

The History of Rock and Dance Music: 1966-1969

Genres and musicians of the Sixties

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The Age of the Revivals 1966-69

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

Blues revival

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When [John Mayall](#) (2) released the album **Bluesbreakers** (apr 1966 - jul 1966), featuring the former Yardbirds guitarist Eric Clapton, he defined, once and for all, a genre of rhythm'n'blues played by white European musicians, the epitome of "blues-rock", which soon became one of the strongest undercurrents of British rock music. It also laid the foundations for progressive-rock: **A Hard Road** (oct/nov 1966 - jan 1967), featuring new guitarist Peter Green, the lush jazz arrangements of the *Bare Wires Suite* (1968), the sophisticated lounge-music of the concept-album **Blues From Laurel Canyon** (aug 1968 - nov 1968) and of his masterpiece, **The Turning Point** (jul 1969 - nov 1969), featuring a drum-less quartet with guitarist Jon Mark and saxophonist Johnny Almond, the prelude to an ambitious **Jazz-Blues Fusion** (nov/dec 1971 - ? 1972). Fleetwod Mac, Colosseum and Mark-Almond (formed by those cohorts) would be the logical consequences of Mayall's continuing experiment with the blues.

In the USA, the equivalent of John Mayall was Al Kooper, the keyboardist who had invented the sound of Bob Dylan's *Like A Rolling Stone* and **Blonde On Blonde**, i.e. of rock music as we know it. He formed [Blues Project](#) (2), a band whose lead instruments were flute and organ and who concocted an atmospheric blend of blues, folk, pop and jazz on **Projections** (aug 1966 - nov 1966). Al Kooper, [Mike Bloomfield](#) (1), who had played on Paul Butterfield's and Bob Dylan's masterpieces, and former Buffalo Springfield guitarist [Stephen Stills](#) joined together to form the first "super-group" and recorded the **Super Session** (may 1968 - jul 1968), an album that marked the meeting of acid-rock, folk-rock and blues revival. Continuing to parallel Mayall's career, Kooper later gave the pop-jazz movement one of its most successful bands, the [Blood Sweat & Tears](#).

Mayall and Kooper inspired countless groups on both sides of the Atlantic. Case

in point, three seasoned British blues musicians (Jack Bruce, Eric Clapton and Ginger Baker) formed Cream, the first "power-trio". More than anyone else, it was [Cream](#) (1) who changed the face of British rock music. They took the fusion of blues and rock to places where it had never been before. They employed a level of group improvisation that was worthy of jazz. In fact, their music had basically three layers: a pop melody, lengthy solos inspired by free jazz, and a propulsive rhythm'n'blues beat. They indulged in guitar distortions and dissonant solos that were shocking for an audience raised on the Beatles. Even the soul-jazz melodies of *Sunshine Of Your Love* (1967), off **Disraeli Gears** (apr/may 1967 - nov 1967), and *White Room* (1968), off the baroque and psychedelic **Wheels Of Fire** (jul 1967-jun 1968/mar 1968 [live] - jul 1968), while not revolutionary, pointed towards a more sophisticated kind of "pop" than the childish refrains of Mersey-beat.

Peter Green's [Fleetwood Mac \(1\)](#) were one of the most creative and competent British bands of the blues revival. *Black Magic Woman* (1968), *Albatross* (1968), *Man Of The World* (1969) and *The Green Mahalishi* (1970) became well-respected standards.

Alvin Lee's [Ten Years After](#) offered a frenzied, loud, violent version of that blues-jazz fusion. The epileptic *Going Home* (1968), the hypnotic *Hear Me Calling* (1969) and the lugubrious *No Title* (1969) show the British progression from the Cream to hard-rock.

San Francisco itself attracted and harbored a sizeable blues community, which was influenced by the city's acid-rock: [Janis Joplin](#) (1), the most visceral vocalist of her time, whose wild antics were immortalized on **Cheap Thrills** (mar/may 1968 - jul 1968) but whose best album is probably the posthumous **Pearl** (sep/oct 1970 - feb 1971); [Steve Miller](#) (2), who penned the hallucinations of **Children Of the Future** (jan 1968 - apr 1968) and **Sailor** (aug 1968 - oct 1968) before turning to commercial music; and Mexican guitarist [Carlos Santana](#) (1), whose major career ranged from **Santana** (may 1969 - aug 1969), the album that found a common ground between Latin rhythm, blues guitar and psychedelic jamming and coined a new form of muzak for hippies, to, after his conversion to Buddhism and jazz, **Caravanserai** (feb/may 1972 - nov 1972) and especially the colossal live **Lotus** (jul 1973 - may 1974), both works inspired by Miles Davis and John McLaughlin and featuring Michael Shrieve's monster drumming.

At about the same time two Los Angeles musicians began playing the blues in unconventional formats that mainly tried to capture the authentic spirit of the past: [Taj Mahal](#) (3) produced albums that delve into the whole tradition of Afro-American music, such as **De Ole Folks At Home** (? 1968 - ? 1969), possibly his masterpiece, **Real Thing** (feb 1971 - ? 1971) and **Recycling The Blues & Other Related Stuff** (? 1972 - ? 1972); and [Ry Cooder](#) (2) would become famous with his thematic reconstructions of eras and styles (tex-mex, swing, rock'n'roll, etc), notably **Paradise And Lunch** (? 1974 - may 1974) and **Paris Texas** (premiered may 1984 - sep 1984).

A passionate and hoarse vocalist in the vein of the black shouters, [Bob Seger](#) (2) wed that tradition with his blue-collar (Detroit) roots. Starting with the anthemic *Heavy Music* (1966) and *Ramblin' Gamblin' Man* (1967), Seger embraced the emotional attack of Wilson Pickett and James Brown, and sprinkled it with touches of soul, southern boogie, hard-rock and folk-rock. Focusing on the ordinary life of the everyman, he later proceeded to pen the pensive atmospheres

of albums such as **Beautiful Loser** (? - apr 1975) and **Night Moves** (? 1976 - oct 1976).

Folk revival

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The other side of the coin was the British folk revival. Folk-rock came to Britain much later than to the USA, but it absorbed the many facets of psychedelic-rock, blues and jazz. [Pentangle](#) (2), formed by two veteran guitarists of the folk scene, Bert Jansch and John Renbourn, went beyond merely recycling traditional material. The lengthy suites *Pentangling* (1968), *Jack Orion* (1970) and *Reflections* (1971) contain more than a passing nod to jazz and classical music.

[Fairport Convention](#) (1) included much heralded musicians, but only guitarist Richard Thompson would stand the test of time. They mostly played covers and traditionals. Their album **Liege And Lief** (sep/nov 1969 - dec 1969), and its "grand folk suites" *Matty Groves* and *Tam Lin*, are typical of the pros (rock rhythm, virtuoso playing) and cons (sterile material) of the folk-revival movement. *Sloth*, from **Full House** (apr 1970 - jul 1970), and the folk-opera **Babbacombe Lee** (aug/sep 1971 - nov 1971) were probably more significant achievements (precisely because they were less aligned with the folk revival).

Pentangle and Fairport Convention became the leading groups of British folk-rock. Dozens followed in their footsteps, but the movement mostly failed to produce real value. Shirley Collins, a pivotal figure since the beginning of the English folk revival movement, released the concept album **Anthems In Eden** (jun 1969 - ? 1969), arranged in an almost orchestral fashion, but using ancient instruments.

The most erudite contribution to reforming folk-rock came from former Them vocalist [Van Morrison](#) (115), who quickly established himself as the most significant musician of his generation. The lengthy, complex, hypnotic and dreamy jams of **Astral Weeks** (oct 1968 - nov 1968) coined an abstract, free-form song format that blended soul, jazz, folk and psychedelia and was performed with the austere intensity of chamber music. The psychedelic and jazz elements came to the foreground on **Moondance** (nov 1969 - feb 1970), which boasted lush, baroque arrangements. Perhaps sensing the end of an era, for a few years Morrison abandoned those bold experiments and retreated to bland rhythm'n'blues songs, with the notable exception of *Listen To The Lion*, off **St Dominic's Preview** (? 1971/? 1972 - jul 1972). Then **Veedon Fleece** (nov 1973/spring 1974 - nov 1974) applied the same treatment to a pastoral, nostalgic and elegiac mood. Morrison's vocal style continued to evolve towards a unique form of warbling that bridged Celtic bards and soul singers. On albums such as **Into The Music** (spring 1979 - aug 1979), **Common One** (feb 1980 - aug 1980), **Beautiful Vision** (summer 1981 - jan 1982) and **Inarticulate Speech Of The Heart** (spring 1982 - mar 1983) Morrison employed disparate musical elements to mold compositions that are profoundly personal and even philosophical, that are both arduous meditations and elaborate constructions, that are, ultimately, more similar to classical "suites" than to pop songs. His stately odes displayed an increasing affectation, often sounding like pretentious sermons, but born out of a painful convergence of spiritual self-flagellation, tortured confession, shamanic trance, James Joyce's stream of consciousness, John Donne's metaphysical poetry and William Blake's visionary symbolism.

Neo-classical revival

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During this era of "revival", British musicians even mixed rock'n'roll with classical music. [Moody Blues](#) (1) were the prototype for much of Britain's "symphonic-rock", "techno-rock" and so forth. The mellotron, simulating the stately sound of the symphonic orchestra, and, in general a reliance on keyboards and flute rather than on guitar, as well as the passion for four-part vocal harmonies instead of rhythm'n'blues shouting, made *Nights In White Satin* (1967) the vanguard of rock music inspired by symphonic music. Pomp and pretentiousness, but also meticulous productions that consciously employed studio overdubbing as an addition to the band, permeate the concept album **In Search Of The Lost Chord** (jan/jun 1968 - jul 1968), a tribute to hippy mysticism and psychedelia, and the melodic fantasia **On The Threshold Of A Dream** (jan 1969 - may 1969).

[Procol Harum](#) invented a sound based on two keyboards (the equivalent of coupling a church organ and a gospel organ) but used it only to dress up stately, elegant and classical-sounding arias such as *A Whiter Shade Of Pale* (1967), *Homburg* (1967), *Conquistador* (1967) and *Salty Dog* (1969). The five-movement suite *In Held Twas In I* (1968) showed their limits, not their strengths.

[Nice](#) introduced the idea of keyboard-driven arrangements of classical and jazz music. Rather than writing new songs, and sticking to the pop format, the Nice relied on standards of the classical and jazz repertory, but deformed them through psychedelic-style jamming. They placed emphasis on virtuoso performances (particularly by keyboardist Keith Emerson) and on lengthy solos. It was the same idea of the Jimi Hendrix Experience and of Cream, except that the lead-instrument was the organ.

The revival of all revivals

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The [Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band](#) (3) was one of the greatest groups in the history of British rock, despite the fact that they were essentially a cross between the music-hall of the 1950s and the theatre of the absurd. Their songs were parodies of musical styles of the past, with lyrics that mocked various aspects of British life, but the eclectic collage of their repertory was, as a whole, much more than a mere parody. Albums such as **Gorilla** (? 1966/? 1967 - oct 1967) and **Doughnut In Granny's Greenhouse** (? 1968 - nov 1968) drew from every genre that came to hand; and in particular from everything that was "kitsch", running the gamut from operetta to doo-wop, from TV commercials to marching bands, from Broadway showtunes to big-band swing, from folk ballads to patriotic choruses, and employing a stunning variety of instruments and vocal registers. Their endeavor was, in fact, very similar to the post-modernist sabotage carried out in California by Frank Zappa. Miraculously, such an unhortodox cauldron of musical ingredients coalesced in songs that were concise and catchy. **Tadpoles** (? 1969 - aug 1969) tried to sell to the masses that hidden pop appeal. The baroque clockwork mechanisms of **Keynsham** (? 1969 - nov 1969) and **Let's Make Up And Be Friendly** (nov 1971 - mar 1972) were primed to detonate a

random sequence of irresistible melodies and sound effects. **Men Opening Umbrellas Ahead** (jan/apr 1974 - ? 1974), the first solo album by Bonzo Band's leader [Vivian Stanshall](#) (1), was no less anarchic. They were the greatest nonsensical artists since Dada, the musical equivalent of Monty Python and, perhaps, the best arrangers of their age. *Slush* (1972) is their testament: someone laughing in heaven, surrounded by angelic violins and organ.

American re-alignment

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In the USA the reaction to Dylan's political rock and to San Francisco's acid-rock was even stronger. The "realignment" involved just about every band, and marked a sudden change in sound and format. Rock music returned to the well-structured, short, melodic song, and rediscovered its tradition, both white (country) and black (blues).

In 1968 the "cosmic cowboy" Gram Parsons invented "country-rock": first with **Safe At Home** (dec 1967 - mar 1968), by the [International Submarine Band](#) (1), and then with **Sweetheart Of The Rodeo** (1968), by the Byrds, two albums that interpreted Nashville material and that employed country instruments along with rock instruments and a hippy attitude. Parsons continued the project with a new band, the [Flying Burrito Brothers](#) (1), that debuted with **Gilded Palace Of Sin** (late 1968 - feb 1969).

Parsons' country-rock spawned countless imitators, notably [Seatrain](#) (2), the new name of Al Kooper's old band, Blues Project, whose albums **Planned Obsolescence** (oct 1968 - dec 1968) and **Sea Train** (? 1969 - ? 1969) were far more accomplished than average (thanks to violinist Richard Greene and guitarist Peter Rowan).

The [Band](#) (11), Dylan's backing band, invented "roots-rock" by fusing folk, gospel, country, and rock on the magnificent albums **Music From Big Pink** (jan/feb 1968 - jul 1968) and **The Band** (jun 1969 - sep 1969). The well-crafted songs of these albums captured a private/domestic and rustic dimension that sounded like a paradox in the era of (urban) folk-rock and (public, communal) hippies. The Band recovered the humblest North-American styles: the Appalachian folk-singers, the gospel preachers of the southern denominations, the bluesmen, etc. At the same time, they soaked those styles in an austere composure, worthy of chamber music, and in a stately atmosphere, worthy of religious music. The interplay among drummer Levon Helm, bassist Rickie Danko, pianist Richard Manuel, keyboardist Garth Hudson and guitarist Robbie Robertson was unique in its balance of domestic and epic tones.

What the Band did for gospel, [Creedence Clearwater Revival](#) (4) did for Louisiana's swamp-blues. They wed the rhythms of the "swamps" with the melodies of folk-rock, the fervor of religious music, the rebellious fever of rock'n'roll, and the existential angst of Bob Dylan. Their best albums, **Bayou Country** (late 1968 - jan 1969), **Green River** (? 1969 - aug 1969), **Willy And The Poorboys** (fall 1969 - nov 1969), and **Cosmo's Factory** (? 1969/? 1970 - jul 1970), which is possibly their masterpiece, achieved a classic form of roots-rock that was full of sinister premonitions, evoking voodoo gothic but projecting it into their age and times. Somehow this unlikely blend coalesced into simple, catchy songs that embodied the quintessence of USA music: *Proud Mary* (1968),

Bad Moon Rising (1969), *Down On The Corner* (1969), *Run Thru The Jungle* (1970), *Looking Out My Backdoor* (1970), *Who'll Stop The Rain* (1970), *Have You Ever Seen The Rain* (1971).

The [Flamin' Groovies](#) (1), who self-produced their debut EP, **Sneakers** (? 1968 - ? 1968), years before indie-rock was born, released an album of virulent rock'n'roll and catchy refrains, **Flamingo** (mar/apr 1970 - ? 1970), that would influence subsequent generations (the progenitor of power-pop).

The [Shaggs](#) were three sisters from New Hampshire who played two guitars and drums, and who recorded one of the most "incompetent" records in the history of music, **Philosophy Of The World** (mar 1969 - ? 1969). Their "do-it-yourself" style and the sincere, intimate tone of their songs predated "lo-fi" pop of the 1990s.

Another "super-group" led the move towards a softer sound: [Crosby Stills Nash & Young](#) (1), formed by two former Buffalo Springfield members, a former Byrds and a former Hollies, popularized intricate vocal harmonies, languid counterpoints and mellow rhythms. **Dejà Vu** (jan 1970 - mar 1970) sounds like the laid-back, atmospheric and slightly psychedelic version of what the three had done with their previous bands. They virtually invented a new genre: the sunny, melancholy, thoughtful country/blues/soul that would be called "West Coast sound".

This style became popular worldwide, as proven by "soft" hits such as America's *Horse With No Name* (1972).

Ironically, just when rock music was beginning to "surrender", to give in to the pressure of the Establishment, and to give up its revolutionary ethos, it also staged its definitive triumph. 1969 was the year of Woodstock in the USA (300,000 people attended the three-day festival) and of the Isle of Wight (150,000 people attended the largest festival ever in Europe). The world's music market was worth two billion dollars: yet again, rock music had caused a boom in the recording industry. Yet again, a music born to rebel against the Establishment had helped the Establishment post record earnings.

Soul explorations

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At about the same time, Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* (1967) and *Ain't No Mountain High Enough* (1967, written by Nick Ashford and Valerie Simpson) and Norman Whitfield's *I Heard It Through The Grapevine* (1968) brought soul music to a sophisticated white audience. It wasn't just party music anymore: it was music with a dynamic and arrangements. Aretha Franklin's passionate interpretations, particularly *A Natural Woman* (1967, written by Gerry Goffin and Carole King) and *Chain of Fools* (1967, written by Don Covay), bridged the world of soul and pop, the way the Beatles had bridged the world of rock and pop.

At the same time, under the influence of James Brown's abominable songs, the dance element of soul music was being brought out by the likes of Dyke (Arlester Christian) And The Blazers, whose *Funky Broadway* (1967) gave a genre its name. San Francisco's [Sly and The Family Stone](#), led by black hippie

Sylvester "Sly" Stewart, whose *Dance To The Music* (1967) became the manifesto of that genre (and whose bassist Larry Graham is credited with inventing the "funk" bass lines), followed by the seminal album **Stand** (? 1968/? 1969 - apr 1969), with *Everyday People* and *I Want To Take You Higher*, *Hot Fun In The Summertime* (1969), *Thank You* (1970), the showcase for Graham's bass, *Family Affair* (1971), the first hit ever to use a drum-machine, and the sociological concept **There's A Riot Going On** (? 1971 - nov 1971).

New Orleans gumbo

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An unlikely contributor to the hippy civilization was the eclectic jazz and rhythm'n'blues pianist [Dr John](#) (3). Heir to the glorious and eclectic musical tradition of New Orleans, he concocted **Gris Gris** (? 1967 - jan 1968), an exuberant carnival of creole folklore that ran the gamut from orgiastic jams to swamp/voodoo blues, from African tribal rhythms to Mardi Gras-style fanfares. Dr John would later endorse the relaxed soul-funk-rock of the realignment, for example on **In the Right Place** (? 1972 - feb 1973), and eventually land a career as a distinguished jazz musician, notably with the solo piano collection **Plays Mac Rebennack** (aug 1981 - ? ?) extending all the way to the four-movement suite *Hurricane Suite*, off **Sippiana Hericane** (? 2005 - nov 2005).

One of the most competent rhythm sections in the history of modern music (drummer Joseph "Ziggy" Modeliste and bassist George Porter), was the backbone of the [Meters](#) (2), which in many ways stood as the natural link between New Orleans' rhythm'n'blues and funk music. Formed by veteran keyboardist Art Neville, they virtually redefined the sound of black music on **The Meters** (? 1969 - may 1969). The Meters also recorded **Wild Tchoupitoulas** (? 1976 - ? 1976), a collaboration with the tribe of black "Indians" that supervised the Mardi Gras carnival. Later on, Art and family members formed the [Neville Brothers](#) (1), whose albums concocted the ultimate New Orleans gumbo (reggae, jazz, rap, soul, voodoo chants and African polyrhythms), particularly on **Yellow Moon** (? 1989 - ? 1989).

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