

The History of Rock Music: 1989-1994

Raves, grunge, post-rock

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Brit and non-Brit pop

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

Brit-pop 1990-94

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As was often the case in rock music, the most publicized phenomenon was also the least artistically interesting. "Brit-pop" became a derogatory term, one associated with ephemeral and dubious acts that speculated on facile melodies and trivial arrangements. If the British Invasion of the 1960s had at least revitalized the USA scene, the "Brit-pop" invasion of the 1990s... was hardly an invasion at all. The Brit-pop bands were all terribly similar and, mostly, tedious. In the end, only a few of them managed to have one or two world-wide hits, and most of them added very little to the history of rock music (other than yet another proof of the aberrations of its industry).

In 1990 Brit-pop had not materialized yet as a "fad", but the seeds were already being planted by bands such as [Lightning Seeds](#), with their retro' classic **Cloudcuckooland** (1990), and [La's](#), with **La's** (1990), specializing in sculpting memorable and unassuming melodies. [Teenage Fanclub](#) produced one of the best imitations of Big Star with **Bandwagonesque** (1991).

[Heavenly](#) (2) inherited the Primitives' passion for melodious simplicity. Fronted by former Talulah Gosh's singer Amelia Fletcher, they resurrected the age of Petula Clark, the girl-groups and bubblegum music on **Heavenly Vs Satan** (1991). Their romantic and naive approach to the pop tune evolved with **Le Jardin De Heavenly** (1992) and **Decline And Fall** (1994) into a new form of revisionist art, one that transformed Britain's perennial Sixties revival into an international language.

[Pulp](#), fronted by Jarvis Cocker's out-of-fashion dandy style, were the

quintessence of glam, retro` and kitsch on albums such as the erotic concept **His 'N' Hers** (1994) and singles such as *My Legendary Girlfriend* (1991), *Babies* (1992) and *Common People* (1995).

Scotland's [Eugenius](#), the new project by former Vaselines' guitarist/singer Eugene Kelly, with **Oomalama** (1992), and Ireland's [Frank And Walters](#), with **Trains Boats And Planes** (1992), also predated the 1994 explosion.

The massive Brit-pop phenomenon began in earnest with the bands destined to rule the world (according to the British press of the time): the [Boo Radleys](#) (1), who went "retro" with **Giant Steps** (1993), [Blur](#), who attained stardom with **Parklife** (1994), and [Oasis](#), the band (or the "bluff") that best personified the fad, from the exuberant **Definitely Maybe** (1994) to the multi-million seller **Morning Glory** (1995).

The most stunning feature of these bands was their absolute lack of imagination. They continued a British tradition, dating from at least the Beatles, of pop musicians who had nothing to say but said it in a sophisticated manner.

Then it became a race to produce ever more predictable music. Each "next big thing" hailed by the British press was merely a copy of a copy of a copy of something that was not particularly exciting even the first time around.

If nothing else, [Suede](#) (1), featuring guitarist Bernard Butler and vocalist Brett Anderson, offered an original take on glam-pop on **Suede** (1993).

Former Microdisney's guitarist Sean O'Hagan proved his stature as a Brian Wilson-style arranger on the second and third albums by the [High Llamas](#) (1), **Gideon Gaye** (1995) and especially on the elaborate and monumental **Hawaii** (1996).

[Supergrass](#) sounded like the heirs to the Buzzcocks' punk-pop, at least on **I Should Coco** (1995).

One "next big thing" led to another "next big thing", and soon England was embroiled in a revival of the "mod" culture of the 1960s (read: the Who and, more recently, the Jam). Pioneered by [Ocean Color Scene's Moseley Shoals](#) (1996), the neo-mod school peaked with the [Wildhearts](#), the most energetic and blasphemous of the pack, notably their album **Earth Vs The Wildhearts** (1993).

Inspired by the new wave of the 1970s, bands such as [Elastica](#), fronted by Justine Frischmann and harking back to Blondie's and the Cars' disco-punk sound of the 1970s on **Elastica** (1995), and [Sleeper](#), also relying on a female voice (Louise Wener) on **Smart** (1995), offered a less trivial kind of commercial rock.

Retro futurism, 1991

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Brit-pop was just the tip of the iceberg. British rock was being swept by a tidal wave of melodic innovation. One facet of it consisted in the

transposition of synth-pop and new-wave forms into the body of kitsch music. The theme of bridging nostalgia and futurism harked back to the decadent rockers of the 1970s (and, above all, Brian Eno). The new generation disposed with the decadent poses, and retained only the aesthetic.

[Stereolab](#) (12) were not the first and were not the only ones, but somehow they came to represent a nostalgic take on Sixties pop music that employed electronic rhythms and arrangements. Built around the collation of keyboardist Tim Gane (ex-McCarthy) and French vocalist Laetitia Sadier, i.e. the juxtaposition of hypnotic, acid instrumental scores and surreal, naive vocals, as refined by their early EPs **Super 45** (1991) and **Super-Electric** (1991), Stereolab walked a fine line between avantgarde and pop. As they continued to fine-tune the idea on **Peng** (1992), echoing the trance of the Velvet Underground, Neu and Suicide, while increasing the doses of electronic sounds, Sadier's voice became a sound and an instrument, contributing more than catchy refrains to the allure of the mini-album **Space Age Bachelor Pad Music** (1993), the aesthetic manifesto of their chamber kitsch. Stereolab probably reached their zenith with the singles of *John Cage Bubblegum* (1993) and *Jenny Ondioline* (1993), that inspired the stylistic tour de force of **Transient Random Noise Bursts With Announcements** (1993). Stereolab had coined a new musical language, as austere as classical music and as light as easy-listening. New keyboardist Katharine Gifford contributed to the elegant and smooth sound of **Mars Audiac Quintet** (1994), their most accomplished fusion of nostalgia and futurism, although not as innovative as the previous album. **Emperor Tomato Ketchup** (1996) was even more impersonal, pure sound for the sake of sound, pure abstraction of kitsch music. Stereolab injected Soft Machine's progressive-rock, Terry Riley's minimalism, Neu's robotik rhythm and Pink Floyd's atmospheric psychedelia into the fragile melodic skeleton of British pop music.

"Retro futurism" was pioneered also by [Saint Etienne](#) (2). Bob Stanley and Pete Wiggs bridged Depeche Mode's synth-pop, the Sixties pop revival, sensual disco-like vocals (Sarah Cracknell) and almost neo-classical arrangements on the sophisticated production exploits of **Foxbase Alpha** (1991) and **So Tough** (1993). They were unique in crafting a celestial, effervescent and ghostly fusion of jazz, funk, lounge and house music. **Tiger Bay** (1994) achieved pure nirvana, pure ambience and pure style. At their best, it felt as if a Broadway star of the 1950s was backed by Giorgio Moroder on electronic keyboards and by an orchestra conducted by Ennio Morricone.

[State Of Grace](#) (1) matched Saint Etienne's achievements on **Jamboreebop** (1996).

[Space](#) devised a form of kitsch that basically bridged Brit-pop and "Madchester" on **Spiders** (1996).

But it was in Japan that the genre found the most fertile terrain. [Pizzicato Five](#) (1), who had turned supermarket muzak into a sub-genre of synth-pop with **Couples** (1987), became one of the leading retro bands when they enrolled eccentric vocalist Maki Nomiya, the ideal alter ego of electronic keyboardist Yasuharu Konishi. The single *Lover's Rock* (1990),

possibly their masterpiece, and the album **This Year's Girl** (1991) celebrated their passion for icons of the Sixties (James Bond soundtracks, hare-krishna chanting, novelty numbers, silly dance crazes), whereas later collections such as **Bossa Nova** (1993) and **Happy End Of The World** (1997) experimented with a format closer to orchestral disco-music.

Art-pop, 1993

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Despite all the trivial music cooked up by the assembly chains of Brit-pop, some British bands experimented with different ideas of what a song is supposed to be.

The [Tindersticks](#) (1) deployed elegant quasi-orchestral arrangements, that relied mostly on the delicate polyphony of guitar, keyboards and violin, on **Tindersticks** (1993). Its songs were the ideal soundtrack for brothels packed with philosophers. Stuart Staples' voice (a Chris Isaak soundalike) was lost in the labyrinth of his own visions, haunted by the giant shadows of Tom Waits, Nick Cave and Leonard Cohen. But the subtlety of that work drained away as the band (a "big" band) opted for orchestral pop and lounge music on **Tinderstick** (1995) and **Curtains** (1997).

[Radiohead](#) (2), the most hyped and probably the most over-rated band of the decade, upped the ante for studio trickery. They had begun as third-rate disciples of the Smiths, and albums such as **Pablo Honey** (1993) and **The Bends** (1995) were cauldrons of Brit-pop cliches. Then **OK Computer** (1997) happened and the word "chic" took on a new meaning. The album was a masterpiece of faux avantgarde (of pretending to be avantgarde while playing mellow pop music). It was, more properly, a new link in the chain of production artifices that changed the way pop music "sounds": the Beatles' **Sgt Pepper**, Pink Floyd's **Dark Side Of The Moon**, Fleetwood Mac's **Tusk** and Michael Jackson's **Thriller**. Despite the massive doses of grandiloquence à la U2 and of facile pathos à la David Bowie, the album's mannerism led to the same excesses that detracted from late Pink Floyd's albums (lush textures, languid melodies, drowsy chanting). Since the production aspects of music were beginning to prevail over the music itself, it was just about natural to make them "the" music. The sound of **Kid A** (2000) had decomposed and absorbed countless new perfumes, like a carcass in the woods. All sounds were processed and mixed, including the vocals. Radiohead moved as close to electronica as possible without actually endorsing it. Radiohead became masters of the artificial, masters of minimizing the emotional content of very complex structures. **Amnesiac** (2001) replaced "music" with a barrage of semi-mechanical loops, warped instruments and digital noises, while bending Thom Yorke's baritone to a subhuman register and stranding it in the midst of hostile arrangements, making it sound more and more like an alienated psychopath. Their limit was that they were more form than content, more "hype" than message and more nothing than everything. However, Radiohead were emblematic of a new trend in rock music that conceived each song as an isolated and saturated microcosmos of studio effects; each song as an ecosystem of interacting sounds in motion.

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