

The History of Rock Music: 1976-1989

New Wave, Punk-rock, Hardcore

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College-pop

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

Athens 1981-86

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Throughout the 1970s, the southern states of the USA had developed a style of rock music based on bass and guitar boogie figures. It was loud and raw. It was a close relative of Chicago's blues-rock and of British hard-rock. It was also a vehicle for conservative messages that were at odds with the traditional ideals of rock music. The "rednecks" had coined their own dialect of rock music.

That was then. The new wave found a South that had greatly improved in all disciplines, from politics to art, and that had become as literate and tolerant as the North, if not as liberal as the West.

Punk-rock was never too popular in the South, though. Somehow music was still held to a moral standard that punk-rock definitely did not meet. On the other hand, the South's fast growing college population adopted the ethos and the aesthetics of the new wave and adapted it to melodic music. The result was an unusually intellectual brand of pop music, in sync with the revival of the Sixties but also in sync with the free spirits of the new wave. This "college pop" had its roots in the folk-rock style of the early 1960s and in the sprightly country-rock of the early 1970s, but it was contaminated by the fears and the neuroses of the age.

Geopolitics played a key role in redefining the map of rock music. Texas, which had led in the first part of the decade, was obscured by Georgia which would soon be obscured by North Carolina. What happened was a shift from the state of cowboys and oilmen to states with a strong aristocratic tradition. It was also a shift from the metropolis to the college towns (Athens, in Georgia, and Raleigh, in North Carolina). It was, finally, a shift from the mythology of the uneducated loser/loner to the mythology of the educated college kid.

When the spotlight moved to college town of Athens, in Georgia, something historical happened: a small town of the "province" competed for musical leadership with the

established rock empires of New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boston, Chicago and Detroit. It was a new epicenter for rock music. Here, the new wave spawned the quirky dance-music with Sixties overtones of the [B52's](#) (1), basically a synthesis of the three leading phenomena of the time (new wave, disco-music and Sixties revival), superbly documented on **B-52's** (? 1979 - jul 1979) by a surreal balance of two female singers reminiscent of the girl-groups, funky guitars and Farfisa-like electronic keyboards.

And the same town (in fact, the same circle of friends) spawned the neo folk-rock of [R.E.M.](#) (4), one of the most successful bands of all times. Pete Buck's Byrds-like Rickenbacker arpeggios, Bill Berry's martial drums and Mike Mills' lilting bass emphasized Michael Stipe's cryptic lyrics, middle-eastern cantillation, gospel-like call-and-response, soaring psychedelic refrains and oracle-like postures. The anthemic but irrelevant *Radio Free Europe* (1981) introduced to the surreal atmosphere of **Murmur** (jan 1983 - apr 1983), an album that basically created fairy-tale worlds for the listener to wander into (alas, angst-ridden ones) while relying on old-fashioned folk-rock foundations. *Fall On Me* (1986) refined their vocal harmonies and rhythmic whirlwinds, while **Document** (mar/may 1987 - sep 1987) revealed their melodic talent with a cornucopia of catchy hooks: *The One I Love*, *Finest Worksong*, *This Is The End Of The World*, etc. **Green** (may/sep 1988 - nov 1988) was another incredible batch of pop songs (including *Stand* and *Orange Crush*), but hardly a cohesive unit: it had the feeling of a compilation of hits. **Out Of Time** (sep/oct 1990 - mar 1991) and **Automatic For The People** (late 1991/jul 1992 - oct 1992) were pensive, brooding, and occasionally pretentious works, employing arrangements that often obviated to the lack of inspiration. **Monster** (apr/may 1994 - sep 1994) was the notable exception, a slab of hard-rock that yielded at least two of their masterpieces, *What's The Frequency Kenneth* and *Crush With Eyeliner*.

B52's and R.E.M. were only the tip of the iceberg, though, soon followed by [Pylon](#), [Swimming Pool Q's](#), [Love Tractor](#), each of them unusually unique and "diverse".

Don Seven, also known as Stephen Fievet and better known as [LMNOP](#) (1), predated "lo-fi pop" with his melodic tours de force, starting with the legendary **Elemen Opee Elpee** (? 1986 - jan 1987). As messy and uneven as they were, **Camera-Sized Life** (? 1994 - ? 1994) and **Pound** (? 1996 - ? 1996) were monumental tributes to the guitar-driven pop of Brian Wilson and Alex Chilton, almost encyclopedias or user manuals for that genre.

North Carolina 1981-84

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Another important school to come out of the South originated from the Sneakers, a Chapel Hill (North Carolina) band that released its first EP in 1976 and that comprised the young talents of [Don Dixon](#), [Mitch Easter](#) and [Chris Stamey](#). Dixon became an influential producer and songwriter. Easter formed [Let's Active](#) and also became an influential producer (e.g., for R.E.M.). Stamey joined Peter Holsapple and formed the [DB's](#) (1), one of the most talented bands of the psychedelic-pop revival. Their **Stands For Decibels** (summer/fall 1980 - jan 1981) was a passionate survey of baroque pop through the ages (early Byrds, **Pet Sounds**, **Sgt Pepper**, Big Star).

Mixing power-pop and folk-rock, several bands from the South attempted to match R.E.M.'s success: [Spongetones](#), [Guadalcanal Diary](#), [Connells](#). The best were probably Mississippi's [Windbreakers](#) (2), led by songwriters Tim Lee and Bobby Sutliff, who crafted **Terminal** (? 1984 - jan 1985) and the equally engaging **Electric Landlady** (may 1990 - jul 1991), collections of songs that relate to the ordinary world but don't really

"experience" it, preferring an aerial view, as if the songwriters were observers from another planet, more intrigued by the technique (a plethora of folk, pop and roots-rock styles) than by the subject.

Hoboken 1981-83

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Another college town, Hoboken, in New Jersey, spawned a similar school of literate pop. Pat DiNizio's [Smithereens](#) (2) were the merriest and most exuberant, but also (in a subtle way) the most erudite purveyors of power-pop. **Especially For You** (? - jul 1986) was a veritable encyclopedia of melodic music, quoting everybody from Tin Pan Alley to the Byrds' jangling folk-rock, from Mersey-beat to bubblegum novelties, from Bacharach's easy-listening to teen-idols of the Fifties. The tight and focused **Green Thoughts** (fall 1987 - mar 1988) yielded the catchy and memorable hooks of *Only A Memory*, *House We Used To Live In* and *World We Know*. The Smithereens had no problem repackaging their melodic style into fashionable pop-metal, namely with *A Girl Like You* (1989) and *Top Of The Pops* (1991).

Other pop bands of the area included Richard Barone's [Bongos](#) (1), whose early singles and EPs made up **Drums Along The Hudson** (oct 1979/mar 1981 - mar 1982), and the [Cucumbers](#).

One of the most unassuming and probably the most endearing folk-rock combo of the era, the [Tiny Lights](#) (14), also hailed from Hoboken. **Prayer For The Halcyon Fear** (? 1985 - ? 1986) capitalized on the talents of Donna Croughn (violin), John Hamilton (guitar) and Jane Scarpantoni (cello). The tenuous harmonies, studded with jazz and funk accents, and the gentle, celestial atmospheres, argued in favor of latter-day hippies, who frequently evoked Joseph Byrd's United States Of America. A stronger jazz, neoclassical and folk underpinning (accordion, saxophone, tabla, sitar, mandolin, violin, flute, mellotron, trombone, tuba) sustains the dreamy circus of **Hazel's Wreath** (? 1988 - ? 1988). A six-unit line-up crafted the elegant vignettes of **Hot Chocolate Massage** (? 1990 - ? 1990), which, given the combo's instrumental prowess, sound like mini-jams. Despite Scarpantoni's departure, **Stop The Sun, I Want To Go Home** (? 1992 - ? 1992) boasted baroque arrangements, but still retained that feeling of meticulous incubation of tender melodies. The ambitious **Milky Juicy** (? 1994 - apr 1994), almost a summary of their career's experiments, was basically progressive-rock with a soul. Equally versed in free-form jams and riff-driven rave-ups, the new line-up used its versatility to increase the emotional depth of the music.

The birth of lo-fi pop 1982-84

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The punk aesthetics (or, better, anti-aesthetics) applied to folk music had an unwanted side-effect: it encouraged ordinary kids to play ordinary songs without worrying too much about form.

Jad Fair's [Half Japanese](#) (2) were the most extreme case. They debuted with one of the most inept, clumsy, childish, lo-fi and indecipherable works of all times, the 50-song triple album **1/2 Gentlemen Not Beasts** (? 1977/? 1979 - dec 1980), that both Dada and Captain Beefheart would be proud of, and followed it up with the more cohesive **Loud** (? 1980 - apr 1981), but still in the spirit of demented, atonal, vehement and highly fragmented rock'n'roll. The frenzy was "punk", but everything else was still nameless. Fair

changed course with **Sing No Evil** (? 1984 - ? 1985), an album that was infinitely more musical than the previous ones, played by 13 professional musicians and boasting real melodies, rhythms and arrangements. Unfortunately, in the process of becoming a real musician, Fair lost the charm of the early anarchic years, but remained one of the pioneers of "lo-fi" and "noise" pop, as he proved when, for example, he refounded the "spoken word" genre with the 64-minute title-track of **Heaven Sent** (? 1997 - nov 1997).

Wisconsin's [Violent Femmes](#) (11) penned songs that sounded like pranks. The irreverent spasms of punk neurosis were overcome by the humorous effervescence of a jug band on **Violent Femmes** (jul 1982 - apr 1983). While not as bizarre as the Holy Modal Rounders, and not as mocking as Gordon Gano's vocals would imply (despite echoes of Jonathan Richman's juvenile dementia), their songs were unorthodox and their rhythms were the antithesis of "traditional" (Brian Ritchie on bass and Victor DeLorenzo on drums). The documentary vignettes of **Hallowed Ground** (jan 1984 - jun 1984) upped the ante, and **The Blind Leading The Naked** (jul/sep 1985 - feb 1986) aimed at mainstream pop.

[Beat Happening](#) was the trio led by Calvin Johnson, a living institution of the Olympia scene. The minimal, handicapped folk music of **Beat Happening** (nov 1983/apr 1984 - ? 1984) and **Jamboree** (? 1988 - ? 1988) encouraged hundreds of kids around the country to play primitive rock music, no matter how inept the musicians. Johnson launched more musical ventures. He recorded [Halo Benders'](#) **God Don't Make No Junk** (spring 1994 - jun 1994) with Pell Mell's keyboardist Steve Fisk and Built To Spill's guitarist Doug Martsch. And [Dub Narcotic Sound System](#), inaugurated with the instrumental album **Echoes From The Scene Control Room** (? ? - jul 1995), was Calvin Johnson's application of dub's creative process to rock music, although the results sounded more like the Contortions performing Memphis soul of the 1960s.

Ohio's [Guided By Voices](#) (1), was one of the most prolific projects in the country, and contributed to create the new stereotype of the "lo-fi" musician. The band, led by vocalist Robert Pollard and guitarist Tobin Sprout, began in 1986 to release an aberrant amount of albums that tended to sound all the same: second-hand psychedelic pop with minimal arrangements. The inspiration never changed, but the quality of the production peaked with **Propeller** (? 1991/? 1992 - ? 1992), **Vampire On Titus** (? 1993 - sep 1993), featuring new guitarist Mitch Mitchell, **Bee Thousand** (? ? - may 1994), perhaps the most phantasmagoric, and the more accessible **Alien Lanes** (early 1995 - mar 1995), before Sprout left Pollard and the routine became even more predictable. Pollard was backed by Cobra Verde on **Mag Earwhig** (? 1997 - may 1997), possibly his best album after the departure of Sprout.

The golden age of college-pop 1982-87

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College-pop spread around the country. It meant more than punk-rock to millions of kids who were not into street gangs. It resonated with the psyche of millions of kids who needed comfort rather than instigation. All in all, it probably divided the youth of the USA roughly in two camps: the street punks and the college kids.

The genre peaked in the second half of the decade with consummate popsters such as New York's [They Might Be Giants](#) (3), i.e. John Flansburgh and John Linnell, who retained the satirical, offbeat quality of the punk era. Actually, the wit of **They Might Be Giants** (? 1985/? 1986 - nov 1986) recalled the British operetta, the music-hall, the Bonzo Band, Frank Zappa, Todd Rundgren, and the bubblegum novelties of the Sixties. In fact, their early albums, particularly the effervescent and more professional **Lincoln** (? 1987 - nov 1987), were a perfect blend of punk and pop.

1988 - sep 1988), sounded like Andy Warhol-ian collages of pop cliches. Both albums feel like intricate mosaics. Both are the product of abstract reprocessing of icons of commercial muzak. Starting with **Flood** (? 1989 - jan 1990), an epic survey of stylistic slapstick (surf, ska, country & western, tex-mex, reggae, swing, vaudeville, doo-wop, zydeco), the sophisticated arrangements of subsequent albums would not add but detract from the effectiveness of their faux-pop tunes.

[Too Much Joy](#), also from New York, and [Colorblind James Experience](#), from upstate New York, were similar in many ways, possibly more clownish and less encyclopedic.

Chicago's [Green](#) (12) were among the great unsung heroes of the 1980s. The quantity and quality of elements that concurred to make **Green** (? 1986 - ? 1986) a phantasmagoric song cycle had few rivals: one could hear echoes of Buddy Holly, Ray Charles, Marvin Gaye, Kinks, Rolling Stones, Hollies, Tom Petty and many others while virtuoso vocalist Jeff Lescher spun his classic tales. **Elaine MacKenzie** (? 1987 - ? 1988) toyed with musical foundations that transfigured decades of rock'n'roll and soul, and the mesmerizing variety of **White Soul** (? 1989 - ? 1989) climbed new artistic heights. Both powerful and romantic, Lescher's songs stood out because they reached recesses of the heart that had been off-limits for his generation.

Don Fleming began his saga in Washington's [Velvet Monkeys](#) (1), who recorded an album of pop-rockabilly-surf-psychedelic Sixties revival, **Future** (? 1983 - ? 1983). After moving to New York, and meeting Mark Kramer, he formed [B.A.L.L.](#) (2) and proceeded to mock acid-rock on **Period** (? 1987 - ? 1987), a work highlighted by nonsensical jams. **Hardball** (nov 1989 - ? 1990) unleashed hard-rock vehemence amid the usual dose of sound effects and skewed melodies. The power-trio indulged in their self-glorifying instrumental jams. When he created [Gumball](#) (1), Fleming simply updated B.A.L.L.'s sound to grunge and noise-rock (and abandoned the clownish tones). Despite the elaborate arrangements, it sounded like a cross between the Who and Big Star, his most blatant stab at commercial success. Fleming reined in **Super Tasty** (? 1993 - ? 1993), but began to lose control over his own grandeur on the monstrous **Revolution On Ice** (fall 1993 - ? 1994).

Nebraska's [For Against](#) played a melancholy fusion of dance-pop and folk-rock on **December** (apr/may 1988 - ? 1988).

Peter Himmelman's [Sussman Lawrence](#) in Minnesota redefined kitsch and AOR on **Pop City** (? ? - ? 1984).

The songwriting team of singers and guitarists Devin Hill and Doug Robertson, Iowa's [Dangtrippers](#), penned joyful tunes of everyday life on **Days Between Stations** (? 1988 - ? 1989).

At the end of the decade, REM's influence was strong in the USA: Arizona's [Gin Blossoms](#) and [Sidewinders](#), Hawaii's [Dambuilders](#), Boston's [Buffalo Tom](#), Minnesota's [Trip Shakespeare](#) (later [Semisonic](#)).

Boston 1983-88

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Boston, ever the quintessential college town, boasted some of the most sensitive musicians, the ones who really spoke to the heart and soul of the college undergraduate.

[Dumtruck](#), who had debuted with **D Is For** (? 1983 - ? 1983) in a folk-pop vein à la R.E.M., crafted the melancholy ballads of **For The Country** (may 1987 - sep 1987).

The [Volcano Suns](#) (1), formed by former Mission Of Burma drummer Peter Prescott, progressed from the whimsical, intricate, disorienting rock'n'roll of **Bright Orange Years** (? 1985 - ? 1985) towards the baroque psychedelic-pop of the double album **Thing Of Beauty** (? 1989 - ? 1990), whose sound was both dense and spaced-out.

[Dredd Foole](#) transplanted the tradition of madcap street bards like [Larry "Wild Man" Fischer](#) to the age and ethos of punk on **Take Off Your Skin** (dec 1986 - ? 1987), that featured the Volcano Suns disguised as the Din, and eventually pioneering a haphazard, lo-fi fusion of folk-rock, punk-rock, acid-rock and free jazz on **In Quest of Tense** (mar 1993 - ? 1994).

Aimee Mann's [Til' Tuesday](#) devoted their career, and particularly the romantic concept **Everything's Different Now** (? 1988 - nov 1988), to delicate and introverted elegies.

In a similar vein, upstate New York's [10,000 Maniacs](#) (2) played atmospheric, intimate and intellectual soft-rock enhanced with vocalist Natalie Merchant's plaintive/sanguine colloquial tone. After venting their existential angst on **Secrets of the I Ching** (mar/jul 1983 - jan 1984), they opted for Fairport Convention's more conventional folk-rock on **The Wishing Chair** (spring 1985 - nov 1985). The fragile and pensive **In My Tribe** (mar/apr 1987 - jul 1987) was the first album to fully display Merchant's persona (not only her voice), although it led to the ecstatic easy-listening of **Blind Man's Zoo** (nov 1988/mar 1989 - may 1989). **Our Time In Eden** (? 1991/? 1992 - sep 1992), their commercial breakthrough, balanced the profound and the ethereal elements of their art and set the stage for Merchant's solo career.

The confessional style of two Boston-area bands was perhaps the epitome of college-pop at the turn of the decade. The [Throwing Muses](#) (2), formed by Kristin Hersh and Tanya Donnelly, debuted with the dramatic and enigmatic post-folk post-punk style of their **First** LP, released untitled (? 1986 - sep 1986), but later evolved into a sunnier pop outfit that eventually recorded the wiser, calmer **University** (fall 1993 - jan 1995).

The [Blake Babies](#) (2), formed at the prestigious Berklee School Of Music by teenager vocalist Juliana Hatfield and guitarist John Strohm, offered tenuous guitar-pop on **Earwig** (mar 1988/jul 1989 - aug 1989), and, more importantly, vignettes that vivisected the dramas of insecure kids of their age. Each song on **Sunburn** (summer 1990 - oct 1990) is, de facto, a metaphor for loneliness and nervousness. Their sound and their image were the antithesis of punk-rock.

A most creative and amusing form of pop was attempted by the [Pianosaurus](#), who performed **Groovy Neighborhood** (oct 1986 - jan 1987) with toy instruments.

West-Coast 1981-88

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Sacramento's [Game Theory](#) (1), led by Scott Miller, delivered another proto-classic of baroque-psychedelic power-pop à la DB's, **Lolita Nation** (? 1986/? 1987 - dic 1987), and Miller would continue making that same music (possibly more influenced by XTC's pastoral chamber-pop) with his next project, [Loud Family](#).

San Francisco's [Sneetches](#) started a local school that would become prolific in the 1990s.

Los Angeles' [Toad The Wet Sprocket](#) (1) were perhaps the catchiest of the batch, particularly on their third album **Fear** (jan 1991 - aug 1991).

Seattle boasted some great lost pop bands. Jeff Kelly devoted his [Green Pajamas](#) to naive psychedelic-pop, while the [Posies](#) (1), led by songwriters Jon Auer and Ken Stringfellow, added **Dear 23** (? 1990 - aug 1990) to the repertory of baroque pop.

Scott McCaughey's bizarre melodic genius was the brain behind the [Young Fresh Fellows](#) (3). Their early albums, such as **The Fabulous Sounds Of The Pacific Northwest** (winter 1984 - apr 1984), were collections of demented rock'n'roll with irresistible hooks, halfway between the Kinks and XTC. **The Men Who Loved Music** (dec 1986 - mar 1987) was still very eclectic, but focused more coherently on black music, and the sound kept evolving, becoming more professional and cohesive on **Electric Bird Digest** (mar 1991 - may 1991), until it achieved the elegant, surreal power-pop of **It's Low Beat Time** (? 1992 - sep 1992). Scott McCaughey later formed [Minus 5](#) (1), recruiting the the Posies' songwriter team of Jon Auer and Ken Stringfellow, as well as R.E.M.'s Pete Buck on bass. On their debut, **Old Liquidator** (? 1994 - jan 1995), they indulge in effervescent strings plucking, angelic synthesizers, West Coast-ian multi-part vocal harmonies, lilting piano figures, epic organ swirls, atmospheric guitar twangs and joyful guitar jangles.

Satire, 1988-89

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Lyrics often prevailed over music. In Pennsylvania, Mickey "Dean Ween" Melchiondo and Aaron "Gene Ween" Freeman created the saga of [Ween](#) (2), who represented the ultimate act of juvenile, caustic and lewd irreverence. **God Ween Satan - The Oneness** (? 1989/? 1990 ? - nov 1990) was their personal music-hall, a gallery of comic/erotic vignettes that clung to musical nonsense and variety. The duo mastered the silly melodies of the They Might Be Giants and the bizarre arrangements of Mark Kramer, and proceeded to create a wildly eclectic opus. **Pod** (jan/oct 1990 - sep 1991) was another continuously mutating beast, although subsequent albums tried to adopt a more unified format.

In Wisconsin, Jimmy and Dennis Flemion, the [Frogs](#) (1) played sloppy, demented acoustic folk in the vein of David Peel while poking fun at racial, sexual and religious dogmas, on **It's Only Right And Natural** (? 1986/? 1988 - ? 1989).

Two New York acts impersonated the best musical satire at the turn of the decade. [King Missile](#) (1) backed sarcastic poet John Hall with a combo of iconoclastic musicians (guitarist Stephen Tunney, percussionist David Licht, bassist Kramer). It was Tunney's eccentric persona that penned **Fluting On The Hump** (? 1987 - ? 1987) and especially **They** (? 1988 - ? 1988), before he left to launch Dogbowl, while the surreal romanticism of the Jonathan Richman-esque front-man was little more than an intellectual divertissement.

[Dogbowl](#) (12), the project of former King Missile's guitarist Stephen Tunney, used the rock opera **Tit** (? 1989 - ? 1989) as a pretext to unleash his mad imagination in a carousel of arrangements that relied on odd juxtapositions and unlikely relations. Its quirky pop vignettes and warped folk songs evoked the Kinks and early Pink Floyd, as they wed neo-hippie optimism with a nostalgic element and unstoppable verve. Tunney's melodic talent blossomed with **Cyclops Nuclear Submarine Captain** (? 1991 - ? 1991), an effervescent kaleidoscope of novelty numbers that sounded demented but also erudite the way Frank Zappa used to. Besides being a milestone of musical nonsense, it was also an ambitious

stylistic collage. Besides being an amateurish parody of pop music, it also evoked glorious musical misfits such as Captain Beefheart's Magic Band or the Holy Modal Rounders, and, last but not least, it mimicked the Bonzo Band's mordant cabaret and Kevin Ayers' decadent/exotic music-hall. The concept album **Flan** (? 1992 - ? 1992) summed up all of Tunney's influences in a colossal send-up of his musical age.

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