

The History of Rock Music: 1955-1966

Genres and musicians of the beginnings

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The Counterculture 1965- 66

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

The Greenwich Movement

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The British bands changed the way rock'n'roll was played. At the same time, USA folk-singers were changing the way rock'n'roll was "consumed". The fusion of music and politics that occurred in the early 1960s had lasting effects on the very nature and purpose of rock music. Rock music became a primary vehicle for expressing dissent within the Establishment, and therefore one of the most relevant aspects of the "counterculture".

Even when the political element was not predominant, rock music came to adopt a stance that was "countercultural" in nature. Rock'n'roll had been discriminated against. Protest folk-singers had been discriminated against. There was a tradition that made rock music an "underground" phenomenon by nature.

The youth of the USA was still searching for an identity, the process that had begun with rock'n'roll. Underground music provided several ways to achieve that goal. Fans of underground music repudiated the passive kind of listening that was typical of pop music (humming the melodies that are played often on the radio, hailing the star that is publicized by the media) and adopted a more independent and critical judgment of music. They actually went the other way, preferring what was not famous, not publicized, not easy. They developed an alternative system of communication, "alternative" to the system of the mass media, alternative in the sense that it dealt with and promoted those phenomena that were ignored by the mass media. Being a minority became something to be proud of, not something to be ashamed of. They, discriminated against by the adult society, sympathized with all discriminated groups (blacks, foreigners) and considered them their peers. All of these attitudes had political overtones, which in some cases became explicit, and thus bridged alternative music and left-wing politics.

The revolution began with the folk-singers, who soon came to be identified as singer-songwriters. It all started with Bob Dylan, who would remain the leading persona of rock music throughout the decade.

[Bob Dylan](#) (114), born Robert Zimmermann, was a lot more than a singer of protest songs. While that's how he started, he soon revealed a lyrical and musical talent that was far more developed than in any other folk-singer of his or any previous generation.

Bob Dylan was the single most influential musician of the 1960s. He started the fire. He turned music into a form of mass communication. He galvanized a generation through folk songs that became anthems. Then he embraced rock music and re-defined it as a genre of metaphysical, free-form compositions. Then he turned his back to rock music and delved into country-rock. The entire world of rock music followed his every step. When Dylan went electric, everybody went electric. When Dylan went country, everybody did. His legacy is monumental. *Blowin' In The Wind* (1962) created the epitome of the finger-pointing protest song. *A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall* (1962) coined a new kind of folk ballad, which was prophetic, visionary and apocalyptic, in the vein of poets such as William Blake. *Mr Tambourine Man* (1965) opened the season of psychedelic music. The album **Highway 61 Revisited** (jun/aug 1965 - aug 1965), after his conversion to electric instruments, included *Like A Rolling Stone*, a somber six-minute portrait of a friend (a personal epic, not a generational one) and *Desolation Row*, a Dante-esque parade of tragicomic humanity, a metaphysical labyrinth of hidden meaning and universal mythology. **Blonde On Blonde** (jan/mar 1966 - may 1966), the first double-LP album ever, remains one of rock's all-time masterpieces: two lengthy, rambling, free-form, organ-driven elegies, *Visions Of Johanna* and *Sad Eyed Lady Of The Lowlands*, and a bunch of arcanelly haunting melodies (*I Want You*, *Absolutely Sweet Marie*, *One Of Us Must Know*) completely changed the landscape of rock music. **Basement Tapes** (jun/oct 1967 - jun 1975) and **John Wesley Harding** (oct/nov 1967 - feb 1968) closed that creative season. After sinking into the depths of country-rock, Dylan would resurrect a decade later with a new sound, the elegant fusion of folk-rock, tex-mex and gospel-soul expounded on **Desire** (aug/oct 1975 - jan 1976) and **Street Legal** (apr 1978 - jun 1978); a feat repeated a decade later with another synthesis of styles, the one embraced on **Empire Burlesque** (jul 1984/feb 1985 - jun 1985) and **Oh Mercy** (mar 1989 - sep 1989). One decade later, Dylan would still be surprising the rock audience, this time with **Time Out Of Mind** (jan 1997 - sep 1997), perhaps in the attempt to prove that he is as immortal as humanly possible.

The transition from the folk-singer to the electric singer-songwriter created all sorts of artistic opportunities. [Jesse Colin Young](#) (1) made one of the most innovative albums of folk music, **Young Blood** (? 196? - mar 1965), backed by jazz musicians. [Fred Neil](#) (1) was one of the most original artists of his era, and very few precedents can be found for his art. While Dylan descended from Guthrie, Neil descended from nobody: the music on **Bleecker And McDougal** (mar 1965 - may 1965) is blues-tinged psychedelia ante-litteram. [Tim Hardin](#) wrote *Reason To Believe* (1965), *If I Were A Carpenter* (1967) and *Hang On To A Dream*, in a vein tinged with blues and jazz. [Philip Sloan](#) was the Los Angeles songwriter who penned *Eve Of Destruction* (1965) for Barry McGuire, the first protest song to climb the pop charts, as well as Johnny "Rivers" Ramistella's *Secret Agent Man* (1966). [Richard Fariña](#) (who died at the age of 30) was the most literate of the group, as documented by **Celebrations For A Gray Day** (? 1965 - apr 1965). [Jackson Frank](#) was a USA guitarist and folksinger who moved

to England and familiarized with the crowd of the British folk-rock scene. He recorded only one album, **Jackson C Frank** (apr 1965 - dec 1965), in a style halfway between the erudite and the fairy tale.

[Neil Diamond](#), a veteran of the Brill Building, grafted elements of soul (*Solitary Man*, 1967), gospel (*Thank The Lord*, 1967), country (*Girl You'll Be A Woman Soon*, 1967), and even reggae (*Red Red Wine*, 1967), onto the format of the folk-rock ballad. In his best songs, such as *Cherry Cherry* (1966) and *I'm A Believer* (1967), catchy refrains coexist with exciting guitar riffs and rousing arrangements. A romantic at heart, Diamond composed some of the most romantic melodies of all times, best epitomized by *Song Sung Blue* (1972).

[Paul Simon](#) (2) was the poet who best captured the psyche of his generation. While Dylan was the spokesman of the peace marches and the campus sit-ins, Simon & Garfunkel represented the average, shy, introverted kid, lonely in his bedroom, distressed by post-puberal sensitivity. Simon did not write angry protest songs, but tender, fragile, ethereal, melancholy odes, notably *Sounds Of Silence* (1965), *I Am A Rock* (1966), *Mrs Robinson* (1968), *Bridge Over Troubled Water* (1969), *The Boxer* (1969). He employed the simplest and most recognizable of vehicles: vocal harmonies and the folk ballad. He fused them in an austere structure that had the magnificent translucence of the madrigal and the motet. On his own, Paul Simon (after breaking up with Art Garfunkel) shifted the emphasis on ethnic music, achieving a sublime fusion of western and African traditions on **There Goes Rhymin' Simon** (mar 1973 - may 1973), **Heart And Bones** (? 1981/?1983 - oct 1983), and **Graceland** (feb 1985/apr 1986 - aug 1986).

The Scottish minstrel Philip Leitch, better known as [Donovan](#) (2), represented the quintessence of the hippy ideals. The sweet, mellow, bucolic ballads of **Fairytale** (sep 1965 - oct 1965) evoked a world of peace and love, of communes in the woods. His experiments with eastern music and jazz, mainly on **Sunshine Superman** (jan/may 1966 - aug 1966), predated acid-rock and progressive-rock. Donovan was Dylan's alter-ego: Dylan was the crude realist, Donovan was the daydreamer; Dylan belonged to a historical period, Donovan lived in a transcendent Eden; Dylan was the crusader vowed to epic missions, Donovan was the hermit overwhelmed by nature; Dylan was the visionary prophet, Donovan was a humble friar. He would continue blending hippy elegies, Franciscan canticles, acid trips and Tibetan mantras (best in *Hurdy Gurdy Man*, 1968).

Another Briton, [Bert Jansch](#), recorded the melancholy and intimate **Bert Jansch** (sep 1964/jan 1965 - apr 1965).

Politically speaking, Dylan's counterpart on the West Coast was ["Country" Joe McDonald](#) (2), a legendary agit- prop performer during the heydays (1964) of Berkeley's student riots. Leading what was fundamentally an electric jug-band, he soon discovered San Francisco's hippies and LSD and managed to wed his political stance to acid-rock's visionary format on **Electric Music For The Mind And Body** (jan/feb 1967 - apr 1967) and **I Feel Like I'm Fixin To Die** (jul/sep 1967 - nov 1967).

Folk-rock

In the meantime, the wedding of folk and rock led to the brief fad of "folk-rock". Folk-rock was not much of an artistic movement: it was the invention of two producers (Tom Wilson, the one who "electrified" Bob Dylan and Simon and Garfunkel, and Terry Melcher, the one who "electrified" the Byrds). Folk-rock was a way to interpret the spirit (without reproducing the sound) of the Mersey-beat bands in a USA context. The "folk revival" had been a New York phenomenon, but folk-rock ended up being a California phenomenon as much as surf music. The [Beau Brummels](#) in San Francisco and the [Byrds](#) (3) in Los Angeles pioneered the "jingle-jangle" sound, a frantic accompaniment of electric guitars to a catchy folk melody (which was often sung in the multi-part harmony style of the Beach Boys).

As the band that co-developed (and popularized) folk-rock, acid-rock, raga-rock and country-rock, the Byrds were responsible more than anyone else for creating a USA sound (and, more specifically, a California sound) in the 1960s. Historically, they bridged the era of surf music (and Mersey-beat) with the era of acid-rock. In reality, there were three groups called Byrds: the folk-rock group, musically dominated by Gene Clark and best represented by *I'll Feel A Whole Lot Better* (1965) although best remembered for the Dylan covers; the psychedelic group, largely an invention of David Crosby; and the country-rock group. Their version of psychedelic-rock, as announced by **Fifth Dimension** (may 1966 - jul 1966), one of the earliest psychedelic albums, and perfected by **Younger Than Yesterday** (dec 1966 - feb 1967), was more complex and erudite than the average, borrowing elements from free-jazz and Indian music (*Eight Miles High* invented raga-rock). The Byrds also equated the "acid" trip with space exploration, thereby coining a form of "space ballad". When David Crosby left and Gram Parsons joined, the sound took a turn towards country music. **Notorious Byrd Brothers** (dec 1967 - jan 1968) was still an eccentric hodgepodge of acid-rock, raga-rock, pop and country, but **Sweetheart Of The Rodeo** (may 1968 - jul 1968) is one of the two albums credited with inventing country-rock. These three groups had in common two things: the name and Roger McGuinn's guitar.

Other California acts to emerge during the golden age of folk-rock were the [Turtles](#), who delivered the more traditional melodies of *Happy Together* (1966) and *Eleonore* (1968), and the hippie duo [Sonny \(Salvatore Bono\) & Cher \(Sarkasian\)](#), that penned the sentimental *I Got You Babe* (1965) and the dramatic *Bang Bang* (1966). The [Mamas & The Papas](#) employed sophisticated vocal harmonies à la Four Freshmen to fuel the celestial refrains of *California Dreaming* (1966), *Go Where You Wanna Go* (1966) and *I Saw Her Again Last Night* (1966), all written by their leader John Phillips, who also penned Scott McKenzie's ethereal hymn to flower-power *San Francisco* (1967).

The songs of these groups were celebrations of a new culture, the youth culture.

The New York bands of folk-rock were less obviously melodic. [Loving Spoonful](#), in fact, were a jug-band, and their *Do You Believe In Magic* (1965) and *Summer In The City* (1966) placed more emphasis on the instrumental arrangements (the latter included noises of the city).

Los Angeles' folksinger Jackie DeShannon wrote *The Great Imposter* (1962) for the Fleetwoods, *Come And Stay With Me* (1964) for Marianne Faithful, *Needles And Pins* (1964) for the Searchers, and *Bette Davis Eyes* (1973) for Kim Carnes.

Bobby Fuller sang the anthemic *I Fought The Law* (1966), written by Sonny Curtis of the Crickets.

[Tim Buckley](#) (122) synthesized a new genre of music by fusing folk, blues, jazz, psychedelic rock and chamber music. Very few rock musicians ever achieved the monstrous intensity and lyrical tenderness of his work. Buckley's songs were journeys through the psyche of the singer. Buckley was therefore more interested in mirroring the emotions of the soul than in emphasizing a melody. A Buckley song is a stream of consciousness. Buckley changed the very idea of what a folk or rock song is supposed to be. Tim Buckley also boasted one of the most original voices ever, a combination of African melisma, Tibetan droning, jazz scat and acid-rock wailing, a combination that set a new standard for any future vocalist. He turned the voice into an instrument of the orchestra, not just a vehicle for words. If **Goodbye And Hello** (jun 1967 - ? 1967) was simply a poor man's version of Dylan's **Blonde on Blonde**, the six lengthy compositions of **Happy Sad** (jun 1968 - ? 1968), performed by a combo that was the folk-rock equivalent of the Modern Jazz Quartet (notably Lee Underwood on guitar and David Friedman on vibraphone), coined an ethereal folk-jazz style that had no precedents (except, possibly, Fred Neil). After the more conventional **Blue Afternoon** (nov 1969 - feb 1970), Buckley pushed his intuitions to the logical conclusion on **Lorca** (sep 1969 - oct 1970), one of rock's all-time masterpieces. Here the music leaves this world, and enters an oneiric and metaphysical landscape. Buckley sings as if in a coma. Melodies appear and disappear in an atmosphere of lugubrious suspense. **Starsailor** (sep 1970 - nov 1970) is perhaps his most formally perfect album.

Another Los Angeles band, the [Buffalo Springfield](#) (1), with their angular and almost neurotic guitar-based instrumental parts, heralded a new era for folk-rock. Neil Young's compositions propelled their second album, **Buffalo Springfield Again** (mar/oct 1967 - nov 1967), into territories that were still unexplored.

Acid folk

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Other musicians used folk-rock to feed the counterculture. The [Fugs](#) (3) were the quintessential satirical/political group of the Sixties, the foremost parodists of the Establishment and defenders of the counterculture. Their obscene, agit-prop vignettes updated a tradition that dated from Chuck Berry's early hits and predated Frank Zappa's operettas. Their use and abuse of cacophony and collage was way ahead of their time. In 1966, the year they recorded *Virgin Forest* on their second album, nobody else was even thinking of using the studio to create what was pure sonic folly. They would later transform into a surprisingly musical outfit, finding enough inspiration to sustain at least **It Crawled Into My Hand, Honest** (? 1968 - ? 1968) and **Tenderness Junction** (jul/dec 1967 - ? 1968).

Their fellow conspirators the [Holy Modal Rounders](#) (11) would come into their own during the psychedelic season, coining a unique, drunk form of acid-folk on their two masterworks, **Indian War Whoop** (? 1967 - ? 1967) and **Moray Eels Eat** (? 1968 - ? 1968).

The only band that could compete with that tribe were the [Godz](#) (1), whose

masterpiece is the spastic, cacophonous **Contact High** (sep 1966 - ? 1966).

An even more unconventional stance was adopted by the [Nihilist Spasm Band](#) (1), formed in 1965 in Ontario (Canada), which used to perform blues-jazz numbers on home-made instruments (kazoo, gut-bucket bass, found percussions, slide clarinet, etc). **No Record** (? 1967 - ? 1967) is their classic album, displaying influences that range from New Orleans' spasm bands to Albert Ayler and Sun Ra.

The Los Angeles freaks

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The supreme genius of counterculture was the Los Angeles composer, arranger, freak and jester [Frank Zappa](#) (1939). Zappa was more than a brilliant and prolific composer. He was a new kind of composer, one who knew no stylistic barrier: he bridged rock and pop and rhythm'n'blues and jazz and classical music. And one who knew no rules of harmony: he would play anything that made sense to him, not to a certain tradition. Zappa co-invented the concept album (he even released a double album when most rock musicians were barely beginning to make LPs), the rock opera, progressive-rock. He was the first rock musician to consciously use the studio as an instrument. He did not just use the band or the orchestra as ensembles of instruments. In a post-modern vein, Zappa composed music using snippets of music inspired to pre-existing music: his unit of composition was not a "sound" but was an organized sound, that the listener could relate to an established genre. And he made no distinction between tv commercials, doo-wop, music-hall, classical ballets, jazz improvisation or dissonant music. A living musical encyclopedia, Zappa managed to excel in all of these genres. He could have been a giant in any of them.

Zappa implicitly realized that music is a non-representational art, and that's why folksingers added lyrics to the music. However, a stylistic quotation is a form of representational art because it relates directly to an aspect of society that the listener is familiar with. Zappa saw that, in order to make a statement about society, a musician can use the sounds that are stereotypical within that society, from commercial jingles to nursery rhymes to the silly voices of cartoons to any mainstream genre of music.

For better and for worse, his musical persona includes an odd aspect: a passion for satirical lyrics. He always seemed more comfortable wearing the clothes of the clown than rewriting the history of music. He always seemed to think of satire as his first and main art, and music as a sort of soundtrack to it. His satirical tone ranged from the childish joke to bitter sarcasm, and he tended to excel at the latter end of the spectrum. His favorite victim was hypocrisy, regardless of how it appears in society. His natural targets were televangelists, corporations, politicians, but also ordinary people, whether "dancing fools", "catholic girls" or "jewish princesses". He showed no mercy for the human species, and relentlessly exposed its vices and perversion. He made fun of virtually every race, people, profession, hobby, habit, job, ideology, religion, etc. on this planet. Most of his repertory is "political", but without actually being militant. Zappa was not a protester or an activist. He was merely a man who used his brain. It turned out that, in one of nature's most bizarre accidents, Zappa the satirical genius shared the same brain with Zappa the musical genius. Zappa debuted with three masterpieces that were eclectic cut-ups of popular styles turned upside down: the concept album **Freak Out** (mar 1966 - jun 1966), the rock operetta **Absolutely Free** (nov 1966 - may 1967) and the anarchic collage

of **We're Only In It For The Money** (feb/sep 1967 - mar 1968). Zappa turned orchestral with **Lumpy Gravy** (oct 1967 - may 1968) and then fine-tuned that idea with the six *King Kong* variations on **Uncle Meat** (oct 1967/feb 1968 - apr 1969) and with the 19-minute *Music For Electric Violin And Low Budget Orchestra*, off Jean-Luc Ponty's **King Kong** (mar/oct 1969 - may 1970). Zappa proved to be equally at ease playing melodic themes with a jazz band, on **Hot Rats** (jul/aug 1969 - oct 1969) and especially on **Burnt Weeny Sandwich** (late 1967/sep 1969 - dec 1969), that included the 22-minute *Little House I Used to Live In*, or deconstructing spastic free-jazz on the dadaistic masterpiece **Weasels Ripped My Flesh** (late 1967/sep 1969 - aug 1970). His self-indulgence knew no limit, but at least **Waka/Jawaka** (apr/may 1972 - aug 1972), **Grand Wazoo** (apr/may 1972 - nov 1972) and **Orchestral Favourites** (sep 1975 - may 1979) found a magical balance between his pop, jazz and classical propensities. His lighter vein, perhaps best summarized on **Roxy And Elsewhere** (dec 1973/may 1974 - oct 1974), always coexisted with his classical ambitions, as demonstrated on the Kent Nagano-conducted **Zappa** (jan 1983 - jun 1983) and on the Pierre Boulez-conducted **Perfect Stranger** (jan/apr 1984 - aug 1984), and with his fluent jazz idiom, as immortalized on **Jazz From Hell** (may 1982/? 1986 - nov 1986).

Possibly the greatest rock musician of all times, and certainly one of the most original and influential geniuses of the 20th century, Don Van Vliet, also known as [Captain Beefheart](#) (214), completely erased all musical dogmas and simply reinvented music on his own terms.

Formally, his style blends Delta blues, free-jazz, cacophonous avantgarde and rock and roll, but what is unique about Van Vliet's music is the oblique, skewed, manic, unpredictable and demented structure of his compositions. The desert (where he grew up) could be a better key to understand his art than any of the influences that one can hear on his albums. Along the way, Van Vliet also created one of the most original styles of singing ever, one that, again, revolutionized centuries of vocal music. The gruff, abrasive, werewolf-grade, warbling of Van Vliet beat the bluesmen at their own game: it did more than express a state of mind, it redefined what a state of mind is. Van Vliet's singing is a force of nature.

Van Vliet, who had already cut a record with Frank Zappa in 1959, formed the Magic Band in 1964. **Safe As Milk** (apr 1967 - sept 1967) presented their dadaistic take on the blues, but **Mirror Man** (nov 1967 - may 1971), recorded in 1967, is a better (albeit rawer) testament of the band in its prime, jamming aimlessly around a few trivial blues chords. After **Strictly Personal** (apr/may 1968 - dec 1968), a more "acid" album that was ruined by the producer, Van Vliet composed what is arguably rock music's main contribution to the history of music, **Trout Mask Replica** (apr 1969 - nov 1969). This masterpiece, that straddles the border between blues, jazz, rock and classical music, is a post-Cage-an study on tonality. He was also one of the wildest eccentrics of his time, and his music may simply be a one-to-one reflection of what was going on inside his blessedly deranged mind.

Unfortunately, Captain Beefheart and the music industry did not get along too well. Later, he managed to record at least two brilliant albums, **Shiny Beast** (unofficially recorded as **Bat Chain Puller** between feb/apr 1976; summer/autumn 1978 - ? 1979) and **Ice Cream For Crow** (? 1982 - sep 1982), but eventually disappeared from the music scenes and turned to painting. And the similarities between his songs and the art of painting became more obvious. The distance between Captain Beefheart and the rest of rock music is the same distance that separated Beethoven from the symphonists of his time.

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