came out, her style had reached an otherworldly quality.

Los Angeles' [Beachwood Sparks](#) (1) adopted the chirping guitars of the Byrds and the rustic melodies of the Grateful Dead, i.e. the sound of the late hippie era, and grafted them onto the emerging style of chamber folk. **Beachwood Sparks** (2000) and especially **Once We Were Trees** (2001) were slightly disorienting journeys through the ages.

Solo acoustic guitar, 1996-1998

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Sun City Girls' boss [Sir Richard Bishop](#) (1) launched his solo career with **Salvador Kali** (1998), a set of seriously virtuoso instrumentals that spanned ethnic, jazz and classical music. The solo guitar improvisation workouts on **Improvika** (2005) and especially **While My Guitar Violently Bleeds** (2007) took inspiration from John Fahey and Sandy Bull for their blends of raga, flamenco, jazz and folk guitar styles.

German guitarist [Steffen Basho-Junghans](#) (2) was the main European heir to the school of the "primitive guitar" (John Fahey, Robbie Basho). His early albums for solo acoustic guitar, the naive and pastoral **In Search of the Eagle's Voice** (1995) and the two volumes of raga-influenced **Fleur de Lis** (1996), indulged in hypnotic sound painting of a less metaphysical nature than Fahey's and of a less spiritual nature than Basho's, but **Song of the Earth** (2000) was a gentle and intense philosophical meditation. The more experimental **Inside** (2001) and especially **Waters in Azure** (2002) were studies in texture and ambience. He achieved a gentle synthesis of sorts with the two tours de force of **Rivers and Bridges** (2003) and with *Late Summer Morning*, off **Late Summer Morning** (2006).

Colorado's [Janet Feder](#) applied a whirlwind of Western and Eastern

techniques to her second album **Speak Puppet** (2001).

They were the vanguard of another case of revival affecting a style that had been very underground in its heyday.

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