

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](#)

(Copyright © 2006 Piero Scaruffi)

Populists

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

The gloomy mood of the USA during the wars of Afghanistan and Iraq was reflected by much of the grass-roots music of the late 1990s. The real protagonist of much of the stories was the collective subconscious of a country that was on a quest for a new identity. A sense of moral confusion permeated the sounds and the lyrics of the bands that harked back to the musical traditions of the USA. The moral center of mass had shifted, and it wasn't clear where.

The languid alt-country of Washington's [Canyon](#) on their debut **Canyon** (2001) was emblematic of the existential lack of focus.

New York's [National](#) (2) spun the allegorical tales of **The National** (2001) in a stately country-pop style. **Sad Songs For Dirty Lovers** (2003), a soap opera of ordinary misfits tinged with Lou Reed-ian expressionism and Leonard Cohen-ian existentialism, upped the ante, as did the atmospheric and solemn **Boxer** (2007).

New York's [Hold Steady](#), formed by Lifter Puller's vocalist Craig Finn and guitarist Tad Kubler, concocted an old-fashioned, infectious mix of hard-rock, roots-rock and power-pop, drenched in semi-biographical themes of ordinary blue-collar life, on **Almost Killed Me** (2004), **Separation Sunday** (2005), which is basically a rock opera, and **Boys And Girls In America** (2006), which contained epic tales of frustrated suburban kids anchored to solid hooks and riffs.

Seattle was a good spot for bands that played folk-rock for the post-emo era: [Band Of Horses](#), with the melancholy dreamy melodic mid-tempo country-rock of **Everything All The Time** (2006); [Elected](#), formed by Rilo Kiley's singer-songwriter Blake Sennett, with the slightly-neurotic and sometimes harrowing autobiographical stories of **Me First** (2004); and the [Fleet Foxes](#) (1), fronted by singer-songwriter Robin Pecknold, with the disorienting multi-part harmonies of **Fleet Foxes** (2008).

The general trend around the country was to animate the songs with eccentric arrangements or sound effects. Florida's [Holopaw](#) employed an array of acoustic, electric and electronic instruments to arrange the tragic, intense tales of **Quit +/or Fight** (2005). Wisconsin's [Decibully](#) straddled the border between pop, psychedelia and soul on **City of Festivals** (2003). [Central Falls](#), formed in Chicago by US Maple's drummer Adam Vida, stood out for the oneiric atmosphere of **Love And Easy Living** (2003). Texas' [Midlake](#) delivered the concept album **The Trials Of Van Occupanther** (2006) in a calmly melancholy tone.

Utah's [Coastal](#) (2) bordered on shoegazing psychedelia with the lengthy trancey songs of **Coastal** (2001) and the slow-motion chromatic mirages of **Halfway To You** (2004). Their music achieved a rare fusion of romantic and metaphysical themes.

Nobody better than New Hampshire's [Okkervil River](#) (2) personified the emerging "chamber roots-rock" aesthetic. **Don't Fall in Love with Everyone You See** (2002) and **Down the River of Golden Dreams** (2003) relied on the balance among evocative keyboards (Jonathan Meiburg), strong rhythms, tasty arrangements (horns, strings) and plaintive vocals (Will Sheff). The tight integration of storytelling and instrumental parts allowed the songs of **Black Sheep Boy** (2005) and **The Stage Names** (2007) to revolve around psychological analysis in a profound and erudite manner that had few precedents in the annals of roots-rock.

Okkervil River's keyboardist Jonathan Meiburg and Okkervil River's guitarist Will Sheff also formed [Shearwater](#) (1), this time fronted by Meiburg, that started in the spartan and dejected vein of Nick Drake with **The Dissolving Room** (2001) and matched Talk Talk's abstract chamber-pop meditations on **Winged Life** (2004). **Palo Santo** (2006) was basically Meiburg's solo album with guests. He borrowed from gentle and romantic songwriters such as Leonard Cohen via the introverted celestial melancholy of Jeff Buckley, adding pastoral and ecological overtones.

San Diego's [Castanets](#) (1) concocted a gloomy fusion of alt-country, slow-core and digital production on the brief but visionary **Cathedral** (2004) and on the turbulent **In The Vines** (2007).

Baltimore's [Wilderness](#) conceived the songs of **Wilderness** (2005) as a post-rock variant of the old dream-pop sound of the Cocteau Twins plus the neurotic, twitching vocals of James Johnson.

Oregon's [Blitzen Trapper](#) enhanced the Wilco-style country-pop of **Field Rexx** (2004) with all sorts of stylistic detours; and **Wild Mountain Nation** (2007) made the stylistic detours the whole point of the music.

San Francisco's [Dodds](#) (1), the brainchild of guitarist Meric Long (a student of West African drumming and blues finger-picking), redefined roots-rock for the age of post-rock on their second album **Visiter** (2008).

New Jersey's [Gaslight Anthem](#), fronted by Brian Fallon, played populist bombastic punk-folk, frequently reminiscent of Bruce Springsteen, on their second album **The '59 Sound** (2008).

The catchy albeit whimsical folk-punk of Bay Area-based [Port O'Brien](#) on

All We Could Do Was Sing (2008) connected the Violent Femmes with alt-country of the 1990s.

[Beat Circus](#) (1), the brainchild of Boston's composer, film-maker and multi-instrumentalist Brian Carpenter, matured with the multi-stylistic and nostalgic concept album **Dreamland** (2008), set in an amusement park at the beginning of the electric age, scored for a 22-piece ensemble, and weaving together a journey into the psyche of a nation and an era.

The [Rosebuds](#), the North Carolina-based duo of guitarist Ivan Howard and keyboardist Kelly Crisp, updated folk-rock with the naive, energetic and catchy male-female harmonies of **Make Out** (2003).

[Horse Feathers](#), the Oregon-based duo of singer-guitarist Justin Ringle and string-man Peter Broderick (who played all sorts of stringed instruments) coined a form of acoustic folk music with little or no percussion and no keyboards on **Words Are Dead** (2006) that sounded like a two-men string band, except that the music was drenched in reverb and the tunes were not inspired by Appalachia but by urban spleen.

Indiana's quintet [Murder By Death](#) crafted the gloomy atmospheric country-rock of Dante-esque concept **In Bocca al Lupo** (2006) with piano and cello.

In the realm of country music perhaps the most impressive new voice was that of Georgia's singer-songwriter Kristen Hall, whose trio [Sugarland](#) scored big with **Twice the Speed of Life** (2004) in a poppy style influenced by the Indigo Girls.

Generally speaking, it wasn't easy to say something still relevant with roots-rock in the age of the laptop. Nor was it easy to relate to the rustic values of small-town America when the vast majority of the population now lived in big cities (only 20% still lived in rural areas). In a sense roots-rock was forced to undergo the evolution that Western movies had to undergo in the 1960s, when a moral shift left John Wayne in the dust the way no bandit or crook could have done on screen.

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