

The History of Rock Music: 1990-1999

Raves, grunge, post-rock, trip-hop

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The Age of Emocore

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

Emocore, 1989-94

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While magazines kept publicizing the "death of punk-rock", hardcore became a pervasive movement that did not leave any town (or country) untouched. As if galvanized by its own death, the movement took on a life of its own and became a genre within the genre. In the 1990s that genre, in turn, spawned a number of sub-genres.

First and foremost, there was "emocore", the style invented in the late 1980s by Rites Of Spring and the Washington contingent. Their "emotional" hardcore alternated quiet and furious musical parts, admitted moody arrangements, indulged in time changes and mid-tempo rhythms, leveraged emotional singing that could whisper as well as shout within the same song, and was not limited to the short/fast format of hardcore. In other words, it was almost the negation of hardcore.

While the genre was, by definition, rather loose, bands that fell into the category during the 1990s included: San Francisco's [Jawbreaker](#), with **Unfun** (1990); Oregon's [Heatmiser](#), the group of songwriter Elliott Smith and bassist Sam Coomes (formerly of Donner Party), with **Dead Air** (1993); Los Angeles' [Weezer](#), the most successful of the batch, with **Weezer** (1994).

Seattle's [Sunny Day Real Estate](#) (2), the vehicle for songwriter Jeremy Enigk (the prototypical anguished voice of emocore), legitimized artistically the genre with the lengthy and elaborate compositions of **Diary** (1994) and **How It Feels To Be Something On** (1998).

[Seaweed](#) (1) moved from the popcore of **Weak** (1992) to the grunge,

metal and punk hybrid of **Four** (1993) to the power-ballads of **Spanaway** (1995), showing a maturity that was unusual within the hardcore scene; and then vocalist Aaron Stauffer, a worthy heir to the melodic/populist tradition of Bob Mould (Husker Du) and Paul Westerberg (Replacements), formed **Gardener** (1) with Screaming Trees' bassist Van Conner, which released the natural evolution of Seaweed's sound: the romantic **New Dawning Time** (1999).

New Jersey's **Wrens** invented a form of "emo-pop" with **Secaucus** (1996) and perfected it to a manic degree on **Meadowlands** (2003).

Emocore represented the terminal point of the trajectory of punk-rock that started in 1976. Back then punk-rock was nihilistic: it boasted that it had no meaning, that it had no interest in society, that it had no emotion. However, shortly thereafter, punks began to show political awareness. Punk-rock acquired a meaning (whether left-wing or right-wing), displayed not indifference for society but a deep-seated anger, and basically transferred the power of the music to the public level. Not only did emocore have a meaning, but that meaning was now highly private, retreating from the social sphere to the individual sphere. Not only did emocore display emotions, but it was highly emotional. Despite the similarity in tone, emocore represented almost the exact opposite of what punk-rock aimed to be in 1976.

Washington's progressive hardcore

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Washington was still the home of a highly-creative hardcore scene, the epitome of "progressive hardcore".

Nation Of Ulysses (10) concocted the explosive, theatrical agit-prop sound of **Plays Pretty For Baby** (1992), an album that was the Clinton-age equivalent of MC5 and Public Enemy. The band's cacophony was tamed by hysterical vocalist Ian Svenonius in an epic way. Guitarist Tim Green moved to San Francisco and formed the Fucking Champs, while Svenonius reformed the band with a slightly different line-up and a new name, **Make-Up** (2): **Destination Love** (1996), a conceptual exercise of community-based music, and the more organic **In Mass Mind** (1998) experimented with a deranged gospel-funk-rock sound borrowed from Gang Of Four, Pop Group and Contortions.

Shudder To Think (1) became the King Crimson of hardcore with **Get Your Goat** (1992) and **Pony Express Record** (1994), featuring new guitarist Nathan Larson, that were full of sophisticated and eccentric nuances.

Jawbox (1), led by former Government Issue's bassist Jay Robbins, created an opus that was both melodic and eclectic, charged with pathos as well as neurosis, on **Grippe** (1991) and **Novelty** (1992), only to increase the doses of electricity on **For Your Own Special Sweetheart** (1994).

Edsel (1) not only applied the noise-rock lessons of Sonic Youth, Dinosaur Jr and My Bloody Valentine on **Everlasting Belt Co** (1993) but

continued to evolve it until they reached the level of polish, adulteration and elasticity of **Techniques Of Speed Hypnosis** (1995)

[Lungfish](#) (2) were the vehicle for Daniel Higgs' sociopolitical philosophizing. His favorite medium was the tension-filled and almost messianic simplicity of **Pass And Stow** (1994), and eventually he and his cohorts fell under the spell of Indian ragas and Buddhist trance on **Indivisible** (1997) and **Artificial Horizon** (1998).

[Circus Lupus](#) (1) experimented with post-hardcore ideas that were as adventurous and irregular as Minutemen's and Saccharine Trust's on **Super Genius** (1992), displaying a technical prowess that was virtually unmatched. Circus Lupus' vocalist Chris Thomson and guitarist Chris Hamley started [Monorchid](#) (1) to pursue a sound that was even more jarring and feverish, as documented on **Let Them Eat** (1997).

No other scene in the world mustered so many talents as Washington's.

Ska-core

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The fusion of ska and punk-rock, pioneered in Britain in the late 1970s, became extremely popular everywhere in the USA during the 1990s.

The San Francisco Bay Area was one of the epicenters of the ska-punk revolution. [Operation Ivy](#) were part of Berkeley's legendary "Gilman Street" scene, but their album **Energy** (1989) stretched beyond punk-rock, encompassing ska and surf. From their ashes, two groups were born. Their guitarist, Tim "Lint" Armstrong, formed [Rancid](#) (1), and proceeded to sell the idea to the masses. **Rancid** (1993) and especially **Let's Go** (1994) disguised the rebellious spirit of hardcore under the appearance of exuberant wit, irresistible rhythms and catchy refrains. It was Clash's recipe for a new generation. The less threatening potion of **And Out Come The Wolves** (1995) found an even bigger audience. The other group, [Dance Hall Crashers](#) (1), boasted two female singers and favored joyful fanfares played with a naive verve more akin to girl-groups of the Sixties than hardcore of the Nineties, particularly on **Lockjaw** (1995).

Commercial success came with Boston's [Mighty Mighty Bosstones](#), who penned amusing collections such as **Question The Answers** (1994), and Florida's [Less Than Jake](#), who delivered the explosive **Pezcore** (1994).

Los Angeles became the capital of ska-core thanks to: Bradley Nowell's [Sublime](#) (1), who coined one of the most anthemic styles on **40 Oz To Freedom** (1992); [No Doubt](#), fronted by a female vocalist (Gwen Stefani), who broke through with **Tragic Kingdom** (1995); [Voodoo Glow Skulls](#), with generic packages such as **Band Geek Mafia** (1998).

Best in England were probably [Citizen Fish](#), born from the ashes of the Subhumans, and best in the rest of Europe were probably Sweden's [Millencolin](#).

Punk-pop

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Hardcore climbed the charts (twenty years after it was invented by the Ramones) with "popcore", the new variation on Buzzcock's punk-pop. It was, again, San Francisco that bridged the gap between the charts and the punks.

By capitalizing on the style pioneered in the mid 1980s by Mr T Experience, [Green Day](#) (1) became one of the money-making machines of the decade, thanks to the infectious hooks and riffs of **Dookie** (1994) and to the generic pop of *Time Of Your Life* (1997) and *Minority* (2000).

The Seattle scene, which had been primed by the Fastbacks, yielded several of the best pop-core bands.

Rusty Willoughby's [Pure Joy](#) belonged to the generation of the Fastbacks, but emerged only with **Carnivore** (1990). Willoughby and the Fastbacks's drummer Nate Johnson formed [Flop](#) (1), who revisited the deceptive simplicity of Cheap Trick and the Buzzcocks on impeccable packages such as **Flop & The Fall Of The Mopsqueezer** (1992) and especially **Whenever You're Ready** (1993).

Although its bands (Descendents, Bad Religion and the likes) had inspired Green Day, in the 1990s Los Angeles was, de facto, a colony of San Francisco, recycling whatever was successful up north. [Pennywise](#) (1) led the charge with **Pennywise** (1991), and a sound that, while respectful of the masters of "beach punk", was also more pensive and atmospheric, eventually achieving the depth of **Unknown Road** (1993). Many of the Los Angeles bands of this generation surfaced after Green Day's breakthrough, but had been roaming the city's clubs for years. Most successful of them all were [Offspring](#), that competed with Green Day's mass appeal on **Smash** (1994).

The [Humpers](#) sounded more sincere than the average of these clones of Screeching Weasel, because their **Positively Sick On 4th Street** (1992) harked back to the original style of the Ramones and the New York Dolls.

Chicago, the city where Screeching Weasel had preached the gospel of punk-pop, boasted perhaps the greatest of punk-poppers, [Pegboy](#) (11). Formed by Naked Raygun's guitarist John Haggerty and other hardcore veterans, they crafted a sound that was frantic and barbaric, but that, at the same time, carried hummable tunes. Every single beat of **Strong Reaction** (1991) was "wrong" in a unique way that made it just about "perfect", delivering a dynamite emotional punch straight to the core of Haggerty's stories. Abandoning the excesses of that stormy and visceral style, Pegboy penned **Earwig** (1994), hell's version of Green Day.

Rick Valentin's [Poster Children](#) started out with the brainy noise-rock of **Tool Of Man** (1992), featuring drummer John Herndon, but converted to a more accessible style on **Junior Citizen** (1995).

Another bastion of punk-pop was located in North Carolina: Mac McCaughan's [Superchunk](#) (1) resurrected the original spirit of punk-rock, but without the negative overtones (the Ramones rather than the Sex

Pistols). The exuberant mood of their second album, **No Pocky For Kitty** (1991), was almost the anti-thesis of hardcore. Mac McCaughan's alter-ego, [Portastatic](#), originally formed to vent the more introspective side of his art, eventually merged with Superchunk's punk-pop, and possibly obscured it, on **The Summer of the Shark** (2003) and **Bright Ideas** (2005).

New Hampshire's [Queers](#) (1) delivered a barrage of catchy, pummeling refrains on **Love Songs For The Retarded** (1993), coupled with outrageously decadent sex/drugs lyrics, and eventually turned their career into a tribute to the Ramones.

England's punk-pop elite basically comprised five bands: [Leatherface](#), whose **Mush** (1991) was perhaps the greatest album of this generation, [Senseless Things](#), [Ned's Atomic Dustbin](#), [Mega City Four](#) and [Seers](#). While they probably did not deserve the notoriety granted to them by the British press, their sound at least stood up to the avalanche of Brit-pop.

The sound of Green Day was exported to Canada by [Cub](#), with **Betti-Cola** (1993), and to Australia by [The Living End](#), who found mainstream success with **The Living End** (1998).

California garage-punk

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An eclectic punk-rock style was pioneered in San Diego by [Pitchfork](#), the band of guitarist John Reis and vocalist Rick Farr, who recorded **Eucalyptus** (1990) and went on to form [Drive Like Jehu](#) (11), one of the most innovative punk bands in the world. They first turned angst into a shimmering cascade of emotions on **Drive Like Jehu** (1991), and then proceeded to compose the soundtrack of a nervous breakdown on **Yank Crime** (1994), one of the most catastrophic and excoriating albums of the time, whose vocabulary was so complex and effective that guitar-based punk songs began to sound like hyper-dramatic mini-symphonies.

[Rocket From The Crypt](#) (11), the new band formed by Drive Like Jehu's guitarist John "Speedo" Reis, embodied the quintessence of both 1960s' garage-punk and 1990s' hardcore. **Paint As A Fragrance** (1991), a parade of lethal, abrasive, turbo-charged acts of fury, was only the appetizer for **Circa Now** (1993), an anthemic synthesis of wild rock'n'roll that evoked the Fleshtones as well as the Heartbreakers. Their art of riffs was so recklessly retro that albums such as **Scream Dracula Scream** (1995) and **RFTC** (1998) sounded like collections of covers.

Albums such as [aMiniature](#)'s **Plexiwatt** (1992) and [Fluf](#)'s **Mangravy** (1993) laid the foundations for the scene that eventually yielded the commercial success that Tom DeLonge's [Blink 182](#) attained with their fifth album **Enema Of The State** (1999).

In San Francisco, [Zen Guerrilla](#) (2) blended punk's demented speed with black music (blues, soul and rhythm'n'blues) on the roaring **Positronic Raygun** (1998), the fervent **Trance States In Tongues** (1999) and the visceral **Shadows On The Sun** (2001), albums that capitalized on many

earlier EPs.

Jazzcore

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"Jazzcore" thrived in the background, but the idea (that had been pioneered by the likes of the Minutemen, Universal Congress, Saccharine Trust and others) fueled the creative work of numerous bands. The Los Angeles school was continued by [Bazooka](#) (1), saxophonist Tony Atherton's hardcore adaptation of the ideas of Frank Zappa, Albert Ayler and Thelonious Monk, particularly on **Perfectly Square** (1993), and by [Trash Can School](#), whose **Sick Jokes And Wet Dreams** (1992) harked back to the visceral blues-punk sound of Pop Group and Birthday Party.

Utah's [Iceburn](#) (2) fused the languages of progressive-rock, jazz, metal and hardcore on **Firon** (1992) and on the monumental **Hephaestus** (1993). The latter's brainy jams opened a number of stylistic avenues that would take the band a decade to fully explore. **Poetry Of Fire** (1995) introduced elements of classical music and atonal avantgarde, not to mention Indian ragas, while veering towards the loose structures of free-jazz, a metamorphosis that continued on Iceburn Collective's **Meditavolutions** (1996), featuring the suite *Sphinx*, one of their most terrible and accomplished works, and was completed with the three lengthy group improvisations of **Polar Bear Suite** (1997).

San Diego's [Credle](#) unleashed **Silent Weapons For Quiet Wars** (1994), inspired by John Zorn's hyper-kinetic nonsense jazz.

Old school

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More or less straightfoward hardcore punk-rock was still pervasive, from New York's crowded scene to Los Angeles' super-crowded scene. Best in New York (and most faithful to the Ramones and the Sex Pistols) were [D Generation](#), with **D Generation** (1994). New York also boasted a vigorous "straight-edge" movement, best represented by [Shelter](#), the new band of Youth Of Today's singer Ray Cappo.

Seattle boasted two of the best revival bands. [Supersuckers](#) (1) indulged in Ramones-ian verve on **The Smoke Of Hell** (1992), and [Zeke](#) (1) unwound a breathless parade of lightning-speed bullets on their second album **Flat Tracker** (1996).

Ohio's [Gaunt](#), with rapid-fire collections such as **Kryptonite** (1996), were also among the best disciples of the Ramones and the Clash.

The heirs to Siege's grinding hardcore were Rhode Island's [Drop Dead](#), who, just like their mentors, recorded very little, mostly on **Drop Dead** (1993).

England was awash in the sweet sound of Brit-pop and could hardly nurture a hardcore scene. However, [Silverfish](#) (1) propelled (and, at the

same time, sabotaged) angry young girl Lesley Rankine's roars and wails with an anthemic and seismic mixture of unrefined adrenaline and concentrate vitriol on **Fat Axl** (1991) and **Organ Fan** (1992).

Norway's glam-punks [Turbonegro](#) (1) eventually recorded one of the most impressive hardcore works of the decade, their fourth album **Apocalypse Dudes** (1998), that sounded like a hardcore version of Alice Cooper and Kiss.

The atonal ferocity of Sweden's [Brainbombs](#) was devoted to the most lascivious, sadistic and murderous instincts, like a seriously (not comically) deranged version of the Cramps. The sound of **Burning Hell** (1992) and **Genius and Brutality Taste and Power** (1994) was a sloppy exaggeration of the Stooges with cameos from a jazz trumpet.

Post-hardcore

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The influence of avantgarde hardcore bands such as Fugazi, Henry Rollins and Jesus Lizard led to a "post-hardcore" style that was convoluted, jittery, sinister and ugly.

Seattle's [Unwound](#) (14), the vehicle for Justin Trosper's epileptic sermons, learned the lessons of Sonic Youth, Fugazi and Jesus Lizard and applied them to the brutal, harrowing vision of **Fake Train** (1993), broadening the lexicon of hardcore with techniques that borrowed from the blues as well as from the avantgarde, while maximizing the emotional impact. It was music that transpired angst and alienation, music of harsh tones, agonizing tempos and demonic vocals. Unwound's essay in intolerable tension continued with **New Plastic Ideas** (1994) and **The Future Of What** (1995), that channelled Trosper's hellish angst into a Morse code of ghostly shrieks and gut-wrenching riffs. While flirting with jazz and avantgarde manners, **Repetition** (1996) and **Challenge For A Civilized Society** (1998) clarified the subtle mission of the band: a sound that was as loud as the sense of confusion and insecurity of their generation.

Phantom 309's vocalist/guitarist John Forbes recorded the raw and vulgar **Sahara Of The Bozart** (1992) with [Dirt](#) and then the frenzied and dark **Put The Creep On** (1994) with [Mount Shasta](#).

Texas bred a school of musicians who blended elements of different local schools of the 1980s: hardcore (e.g., Poison 13), psychedelic (e.g., Butthole Surfers) and industrial (e.g., Pain Teens). [Crust](#) (1) crafted **Crust** (1991) and especially **Crusty Love** (1994), a chaotic, claustrophobic and cacophonous post-industrial symphony. [Drain](#) (1), the side-project of Butthole Surfers' drummer King Coffey, mixed Red Crayola, John Cage and nursery-school mayhem on **Pick Up Heaven** (1992). The music of **Pistol Swing** (1993) by [Johnboy](#) (1) sounded like a chain reaction inside a nuclear reactor, a repulsive magma of manic impulses and subhuman hallucinations.

Several bands from Illinois and Minnesota straddled the line between hardcore and grunge, notably [Janitor Joe](#), on **Big Metal Birds** (1993), and

[Tar](#), on **Jackson** (1991).

The "crossover" style of the early 1980s, pioneered by hardcore bands that incorporated heavy-metal elements (Agnostic Front, Bad Brains, Corrosion of Conformity) was revitalized in New York by two bands that, de facto, invented "metalcore": [Judge](#), the new band of Youth of Today's Mike Ferraro and John Porcell, with **Bringin' It Down** (1989), and [Killing Time](#) with **Brightside** (1989).

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