

The History of Rock Music: The 2000s

[History of Rock Music](#) | [1955-66](#) | [1967-69](#) | [1970-75](#) | [1976-89](#) | [The early 1990s](#) | [The late 1990s](#) | [The 2000s](#) | [Alpha index](#)

Musicians of [1955-66](#) | [1967-69](#) | [1970-76](#) | [1977-89](#) | [1990s in the US](#) | [1990s outside the US](#) | [2000s](#)

[Back to the main Music page](#)

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DJs and Rappers

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

Hip-hop and the digital producer

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Hip-hop dominated the charts during the first decade of the 21st century. That represented a dramatic change from 50 years earlier, when black music had been segregated to the "race" charts. The reason why rap artists appealed to such a broad audience was probably that they boasted, on average, the best producers. Music (whether popular or classical) in the second half of the 20th century had been increasingly focusing on the soundscape, on sculpting the atmosphere, rather than on the melody. Hip-hop music completed that trend by mostly disposing of the melody and setting the lyrics in a purely atmospheric context. The producer (the sound director and sculptor) was clearly more important in hip-hop music than in other genres. Competition among producers in turn led to a generation of more and more sophisticated producers. Very few rock producers could compete with hip-hop producers in terms of instrumental creativity.

It was the black producers of the 2000s who inherited the mantle of the white producers of the 1960s (Joe Meek, Phil Spector, George Martin, Brian Wilson) who had coined the concept of the studio as an instrument.

Another appeal of hip-hop music rested on the fact that the lyrics of rappers tended to be less pompous and indulgent than the lyrics of rockers. It made sense to listen to the raps in a way that did not make sense in rock music. Rockers were largely speaking to an older audience that was still interested in personal existential journeys (the same way that country singers had been speaking to an older audience when rockers were speaking to a younger audience). The younger generation (especially in the middle class) was often more attracted to the down-to-earth lyrics of black rappers.

Hip-hop music

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As white hip-hop became more competitive, black hip-hop reached a creative crisis that forced the new generations to focus on sound manipulation rather than on messages. At the turn of the century, hip-hop music was borrowing from other musical genres as well as recycling its own vocabulary of breaks, samples, and themes. New technology allowed producers to wrap everything into an original art of atmosphere/ambience sculpting. The "message" was becoming less and less important. The sociopolitical landscape was also radically changed by the 2001 terrorist attacks against New York and Washington: the debate shifted from class conflict to religious conflict, which contributed to neutralize the original sociopolitical fuel of hip-hop music.

The deluge of hip-hop albums at the turn of the century continued with works such as: Ben "[Ty](#)" Chijioke's **Awkward** (2001), an original Afro-funk-jazz-rap fusion from Britain; **Quality** (2002) by New York's [Talib Kweli](#) (Greene); **Exit** (2003) by Canada's [K-OS](#) (Kheaven Brereton); **The End of the Beginning** (2003), by veteran Los Angeles rapper [Murs](#) (Nick Carter), a former member of 3 Melancholy Gypsies (or 3MG) and, after relocating to Oakland, of the Mystik Journeymen's "Living Legends" collective, produced by 9th Wonder; [Dudley Perkins'](#) **A Lil Light** (2003), another oneiric production by Madlib; **Black Mamba Serums** (2004), by former Company Flow rapper Justin "[Bigg Jus](#)" Ingleton.

[Little Brother](#), the North Carolina-based duo of rapper Phonte Coleman and producer Patrick "9th Wonder" Douthit, joined the ranks of soul-tinged rap music with **The Listening** (2003). Phonte then hooked up with Dutch producer Matthijs "Nicolay" Rook and the duo, under the moniker [Foreign Exchange](#), released **Connected** (2004), an even more baroque attempt at transposing the fluidity and smoothness of classic soul into hip-hop music.

Virginia-based production team The Neptunes (Chad Hugo and Pharrell Williams), already among the most successful hip-hop producers, formed [N.E.R.D.](#) (1) with rapper Sheldon "Shay" Haley. **In Search Of** (2001), remixed the following year with live instrumentation, and especially **Fly or Die** (2004) indulged in a neurotic melange of sonic stereotypes and production techniques of metal, funk, soul and pop. They also produced the albums by [Clipse](#) (1), the duo of Virginia brothers Gene "Malice" and Terrence "Pusha T" Thornton, two of the sonic jewels of the decade: **Lord Willin'** (2002) and **Hell Hath No Fury** (2006).

Northern Californian duo [Blackalicious](#) (1), i.e. rapper Tim "Gift of Gab" Parker and producer Xavier "Chief Xcel" Mosley, crafted a lyrical and nostalgic style with **Nia** (2000).

The decadence of West-Coast rap was well represented by the groups that were supposed to rejuvenate it, and that, in fact, failed to: [Dilated Peoples](#), whose **The Platform** (2000) featured beats created by Los Angeles' producer Alan-Daniel "Alchemist" Maman, and [Jurassic 5](#), whose enthusiastic and amusing **Quality Control** (2000) and especially **Power in**

Numbers (2002) amounted de facto to a revival of old-fashioned rap (despite Cut Chemist's presence). Even [Madvillain](#) (1)'s **Madvillainy** (Stones Throw, 2004), the much publicized collaboration between New York-based rapper Daniel "MF Doom" Dumile (the former "Zen Love" of KMD) and Los Angeles-based producer Otis "[Madlib](#)" Jackson, was mostly an impressive tour de force of production techniques; the same skills that Jackson had already displayed on several of his own recordings, notably Quasimoto's **The Unseen** (2000) and Yesterdays New Quintet's **Angles Without Edges** (2001), frequently blurring the border between psychedelic, jazz and hip-hop music. MF Doom, on the other hand, lent his rapping skills also to Dangerdoom's **The Mouse And The Mask** (2005), a collaboration with Danger Mouse.

New York's producer Brian "[Danger Mouse](#)" Burton, better known for mixing together vocals and beats from Jay Z's **Black Album** and snippets from the Beatles' **White Album** to create his **Grey Album** (2004), formed [Gnarls Barkley](#) with Goodie Mob's vocalist Cee-Lo Green. The soul, pop and hip-hop hybrid of their **St Elsewhere** (2006) signaled a shift towards a reappropriation of the past.

On the lighter side, Los Angeles' rapper Regan "[Busdriver](#)" Farquhar, mixed goofy energetic scat-tinged rapping and eclectic beats on **Temporary Forever** (2002).

Chicago's [Kanye West](#) (2) produced Jay-Z, Talib Kweli and Alicia Keys and then fashioned one of the most personal concepts of the era, the soul-infected **The College Dropout** (2004). Hyper-chromatic three-dimensional arrangements turned **Late Registration** (2005) into a stately hip-hop fresco and a distillation of the genre's existential legacy.

The combination of Gershwin "[BlackBird](#)" Hutchinson, a versatile West Coast rapper and singer, and the quasi-psychedelic imagination of producer Paris Zax yielded **Bird's Eye View** (2005).

Philadelphia-based producer and MC [Jneiro Jarel](#) (born Omar Gilyard) added a new dimension to the fusion of jazz and hip-hop music with the digital collage of **Three Piece Puzzle** (2005).

Georgia's rapper Clifford "[T.I.](#)" Harris was the most successful purveyor of southern rap, thanks to **Trap Muzik** (2003) and the platinum-selling **King** (2006).

Boston's white rapper [Edan Portnoy](#) fused acid-rock and hip-hop on **Beauty And The Beat** (2005), the same way Sly Stone fused acid-rock and funk music four decades earlier.

Minnesota's white quartet [Kill The Vultures](#) wed punk, jazz and hip-hop on **Kill The Vultures** (2005).

The new star of soul music was [Raheem DeVaughn](#), who debuted with **The Love Experience** (2005) and broke through with the more traditional **Love Behind the Melody** (2008). The rhythm'n'blues diva of the decade was [Beyonce](#) Knowles, now a solo artist after dropping the best-selling female group of all time, Destiny's Child.

[Why?](#) debuted with **Oaklandazulasyllum** (2003) in the vein of San Francisco's numerous freak acts that bent genres and derided stereotypes. With the romantic **Elephant Eyelash** (2005) and the tragic **Alopecia** (2008), though, two albums that mirrored each other three years apart, Why? perfected an unlikely fusion of rap, minimalism and rock while using it as the scaffolding for frontman Yoni Wolf's brutally vivid and earnest lyrics.

[Prolyphic & Reanimator](#), i.e. the duo of Chicago's producer Reanimator and Rhode Island's rapper Prolyphic, refined their mentor Sage Francis' introspective and multi-layered style on **The Ugly Truth** (2008).

Instrumental hip-hop, 2001-2008

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Detroit's white producer [Dabrye](#) (Tadd Mullinix) created a new instrumental format out of hip-hop, funk, jazz and electronica on **One/Three** (2001).

In Los Angeles, Busdriver's white producer Alfred "[Daedelus](#)" Roberts (1) painted the disjointed murals of **Invention** (2002), setting collages of samples to hip-hop beats, mixing sci-fi electronica and orchestral kitsch; an art that he refined and culminated with the elegant retro parade of **Exquisite Corpse** (2005), where the samples of orchestral music of the 1930s came to constitute the musical equivalent of a collective stream of consciousness.

Inspired by New York's "illbient" scene, a number of djs aimed for a hip-hop that could transcend hip-hop, that is for a new (ambient, psychological, free-form) form of art founded on the marriage of poetry and sound. Ohio-born dj [Boom Bip](#) (Bryan Hollon), a self-described "anti-dj", well impersonated the sound sculptor and collage assembler of the new wave of hip-hop with the mind-boggling exercise in hip-hop counterpoint of **Seed to Sun** (2002).

[RJD2](#), the project of white Ohio-based producer Ramble Jon Krohn, turned **Deadringer** (2002) into a tour de force of cinematic collages of samples and wicked stuttering beats, dilating and deforming Sixties soundtracks, smooth jazz, soul themes and gloomy atmospheres.

Los Angeles' producer [Paris Zax](#) tried to fuse hip-hop and acid-rock on the all-instrumental **Unpath'd Waters** (2005).

Lucas "[Cut Chemist](#)" MacFadden rediscovered the joyful childish art of audio collage on **The Audience's Listening** (2006).

[James Yancey](#) upped the ante of instrumental sample-based (and schizophrenically fragmented) hip-hop with **Donuts** (2006), credited to both his nicknames J Dilla and Jay Dee.

Los Angeles-based producer Steven Allison, better known as [Flying Lotus](#), was emblematic of a generation that was employing laptop computers to generate sounds that were impossible before, both in terms

of (noisy) arrangement and in terms of (convulsive) rhythms. **1983** (2006) also displayed a broad range of influences.

British styles of the 2000s

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London's Dylan Mills, better known as [Dizzee Rascal](#) (1), a member of the "Roll Deep Crew", promoted a new genre ("grime"), an abrasive version of "garage" (itself a variant of drum'n'bass), with **Boy in Da Corner** (2003).

The other British "next big thing" of the era was Sri Lankan-born agit-prop chanteuse Maya Arulpragasam, or [M.I.A.](#) for short, whose **Arular** (2005) simply mixed hip-hop, reggae and pop, while fostering a hard-line ideology that embraced both the political and the sexual, part Jello Biafra and part Madonna. **Kala** (2007) was less immediate but more visceral, a giant cauldron of artificial, natural, social and musical sounds.

[Streets](#), the project of Mike Skinner, a white British rapper, jumped on the bandwagon of the latest dance fads ("garage" and "two step") and turned them into tools to construct generational anthems. **Original Pirate Material** (2002) turned Streets into the English equivalent of Eminem.

Dubstep originated in London (probably in a club called "Forward>>" in 2001) as a bass-heavy instrumental dance music derived from garage, a sort of middle ground between two-step and dub. Unlike grime, that was fundamentally orientated towards the vocals, dubstep was more about the atmosphere. Digital Mystikz, Loefah and Kode9 were among the pioneers of the scene, but it was Skream with *Midnight Request Line* (2005) that established it as a major force in dance music.

The first artist to emerge from the British dubstep scene and reach a broader audience was Will "[Burial](#)" Bevan (1). **Burial** (2006) actually seemed rather an evolution of the gloomy trip-hop ambience of the 1990s shaken by post-jungle breaks; but it included metallic post-industrial polyrhythms, miasmatic electronics and "concrete" collages of noise, voices and beats. Reintroducing the vocals, its follow-up **Untrue** (2007) wed dubstep with soul music.

Other milestones of the grime/dubstep scene included: Richard "[Wiley](#)" Cowie's **Treddin' On Thin Ice** (2004), [Virus Syndicate](#)'s **The Work Related Illness** (2005), Kane "[Kano](#)" Robinson's **Home Sweet Home** (2005), Maxwell "[Lethal Bizzle](#)" Ansah's **Against All Oddz** (2005), Steve [Milanese](#)'s **Extend** (2006), Barry "[Boxcutter](#)" Lynn's **Oneiric** (2006), Louise-Amanda "[Lady Sovereign](#)" Harman's **Vertically Challenged** (2006), Steve "[Kode9](#)" Goodman's **Memories Of The Future** (2006), Greg "[Distance](#)" Sanders's **My Demons** (2007), Jan "[Disrupt](#)" Gleichmar's **Foundation Bit** (2007), Rob "[Pinch](#)" Ellis' **Underwater Dancehall** (2007), Beni "[Benga](#)" Uthman's **Diary Of An Afro Warrior** (2008).

There were few musicians left who were worthy of the great drum'n'bass innovators of the past. [Shitmat](#) (1), the brainchild of British producer Henry Collins, specialized in spastic drill'n'bass and digital hardcore

peppered with Jamaican-style ragga shouting on **Killababylonkutz** (2004), that contained multiple remixes of the same song in completely different directions, and on **Full English Breakfast** (2004), originally released as five EPs; and then converted to madcap breakcore collages with **Hang The DJ** (2006), a wild and witty merry-go-round of samples from such diverse sources as heavy metal and orchestral pop.

[Neil "Landstrumm" Sutherland's **Restaurant Of Assassins**](#) (2007) offered an original fusion of drill'n'bass, dubstep and glitchy noise.

Clarence Park (2001) by English electronic musician [Chris Clark](#) provided a diligent summary of English electronica of the previous decade (Squarepusher, Aphex Twin and Autechre), running the gamut from ambient music to glitch music to drum'n'bass to synth-pop.

Inspired by Shitmat, [DJ Scotch Egg](#) (Japanese producer Shigeru Ishihara, based in Brighton) used a handheld video game console to shape dance-music of the gabber genre, as documented on **KFC Core** (2005).

British pop stars of the end of the decade included the Sugarbabes, a female trio (Heidi Range, Mutya Buena and Keisha Buchanan), with *Push the Button* (2005), and Aimee Duffy, with the soul-tinged *Mercy* (2008).

World-hop

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[Cadence Weapon](#), the moniker chosen by Western Canada's white rapper Rollie Pemberton, utilized a broad (and still cohesive) palette of beats and virtuoso claustrophobic studio arrangements on **Breaking Kayfabe** (2005).

[Shadow Huntaz](#), formed by Dutch producers Don and Roel Funcken and three USA rappers, delivered a delirious fusion of glitch music and hip-hop music, influenced by the iconoclastic jams of both acid-rock and free-jazz, on **Corrupt Data** (2004).

One of the most intriguing takes on the whole scene came from Australia. [Terminal Sound System](#) (Halo's bassist Skye Klein) probed the landscape of dubstep, drum'n'bass and trip-hop, sculpting glitch-ambient music over a bed of chaotic breakbeats on albums such as **Compressor** (2007) and **Constructing Towers** (2008).

In Japan the most intriguing work was perhaps **Neutrino** (2004), by Japanese duo [Neutrino](#) (Atsuhiko Murakami and Hideki Kuroda).

[continues...](#) | [back...](#) | [Index](#)