

## The History of Rock Music: 2000-

Genres and musicians of the 2000s

([Versione italiana](#))

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#### The 2000s: Decade of Fear

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Within a few months the relative peace and stability of the Clinton era were totally reversed. The "dot com" bubble crashed in april 2000. The election to succeed Clinton was won by George W. Bush on a technicality (his opponent had won more votes). Nonetheless Bush interpreted the result of the elections as a mandate to pass highly divisive right-wing policies. The longest economic expansion in USA history came to a sudden halt in his first months as president. Then in september 2001 terrorists affiliated with Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaeda carried out a spectacular attack against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, killing more than 3,000 people. The USA retaliated by bombing the Taliban out of power in Afghanistan and launching a worldwide "war against terrorism". Bush coined the expression "axis of evil" for the totalitarian regimes of Iraq, Iran and North Korea, that now represented the enemies in the post-Soviet era, and in 2003 proceeded to take out the first one, Saddam Hussein.

For the rest of the decade the USA was involved in two lengthy wars of attrition, plus intense diplomatic pressures to deter North Korea and Iran. Those wars and a generally arrogant attitude towards the rest of the world gained the USA an unprecedented degree of hostility, even among the traditional allies of Western Europe (where millions attended anti-USA demonstrations). The USA's policy of "globalization" further alienated foreign masses, that widely interpreted it as a

plan for world hegemony. Suddenly the world identified the USA not as the defender of freedom but as the most polluting country in the world and the most imperialistic, a barbaric regime that still administered the death penalty and that tortured prisoners of war. Anti-USA sentiment brought to power leftist regimes throughout Latin America.

Internally the USA was rocked by political scandals while the budget deficit skyrocketed, the dollar collapsed and the trade deficit mushroomed. Signs of global decline were greeted all over the world: in 2007 China overtook the USA to become the world's second largest exporter, and Toyota passed General Motors as the world's largest car manufacturer. In 2007 the stock market hit a record high, but then oil prices started increasing dramatically and a financial crisis caused banks to collapse. One year later (in October 2008) the USA stock market had lost almost half of its value. The crisis spread from one continent to the other: markets worldwide plunged into chaos, heralding the worst recession since the 1970s and stroking fears of a new depression.

During the presidential campaign of 2008 oceanic crowds gathered to listen to the first black candidate, Barack Obama, the son of an African man, a sign that the nation had not lost hope. The following January he, a man of African and Muslim descent, became the world's most powerful person in the capital of the Western and Christian world. However, he was now presiding over a worldwide economic catastrophe.

During this era of turmoil the great social transformation within the USA took place in cyberspace. Over the decades, rock music has always been the soundtrack of alternative youth lifestyles. In the case of "Generation Y", born between 1981 and 1999, it was a "digital" lifestyle. They grew up with videogames, email, instant messaging, music downloads, movie rentals, cable television, blogs. This was the first generation for whom there was no centralized source of news and entertainment (previous generations had come of age in a world still dominated by three television networks, by five major record labels, by major movie studios and theaters, etc). This was the first generation for whom the primary source of information and news was the Internet. Larry Page and Sergey Brin had founded Google in 1998, and Google became the main interface with the world for an entire generation. Social networking software such as Facebook, founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, became their primary source of socialization. In 2001 Jimmy Wales founded Wikipedia, a multilingual encyclopedia that was collaboratively edited by the world-wide web community, and soon became the most trusted source of knowledge.

Just like in the previous decades, the biggest change in lifestyle was probably for women. The Western woman was still busy rebuilding her identity and her role in society. For example, this was the first time in history that so many women were still single in their thirties. The average age for a woman to get married had progressively increased, but now it had reached a point that made it unlikely these women would ever become mothers or even wives. Single women in their thirties constituted de facto a new social class that never existed before.

### ***Death of the Hero***

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Among the many social transformations of the new century one stood out: the death of the hero. The generation growing up after the advent of cable news television had a fundamentally different kind of exposure to world news. Previous generations were fed radio or television news at a specific time of the evening, and shared that event with the entire nation. The entire nation was exposed to the same range of emotions. Not surprisingly, the response to a world event was relatively uniform across the entire nation. The fact that the news was limited to a narrow time window increased its emotional impact. As McLuhan said, the media created the message. Because the news were delivered in this fashion, they facilitated the emergence of hero figures. Bob Dylan was a product of that age. In the age of 24-hour live news, instead, that uniform

collective response was lost forever. People absorbed the news at different times in different ways. The Internet further diluted the emotional impact, as people could get the news when they wanted (not when the media delivered them). Inevitably, becoming a national hero became a lot more difficult. The demise of the national hero had a profound effect on all the arts.

Each decade in the history of rock music (the ultimate international koine) was marked by an international icon (a koine within the koine).

The 1950s had Elvis Presley (best selling artist for 40 years).

The 1960s had the Beatles (still the best selling band of all times).

The 1970s had Pink Floyd (still the best selling album-oriented band of all times).

The 1980s had U2 and Madonna, and already one could see the Atlantic divide getting wider, and a non-rock artist (Michael Jackson) surpassing all rock artists in generating worldwide hysteria.

The 1990s had very pale icons compared with their predecessors. No rock artist managed to get even close to the sales of non-rock artists such as Mariah Carey, Whitney Houston, Garth Brooks, Britney Spear, Boyz II Men, etc. The best selling rock albums were one-shot deals from artists such as Alanis Morissette and Hootie & the Blowfish whose popularity lasted only a few years. Radiohead were darlings of the mainstream press, but hardly recognized by the masses or identified with a social trend. Eminem opened the 2000s with a bang, but faded rapidly in the background as the decade progressed.

### ***Yet another definition of Rock Music***

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Rock'n'roll may (may) have been a well-defined genre, but starting with Buddy Holly the term "rock music" became fuzzier and fuzzier. The Beach Boys played surf music, and the Beatles' music was Mersey-beat, a variant of pop music. Dylan was a folksinger. Somehow they all got lumped into "rock music". The truth is that there was no "technical" definition of rock music to start with. During the following decades there was less and less of an agreement on what constituted rock music, as its purveyors swung wildly from jazz to world-music. By the end of the century, rock music included artists who played mainly electronic and digital instruments. The problem is that "rock music" was never a definition of the music, but a definition of the audience. Rock music was music for young white rebels. As those young rebels grew up, it lost its "young-only" quality. As times changed and people accepted the Establishment (maybe because they had fewer reasons to attack it), the "rebellious" quality was reduced to a mere search for originality. Thus rock music evolved into music for white originals. The music itself changed dramatically, but the audience that rock music had created basically continued to exist, mutatis mutandis, across generations. Thus an identity could be found in the audience, not in the stylistic attributes of the music.

The media were largely responsible for determining what that audience listened to, and therefore what rock music was. The media's defining power was already evident in the 1960s. Hendrix happened to be classified as a rock musician mainly because his records were reviewed in rock magazines and therefore sold to a rock audience. He might as well have been classified as a blues musician, or even a jazz musician: had his records been reviewed mainly by blues magazines, his audience would have been the blues audience, and therefore he would have been part of the history of blues music, not rock music.

Ultimately, the reason some musicians were considered "rock" is that rock critics and rock historians (such as me) wrote about them. The only consistent definition of rock music is, in a sense, that rock music is what i am writing about.

The only viable definition is a "use-based" definition: rock music is the set of all musicians that the rock community writes about. Thus Klaus Schulze (an electronic musician) makes rock music, but an electronic musician raised in the classical community does not make rock music, even if their styles are very similar: the difference between the two is that the rock press writes at length about Schulze.

It is not the listener who defines what is rock music, it is the reader.

### ***The Great Divide***

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Surprisingly, by the end of the century the white-black divide had not been erased at all. The world of popular music was still largely divided into white and black music. White music was mostly rock and its variations (whether heavy-metal or punk-rock). Black music was definitely not rock (hardly any black musician in heavy-metal or punk-rock bands) and mostly dance-oriented. Forty years after the peak of the civil-rights movement, there were virtually no white bands fronted by a black singer anywhere in the world. The majority of black musicians were still playing in all-black bands, and the majority of white musicians were still playing in all-white bands (or, better, bands with no black musician, because the number of Latin American and Far Eastern musicians in white bands had dramatically increased). White music was still largely "mind" music, while black music was still largely "body" music, although the corporeal music of the blacks often carried a more meaningful message than the intellectual music of the whites. Even when white musicians played black music (as it has been the case since the 1950s), they tended to do it with other white musicians rather than with black musicians. Black musicians, on the other hand, rarely bothered to play white music at all.

If one does not count the Jimi Hendrix Experience and Prince and the New Power Generation (neither of which was truly a band, as their titles imply), rock music had to wait until 1994 for a white band fronted by a black vocalist, Hootie & The Blowfish, to attain mainstream success. For all its widely advertised rebelliousness, unconformity and liberal lifestyles, rock music remained the most racially segregated art/industry of all.

On the other hand, this racial barrier continued to provide an invaluable creative source. After all, rock'n'roll, ironically, originated from the segregated society of the 1950s. Rock music originated from the wall that the Establishment had erected between white and black communities. Had they coexisted as equals, white teenagers may have never been so morbidly attracted to the music of black teenagers. And probably black teenagers would have been so integrated in the USA lifestyle that soul and rhythm'n'blues and hip-hop would have never happened. Ironically, it was, to some extent, the very racial nature of these genres that kept them in a permanent state of evolution/revolution.

### ***Rock music is ultimately the next generation's noise***

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For the first three decades rock music evolved in a rather turbulent manner. Every ten years or so a major socio-musical revolution caused a complete realignment of its aesthetic paradigm and induced a similar change in habits and values of young western people. Those revolutions lend themselves as generational dividing lines. The first one took place in 1955, when Chuck Berry and the other black rockers introduced a paradigm of rebellion to the USA lifestyle and a paradigm of bodily music. (Something similar took place in rhythm'n'blues music at about the same time).

A second dividing line was represented by the year 1966, when musicians such as Pink Floyd and Frank Zappa introduced a much more complex view of rock music. That led to the "psychedelic" and "progressive" sounds of the late 1960s and early 1970s. This time the music was either political (not just rebellious) or spiritual (not just anti-conformist). It was therefore a music for the mind, not the body, and that was, in retrospective, its major innovation: rock music became a more conceptual and more adult form of art than it had been in the 1950s and early 1960s. (Something similar took place in soul music).

A third dramatic change in direction came at the end of the 1960s, when the emphasis shifted from content to form, from "style" to "sound". It was the age of the electronic keyboards and, for the consumer, of the "hi-fi" stereo.

The fourth obvious dividing line is the year 1976, the "new wave", when musicians such as Pere Ubu, the Residents, Suicide, the Pop Group and Throbbing Gristle reinvented rock music as a rather depressing form of music, a music inspired by the violent and nihilistic "punk" aesthetic. It was a music of anarchy instead of order, and it marked a return to the body, away from the mind. (A parallel trend could be detected in funk/disco music and in hip-hop).

The fifth dividing line was a bit less obvious, as the 1980s witnessed an unprecedented multiplication of styles and a proliferation of musicians, but 1989 can be conveniently used as the year in which independent/alternative rock music took a different shape: the Pixies, Fugazi, Royal Trux, My Bloody Valentine, Godflesh and Tortoise (as well as Public Enemy in hip-hop) were the post-modernists of rock music, providing an "intellectual" reading of old styles, with an emphasis on the "emotional" impact that eventually led to grunge and emo-core.

Next came the age of drum'n'bass and trip-hop, that was basically another return to "sound" as opposed to "style".

The seventh revolution came with the mass adoption of electronic and especially digital devices. If electronic keyboards had simply expanded the spectrum of sounds, digital devices allowed musicians to conceive new ways of organizing those sounds. Digital music enjoyed an extra degree of freedom. Something similar happened in black music with "digital" producers and with soundsculptors such as Dalek.

Each age was not so much a rejection of the previous ages as a re-interpretation of the styles of previous ages. Hence the many "revivals" that took place in each decade.

And each age had a movement of reaction to this trend (Presley and the Beatles at the beginning, glam-pop in the 1960s, synth-pop during the new wave, pop-metal during the 1990s, and the digitally-arranged pop music of the digital era).

But, mostly, each age challenged the dogmas of the previous one. So much so that very few "fans" migrated from one generation to the next one, each generation remaining convinced that only mediocre imitation or noise was being produced by the following one. The mediocre imitations were indeed such (musicians who kept playing the same old music). But the "noise" was the new exciting music that only those in the new generation were capable of identifying with. Long-term, that "noise" was what mattered.

That "noise" was the history of rock music.

In a sense, this was the main link between each ages of "rock" music: it was meant to be incomprehensible to the previous generations.

### ***What is Rock Music? Part Two***

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At the turn of the century, after so many revolutions that had created so many subgenres, each one undergoing its own peculiar mutation, the term "rock music" became less and less meaningful. It was difficult to classify Pan Sonic or Vibracathedral Orchestra as rock music, but their albums were mainly reviewed by rock critics for rock publications. Even garage-rock or heavy-metal bands were becoming so experimental that they hardly related to the classics anymore. The world of the avantgarde had moved closer and closer to the world of rock music. It was not clear who

was what anymore. "Rock" had become a federation of genres rather than a well-defined genre.

This schizophrenia was already there in the 1960s, when rock music encompassed everything from Dylan's folk-rock to King Crimson's progressive-rock, and every decade added new subgenres. Eventually, rock music had become a genealogical tree of genres, each one owing its existence to some predecessor going back all the way to the generation of Chuck Berry. Rock music was never a uniform, monolithic style, but simply a historical chain of events: Chuck Berry begat the Stones who begat the Velvet Underground who begat Brian Eno who begat the new wave... etc. As the genealogical tree unfolds, one gets to musicians who play a music wildly different from Chuck Berry's, but owe their existence to a socio-musical revolution that started in the 1950s with rockers such as Berry. Thus it is "rock". But not quite.

"Rock" was born as a music of synthesis (of white and black music), and continued to remain essentially a synthesis of styles, from electronica to grindcore. Fundamentally, there was a need for a new term but nobody came up with one. Jazz also had evolved over the decades, but there had always been a prevailing jazz style (swing, bebop, free-jazz, ...) that played the role of center of mass for all the other jazz subgenres. Rock was a looser term because, at any point in time, no subgenre prevailed.

Rock music was born a music of and for young people (or, at least, young people thought so, not realizing how much their choices were being manipulated by the managers of the major recording labels). Rock music used to be a music for young people mainly because young musicians were the only ones willing to experiment, and young listeners were the only ones willing to listen to their experiments. This fact remained true to an extent throughout the following decades (each generation being reluctant to accept the styles in vogue among the new generations), but not as much as it used to be in the 1960s. The adults of the turn of the century were much more willing to listen to something "weird" than their parents had been, although there remained psychological resistance to accepting a style different from the styles one had grown up with. The gap between young people and adults was mainly due to the amount of new music that they listened to. Younger people enjoyed the huge advantage of having a lot more time to listen to music than older people. That, ultimately, was the factor that still created a gap between the generations. Despite this inevitable gap (due more to time constraints than to ideological differences), "rock" music was more "adult" than it had ever been. Both the average age of the musicians and the average age of the audience had increased dramatically from the 1960s. Thus rock music could not even be simplistically associated with young people anymore.

### ***Reshaping the music industry***

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In 1999 Shawn Fanning founded the Napster on-line music service that allowed anyone with a computer and a modem to share music files with others over the Internet. They could be played on the PC itself or on the portable MP3 devices (that had been introduced in 1998). Millions of Internet users did not need to pay outrageous prices for their favorite music: in fact, they didn't need to pay anything. Even after the "file sharing" phenomenon was reined in by a series of lawsuits, life was much improved for consumers: Apple introduced the on-line music service "iTunes", which legally sold 25 million songs during just the first year. For a long time record labels had ripped off the consumer by forcing the consumer to purchase CDs, regardless of how many songs of that CD a consumer wanted to hear. A completely new dynamics was created by iTunes: consumers were finally allowed to purchase just the song that they desired. The consumer was no longer a captive in the logic of the record labels. The first dogma to collapse was the dogma of the "album": the listener was free to download any song without having to purchase the entire album.

In 2001 sales for the record industry slipped 5% (their first decline in ages), a fact that was widely blamed on the on-line sharing services. The same year, Napster was found guilty of breaching copyright law and forced to suspend its service, but others took its place. In 2000 Warner remained the only USA "major", as Universal had become French, Sony was Japanese, EMI was British, and BMG was German. Clearly, the USA was less and less interested in the business of selling CDs.

The downfall of the record industry was long overdue and welcomed by just about everybody. But it was not the only anachronism still in place. As consumers became even more song-oriented, it became even more important to pinpoint a song heard on the radio. Alas, disc-jockeys continued the old habit of not announcing the title of a song and the name of the musician. Consumers remained powerless to actually know what song they just listened to. In the 2000s it remained easier to read a review of an album that one had never heard than to discover the title of a song just heard on the radio. Millions of potential sales were still hindered by the chronic stupidity of disc-jockeys worldwide, probably in cahoots with record labels that wanted consumers to buy CDs based on the marketing campaign and not on the basis of what the songs actually sounded like.

Another positive side-effect of the "music download" civilization was the demise of the unscrupulous critic. The availability of music on the Internet, and particularly of recent releases, had a healthy impact on one vital aspect of the music industry: critics. It freed thousands of critics (both professionals and amateurs) from the psychological deference towards the labels that sent them promos for review. For decades the press and the radio stations had to rely on friendly labels to send them free promos of new music. This created a master-slave relationship that never boded too well for the objectivity of the opinions expressed by the slaves (critics and radio stations). Hence the thousands of new releases routinely rated as "masterpieces" by so many critics (only to be downgraded one year later to the status of "failure"). Indirectly, the fact that in 2001 a new release could be downloaded anonymously, without fear of reprisal by the label, allowed the rock critic to become truly independent (for the first time ever). The rock critics who still depended on promos provided by the labels now had to face the competition of truly independent rock critics, who could care less whether the labels sent them promos or removed them from their mailing lists.

A little noted side effect of the digital download and of the consequent demise of the CD was the end of an illustrious craft that dated from the dawn of recording: the cover art. That art had peaked during the 1960s and 1970s, when each album cover was carefully designed by professional artists. The advent of the CD had downgraded the cover art, simply because the CD was smaller and did not allow the artists as much space. However, CDs could still come packaged in creative manners (instead of the environmentally-unfriendly plastic wrap). Once the industry shifted to the digital download, though, the cover art died. For the first time, the music was to be enjoyed with no visual complement.

### ***Superficial Listening***

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The 1990s had introduced technological innovations that changed both the way music was manufactured and the way music was consumed. Unlike the "record", that required a well-funded record label to manufacture and distribute, the compact disc had become cheaper and cheaper to manufacture, and the Internet had allowed an ever larger number of musicians to bypass the traditional distribution channels. Thus musicians were, de facto, in a position to record and release compact discs ad libitum.

The market for independent recordings was soon flooded with compact discs of mediocre quality (both artistic and technical). In a sense, the very concept of what a recording is underwent a dramatic evolution: instead of being the summa of a period (the best pieces composed during that period), it became merely a sample of the period's sound. Musicians paid less and less attention to crafting impeccable songs. They contented themselves with documenting their current sound with

a one-hour long recording of it. In a sense, there was a trend towards releasing the "demo" and never reaching the point of the finished product.

The consumer, faced with dozens of recordings by an independent musician, none of them expected to be a milestone, was, in turn, sampling them in the same superficial manner.

Thus the cardinal process of the 20th century (the process away from the melody and towards the sound) became also a process of moving from deep listening to superficial listening (just the opposite of what some musicians advertised).

Furthermore, a 30-year trend towards hi-fi equipment was dramatically reversed at the turn of the century with the widespread diffusion of lo-fi equipment. Whether the laptop or an MP3 player or a iPod, for millions of young people the device of choice to listen to music became a relatively low-quality device. If psychedelic music, cosmic music and even new-age music were basically the consequence of more and more sophisticated stereo equipment, the consequence of less and less sophisticated audio equipment was a lower degree of instrumental prowess (no matter how many layers of instruments were used to arrange a piece of music). The motivation to produce chromatically beautiful music was somewhat reduced.

### ***The Civilization of the Prosumer***

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Marshall McLuhan had predicted already in 1972 that technology would eventually enable consumers to become producers. Alvin Toffler's "The Third Wave" (1980) introduced the term "prosumer". Surprisingly, rock and dance music were the first fields in which their prophecies became reality. Three factors contributed to a major shift in the habits of kids of the middle class. An increased purchasing power (compared with their parents' generation) reduced the limitations of traditional entertainment (drive-in cinema, pub drinking, bowling and so forth). At the same time a highly programmed lifestyle (from childhood to graduation) reduced the percentage of time devoted to real social life (the kind of social life that kids in developing countries get from spending all their spare time in the streets with the other kids of the neighborhood). Finally, a surge in the availability of low-cost media production and distribution tools (video and audio production, distribution via the web) created a new form of solitary entertainment. These three factors (economic, social and technological) translated into a shift of interest from passive fruition (such as cinema and television) to active creation (typically on a laptop). It wasn't just an upgrade from playing electric guitar or the drums: it was a step up from depending on others (the band, the venue, the record) to being self-sufficient in doing, marketing and distributing one's creation. The transition from the electromechanical world to the digital world enabled the civilization of the "prosumer", a civilization in which the line between consumer and producer is becoming increasingly blurred.

### ***The Democratization of Culture***

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Rock music, as well as jazz music and all other genres of popular music, owed its existence to one of the most significant phenomena of the 20th century: the democratization of culture. Until then only the elite had a "culture" to talk about. Popular culture used to be ephemeral: itinerant shows, variety shows and the likes provided cheap and vulgar entertainment for the masses, but the masses themselves didn't take them seriously. During the 20th century an avalanche of technological innovations (phonograph, radio, cinema, television, LP, CD, walkman, iPod, DVD, MP3) made culture readily and cheaply available to the masses. A parallel process created a growing middle-class and therefore enabled more and more people to spend time and money on cultural events and artifacts. The combination of these two phenomena led to an unprecedented boom in popular culture that transformed popular culture into a driver of sociological change.



Technology was further democratized in the 1990s through the Internet revolution that literally enabled hundreds of millions of ordinary people to share and download in their houses all sorts of cultural artifacts, from music to videogames. Highbrow culture still existed but it was becoming less and less relevant because the gap in terms of audience was beginning to be colossal.

### ***Where to, Chuck?***

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Chuck Berry invented the paradigm of rock music: three minute melodic songs, mainly driven by the electric guitar over a rhythm section of bass and drums, and sometimes arranged with other instruments. Fifty years later the world audience of rock music had been served more than 100,000 collections of songs, for a grand total of more than one million songs. Every time a musician of the 2000s released an album that was a collection of three-minute songs, that musician had basically answered "yes" to the question "Does the world really need ten/fifteen more of these three-minute songs, so that the grand total goes from one million to one million and ten?"

No matter how much the magazines hailed the new album by this or that "next big thing" or "alternative artist" (obviously convinced of having a unique voice, a unique message and a unique set of refrains never heard before in the history of music), there was something terribly obsolete and (ultimately) tedious about listening to yet another batch of three-minute songs. The magazines hailed them as masterpieces, one after the other, but over a decade the same magazines would remember only two or three of the songs contained in all the "masterpieces" of an artist. This huge library of more than one million songs was fundamentally a junkyard. These boatloads of new songs were moving straight from the store to the junkyard after a brief stop in the CD player of a hapless consumer. Something was fundamentally wrong about an art whose main effect was to create the biggest garbage dump of all times.

Last but not least, the lyrics of a three-minute song are neither William Shakespeare verses nor Henry James novels, despite what most songwriters and most of their reviewers may think. Listening to a new three-minute song invariably meant listening to yet another bad example of storytelling or bad example of poetry oversold by reviewers as meaningful, poignant, touching, thrilling...

This was the mother of all crises facing rock music at the beginning of the 21st century.

### ***Destination: Earth***

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Whatever the answer to that existential question, and whatever the definition of the Anglosaxon music that used to be called "rock", during the 2000s it became obvious that the Anglosaxon countries had lost their monopoly of... Anglosaxon music. That music had spread throughout the world, and other regions of the planet, especially continental Europe and Japan, were producing as much quality and quantity as the USA and Britain.

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