

# The History of Rock Music: 1970-1975

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## Decadence 1969-76

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

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As usual, the "dark age" of the early 1970s, mainly characterized by a general re-alignment to the diktat of mainstream pop music, was breeding the symptoms of a new musical revolution. In 1971 Johnny Thunders formed the New York Dolls, a band of transvestites, and John Cale (of the Velvet Underground's fame) recorded Jonathan Richman's Modern Lovers, while Alice Cooper went on stage with his "horror shock" show. In London, Malcom McLaren opened a boutique that became a center for the non-conformist youth. The following year, 1972, was the year of David Bowie's glam-rock, but, more importantly, Tom Verlaine and Richard Hell formed the Neon Boys, while Big Star coined power-pop. Finally, unbeknownst to the masses, in august 1974 a new band debuted at the CBGB's in New York: the Ramones. The future was brewing, no matter how flat and bland the present looked.

### *Decadence-rock 1969-75*

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Rock'n'roll had always had an element of decadence, amorality and obscenity. In the 1950s it caused its collapse and quasi-extinction. In the 1960s it fell victim to the general political and moral re-alignment to old-fashioned values. But it never completely disappeared. Jim Morrison, Lou Reed and Kim Fowley kept the outrageous alive in rock'n'roll, as did the Rolling Stones in Britain. In fact, between 1968, when the Cockettes, a hippie-decadent musical theater troupe of drag queens, debuted in San Francisco, and 1974, when the Rocky Horror Picture Show was released, that aspect of rock music became a mass product. Britain called it "glam-rock", and began its genealogy with Marc Bolan's [T.Rex](#) (2). With albums such as **Unicorn** (early 1969 - may 1969), Marc Bolan played the role of link between Donovan and David Bowie, between the hippy culture and the glam culture. His fairy-tale lyrics and his tribal boogies belonged to a different age, but T.Rex's *Ride A White Swan* (1970) is the song that opened the golden age of glam-rock, and **Electric Warrior** (mar/jun 1971 - sep 1971) was the album that wed this genre to hard-rock, a crucial intuition.

However, it was [David Bowie](#) (2) who brought glam-rock to its commercial (if not artistic) peak. While his musical skills are dubious at best, there is no question that Bowie performed a Copernican revolution, turning marketing into the essence of his art. All great phenomena (and swindles) of popular music, from Elvis Presley to the Beatles, had been, first and foremost, marketing phenomena, but Bowie transformed that marketing phenomenon into an art on its own.

Bowie was, in many ways, the heir, no matter how perverted, of Andy Warhol's pop art and of the underground culture of the 1960s. He adopted some of the most blasphemous issues and turned them upside down to make them precisely what they had been designed to fight: a commodity. Bowie embodied the quintessence of artificial art, raising futility to paradigm and focusing on exhibition rather than on content. Bowie made irrelevant the relevant and relevant the irrelevant. Each element of his art is the emblem of a true artistic movement; however, the ensemble of those emblems constitutes no more than a puzzle, no matter how intriguing, of symbols, a roll of incoherent images projected against the wall at twice the speed, a dictionary of terms rather than a poem, and, in the best of hypotheses, a documentary of the cultural fads of his era.

After years of apprenticeship, that had only yielded one hit, *Space Oddity* (1968), futuristically arranged by Paul Buckmaster, Bowie was reborn as the sophisticated ultra-pathetic dandy of **Rise & Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars** (sep 1971/jan 1972 - jun 1972), whose main musical features were Mick Ronson's orchestral arrangements and Rick Wakeman's keyboards. What caused sensation was the show, not the music.

Then Bowie began his nomadic artistic life, an endless series of transformations: hard-rock, soul, disco-music and so forth. Following the naive foray into avantgarde of **Station to Station** (oct/nov 1975 - jan 1976), Brian Eno helped him design the "Berlin trilogy", for which Bowie adopted an electronic and expressionistic stance, in sync with the "new wave" of those years: **Low** (summer 1976 - jan 1977), **Heroes** (jul/aug 1977 - oct 1977), which is the best of the three, and **Lodger** (sep 1978/mar 1979 - may 1979), which is vastly inferior. The songs on these albums were becoming increasingly abstract. They still relied on atmosphere rather than on content, but the atmosphere was apocalyptic rather than sensationalistic.

Meanwhile, In the U.S.A. Alice Cooper was the prophet of bad taste. [Alice Cooper](#) (2) became the first star of horror-shock rock, relying on the most truculent and ridiculous show of the era. But Cooper had been a disciple of Frank Zappa's satirical operettas, mainly on **Pretties For You** (nov 1968 - mar 1969), and later became, first and foremost, a terrific craftsman of "teenage anthems" in the tradition of Chuck Berry. Epically defiant, *Under My Wheels* (1971) and *School's Out* (1972) represent the authentic, subversive spirit of rock'n'roll, while albums such as **Love It To Death** (oct/dec 1970 - jan 1971) continued to recycle and borrow themes from the vaudeville, Broadway showtunes, horror movies, and the Grand Guignol.

In Los Angeles the [Sparks](#) (1) set up a futuristic music-hall that borrowed from pop, soul, hard-rock and progressive-rock. But it was hardly outrageous at all: albums such as **Kimono My House** (dec 1973/feb 1974 - may 1974) were pure entertainment.

The true decadents of New York, rediscovered by David Bowie, were Lou Reed (ex Velvet Underground) and [Iggy "Pop" Osterberg](#) (ex Stooges). Iggy Pop's

**The Idiot** (jul 1976/feb 1977 - mar 1977) converted the monster to harsh electronic landscapes, the same metamorphosis carried out by Bowie's **Low**.

[Lou Reed](#) (16) became one of the most significant voices of the 1970s and 1980s. From the very beginning, the decadence of urban life was the central theme of his work. His approach wed the Velvet Underground's psychedelic depression with new expressionistic overtones that become explicit on his first major artistic success, **Berlin** (? 1973 - jul 1973). His early albums were devoted to a bleak analysis of the corrosive power of vice. Reed sang with almost no emotion, and his albums had the feeling of reportages. Reed's monotonous voice and light boogie rhythm virtually created a new kind of singer-songwriter, one who can be simultaneously a detached observer and an involved protagonist. **Metal Machine Music** (? 1975 - jul 1975) represented an odd parenthesis, but one that, in retrospect, announced industrial music and noise music. A double album of pure cacophony, it stands as the most unremitting sonic experience of the first 20 years of rock music. Inevitably, he was adopted as a sort of guru by the punk generation, and his **Street Hassle** (? 1977 - feb 1978) reflects that meeting of two generations. **Blue Mask** (oct 1981 - feb 1982) and **Legendary Hearts** (? 1982 - mar 1983) signaled adulthood, as Reed switched his focus from the basements of the junkies to the neighborhoods of the middle class. A humbler, gentler Reed began to sing about domestic and suburban issues. The ultimate extroverted became an introverted, anti-heroic and populist chronicler of the middle age. **New York** (may/oct 1988 - jan 1989) was, in fact, his masterpiece. In a sense, that album ended the pilgrimage that Reed had begun in Berlin. It ended his moral odyssey in his own city. It closed the circle. And, musically, it did so by quoting the roots of USA popular music, from folk to jazz to gospel to blues to country. The mournful tone of these albums found an application within the private sphere with two albums that are, de facto, requiems: one for Andy Warhol, **Songs For 'Drella** (dec 1989/jan 1990 - apr 1990), a collaboration with John Cale, and one for his friends who died of cancer, **Magic And Loss** (apr 1991 - jan 1992). They compose the modern equivalent of a Medieval fresco of the years of the plague.

In many ways, glam-rock and decadent rock in general were instrumental in bringing about the punk revolution.

In England [Mott The Hoople](#) (1) predated punk-rock with **Mott** (feb/apr 1973 - jul 1973), and Bill Nelson's [Be Bop Deluxe](#) predated new wave by fusing Hendrix's guitar neurosis and Eno's electronic paranoia, particularly on **Futurama** (? 1975 - may 1975).

In the USA, Johnny Thunders and his cohorts of tranvestites, the [New York Dolls](#) (10), played furious and catchy rock'n'roll on their debut album, **New York Dolls** (apr/jun 1973 - jul 1973). Their trash aesthetic descended from the Rolling Stones and the Velvet Underground, but their frantic pace descended from the rockers of the 1950s and from the surf bands of the early 1960s, while their anthemic melodies came from the Who and the Animals. But what made them dangerous were the fire power (all instruments were played like automatic weapons) and the attitude (not exactly consistent with the prevailing mood of re-alignment). Thunders went on to form the [Heartbreakers](#) (1), who were, basically, an updated version of the New York Dolls for the punk generation. The songs on **L.A.M.F.** (mar 1977 - oct 1977) were slogans, and the album as a whole was a personal diary.

The [Dictators](#) (1) were the clearest link with the Ramones. Their album **Go Girl Crazy** (aug/sep 1974 - mar 1975) was a blaspheme totem of junk culture. The band recycled rock'n'roll, surf music, folk-rock and Mersey-beat, but they played it in fast and loud manner of hard-rock, and added a demented, spastic attitude that transformed Frank Zappa's or the Fugs' satirical rock into a terrorist attack.

Jonathan Richman's [Modern Lovers](#) (1) played hypnotic rock'n'roll, a splendid recreation of the Velvet Underground sound which, released a few years later on **Modern Lovers** (fall 1971/apr 1972 - aug 1976), would introduce the punk generation to urban neurosis.

In Canada, Edgar Breau's [Simply Saucer](#) (1), who only released a single, played a mixture of free jazz, Pink Floyd, Stooges and the Velvet Underground. **Cyborgs Revisited** collects unreleased material (studio: jul 1974/live: jul 1975 - late 1989).

In Los Angeles, Kim Fowley invented the [Runaways](#) in 1975. They were quintessential Los Angeles teenage girls (including Joan Jett and Lita Ford) and musically incompetent. Fowley turned them into a glam sensation, trained them to play hard-rock and provided them with bubblegum-pop refrains. **Queens Of Noise** (feb 1977 - spring 1977) remains their quintessential outrage.

### **Heavy metal 1972-76**

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In 1968, Steppenwolf's *Born To Be Wild* had coined the expression "heavy metal". Heavy-metal soon became the USA term referring to hard-rock.

More than anyone else, it was [Blue Oyster Cult](#) (3) that defined the new genre. By assimilating an encyclopedic repertory of sonic graffiti (rock'n'roll, swing, Mersey-beat, blues-rock, psychedelia, hard-rock, southern boogie, honky-tonk) and mixing it with the sound of Who, Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath, this emanation of a decadent New York milieu (personified by their inventor, producer and composer Sandy Pearlman), became the flag-bearer of a new apolitical hard-rocking sound. References to satanic cults and to gothic/sci-fi B-movies on **Blue Oyster Cult** (jul 1969/oct 1971 - jan 1972) and **Tyranny and Mutation** (? 1972 - feb 1973) were carefully wrapped in a lattice of crude riffs and menacing rhythms. An increasingly theatrical and magniloquent approach, and a corresponding simplification of song structures, began with **Secret Treaties** (? 1974 - apr 1974), **Agents of Fortune** (? 1975/? 1976 - may 1976).

[Aerosmith](#) (3) well represented the link between heavy metal and the wild and depraved brand of rhythm'n'blues promoted by urban punks such as the Rolling Stones and the Stooges, the reference points for vocalist Steve Tyler and guitarist Joe Perry. Aerosmith's true spirit on **Toys In The Attic** (jan/feb 1975 - apr 1975) and **Rocks** (jan/mar 1976 - may 1976) was actually quite different from the loud and truculent cliché created by British hard-rock and pursued by B.O.C. Even ten years later, when they rejuvenated themselves on **Pump** (feb/jun 1989 - sep 1989), Aerosmith were more interested in drama, narrative and atmosphere than in "heavy" postures.

[Kiss](#) (1) were the exact opposite. They did indulge in all the stereotypes of the

genre, emphasizing monster grooves, loud guitars, satanic voices and sexist lyrics. **Kiss** (oct 1973 - feb 1974) took Alice Cooper's glam-rock and made it even less credible, emphasizing every possible aspect of their macabre and obscene antics. Their "songs" were brutal and monochord, relying on the repetition of very simple ideas. The refrains were as trivial as bubblegum music, but truculent beyond Black Sabbath.

The Australian band [AC/DC](#) (2) was one of the greatest heavy-metal bands of all times, and one of the most authentic acts of rock'n'roll. They embodied the wild, rebellious essence of rock music like few other bands before punk-rock. They were the opposite of the intellectual singer-songwriter or the brainy progressive-rock or the decadent glam-rock of the 1970s: they were not the brain and not the heart but the guts of rock'n'roll. Hoarse and feverish vocals (first Bon Scott and then Brian Johnson), and Angus Young's dirty, bluesy guitar licks (a combination already tested by Free in Britain) propelled the anthemic *It's A Long Way To The Top* (1975), *Problem Child* (1976), *Whole Lotta Rosie* (1977), *You Shook Me* (1980) all the way to the frenzied *Heat Seeker* (1988). Albums such as **Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap** (summer 1976 - dec 1976), **Highway To Hell** (feb/apr 1979 - jul 1979) and **Back In Black** (apr/may 1980 - jul 1980) were shots of unbridled hedonism.

[Journey](#) (1), formed by three California veterans, played competent but uninspired pop-metal with progressive-rock overtones. Neil Schon's shimmering guitar riffs propelled the energetic and feverish instrumental jams of **Journey** (late 1974 - apr 1975).

But [Boston](#) (1) were the archetype of pop-metal, and their album **Boston** (winter 1975/spring 1976 - sep 1976) would remain one of the all-time best-sellers.

[Rush](#) (2) re-invented the power-trio, which so far had been modeled on Cream. Albums such as the sci-fi concept **2112** (feb 1976 - mar 1976) offered a synthesis of Yes, Black Sabbath, King Crimson and Led Zeppelin. The use of synthesizers and the conversion to a more conventional format led to the pop-metal of **Permanent Waves** (sep/oct 1979 - jan 1980).

Southern rock was another source of inspiration for the early bands of heavy metal. Lynyrd Skynyrd's heirs, Florida's [Molly Hatchet](#), rediscovered the three-guitar sound, particularly on their second album, **Flirtin' With Disaster** (? 1979 - oct 1979); while the Allman Brother's sound (two guitars, two drums) was resurrected by 38 Special and hardened on their fourth album, **Wild Eyed Southern Boys** (sep 1979/jul 1980 - may 1981).

These bands largely defined the horizons of heavy metal for the 1970s.

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