

The History of Rock Music: 1976-1989

New Wave, Punk-rock, Hardcore

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The New Wave of Pop and Synth-pop

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

Synth-pop 1979-84

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The melodic song was center stage in popular music for the entire 20th century. Pop was certainly not born with rock music. Pop was born with the record industry at the beginning of the century. Rock'n'roll forced a new form onto the pop song, by limiting the format to guitar, drums, bass and the occasional horns or keyboards. Indirectly, the spartan format of "pop" in "rock" music emphasized the melody itself: the Beach Boys or the Hollies could not rely on the orchestral flourishes of Burt Bacharach.

Pop survived the new wave but underwent a radical transformation. On one hand the neurotic/futuristic arrangements that were almost mandated by the new wave ended up complicating what was supposed to be a simple "song". On the other hand, the punk aesthetics of down-to-earth conciseness pulled the song format in the opposite direction, towards a bare and slim melodic line.

The net result of this bi-directional pull was to make pop songs much more interesting, to say the least.

It all started with electronic instruments, with Brian Eno's melodic futurism and with Kraftwerk's robotic rhythms. Premonitions came with Ultravox, XTC, B52's, etc. But the first full-fledged application of those ideas was a divine novelty, *Video Killed The Radio Star* (1979), recorded by the duo of keyboardist Geoff Downes and vocalist Trevor Horn, the [Buggles](#), who fused the silly melodies of the Sixties, the dance beat of disco-music and electronic arrangements. Then came [Gary "Numan" Webb](#), the first pop star of synth-pop thanks to the hits *Are Friends Electric* (1979) and *Cars* (1979).

In Japan, the [Yellow Magic Orchestra](#) (1), featuring Ryuichi Sakamoto, pioneered synth-pop with albums such as **Solid State Survivor** (? 1979 - sep 1979).

Synth-pop was perhaps the single most significant event in melodic music since Mersey-beat. [Orchestral Manoeuvres In The Dark](#) (keyboardists Paul Humphreys and Andy McCluskey) were emblematic in the way their synth+vocals equation progressed from the

catchy mini-symphonies *Electricity* (1979) and *Enola Gay* (1980) to the mainstream romantic ballads such as *If You Leave* (1986). [Depeche Mode](#) were gloomier and equally melodic, continuing to explore the combination of spleen and rhythm experimented by Roxy Music and Ultravox while keeping an eye on the discos with *Just Can't Get Enough* (1981), penned by Vince Clarke. Synth-heavy band [Human League](#) began with the industrial Kraftwerk-ian suite *Dignity Of Labour* (1979), but (after keyboardists Ian Marsh and Martyn Ware left) singer Philip Oakey turned it into a disco-soul unit with hits such as *Don't You Want Me* (1981).

When, in 1981, [Soft Cell](#) (vocalist Marc Almond and keyboardist David Ball) entered the pop charts (with the cover of a 1964 hit, Ed Cobb' *Tainted Love*), synth-pop became a deluge. And the duo became the preferred format, replacing the entire orchestra and rhythm section with a simply keyboard (first member) while retaining the equivalent of the old crooner (second member). It was old pop music delivered with modern instruments. The [Eurythmics](#) (androgynous chanteuse Annie Lennox, perhaps the best vocalist in this genre, and keyboardist Dave Stewart) found a miraculous balance of lyrical melodies and superb arrangements on their hits *Sweet Dreams* (1983) and *Here Comes The Rain* (1983). Former Depeche Mode keyboardist Vince Clarke teamed up with torrid vocalist Alison Moyet for [Yazoo](#)'s aggressive hymns, but his impressive skills as an arranger shone more brightly on the duo formed with Andy Bell, Erasure, which released *Oh L'Amour* (1986) and *Victim of Love* (1987). The [Pet Shop Boys](#) introduced existential angst, urban neurosis and an almost Brecht-ian pathos into the catchy melodies of *West End Girls* (1984), *Opportunities* (1986), *It's A Sin* (1987). Chris Lowe's arrangements were simultaneously luxuriant and claustrophobic, while Neil Tennant's vocals were almost anthemic.

The [Flying Lizards](#) (1), formed by avantgarde composer David Cunningham, were among the few outfits who dared experiment on this very successful format. **The Flying Lizards** (? 1979 - jan 1980) delivered lo-fi psychedelic disco-music halfway between the Canterbury school of progressive-rock and Brian Eno's electronic impressionism.

After Curtis' death, the surviving members of Joy Division adopted synthesizers, sequencers and drum-machines, renamed themselves [New Order](#) (1), and began a new career with the lush disco productions of *Blue Monday* (1983), *Love Vigilantes* (1985) and *Bizarre Love Triangle* (1986). While **Power Corruption And Lies** (jan 1983 - may 1983) tried to maintain the intellectual manners, subsequent albums focused on simpler melodies and rhythms, i.e. on more and more trivial disco-music.

New romantics 1981-83

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Electronic arrangements were no less important for the new generation of teen idols.

Revitalized by the general effervescence caused by the punk revolution, London's thriving disco scene was suddenly propelled to the limelight. Its "new romantics" concocted a calculated mixture of disco-music, swinging London, dolce vita, retro-futurism, sexual decadence and punk irreverence (a cocktail very reminiscent of Roxy Music and Ultravox), epitomized by Spandau Ballet (a band that mixed guitar, synthesizer, saxophone and rhythm section) and their **Journeys To Glory** (end 1980/jan 1981 - feb 1981).

[Duran Duran](#) became the Beatles of the "new romantic" movement with their obnoxious ballads: *Planet Earth* (1981), *Hungry Like The Wolf* (1982), *Reflex* (1983), *The Wild Boys*

(1984) and *A View To A Kill* (1985). As far as tv programming went, their only competition were [Culture Club](#), with equally inept ballads such as *Do You Really Want To Hurt Me* (1982) and *Karma Chameleon* (1983). These new teen-idols, as well as [Thompson Twins](#) (*Hold Me Now*, 1984), [Tears For Fears](#) (*Everybody Wants To Rule The World*, 1985), [ABC](#), [Heaven 17](#) (keyboardists Ian Marsh and Martyn Ware of Human League), basically recycled ideas from Peter Gabriel for the MTV generation and produced vastly over-rated glossy funk-soul ballads. Disco hits of the new romantics included Wham's *Wake Me Up* (1984) and especially *Freedom* (1984), perhaps the catchiest of the batch, boosted by George Michael's vocals, Frankie Goes To Hollywood's *Relax* (1983), helped by its sado-maso video and by the slick productions of Trevor Horn (former Buggles), Dead Or Alive's *You Spin Me Around* (1985), helped by Pete Burns' androgynous looks.

The prodromes of Lo-fi Pop 1980-83

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In the meantime, other bands worked very hard on the atmospheric element and coined a subdued, melodic style that implied a major revision of the whole concept of "pop" music.

The [Young Marble Giants](#) (1), featuring vocalist Alison Statton and guitarist Stuart Moxham, released **Colossal Youth** (nov 1978/nov 1979 - feb 1980), a collection of fragile, tenuous, spartan but no less eclectic and inventive tunes, that was the epitome of the "lo-fi pop" to come.

Another proto-experiment of "lo-fi pop" was attempted by the [Raincoats](#) (2), one of the few feminist bands, who played progressive-rock without the pomp and the pretentiousness. The moral fairy tales of **Raincoats** (? 1979 - dec 1979) used skewed melodies and odd time signatures with angelic nonchalance. **Odyshape** (? 1980/? 1981 - may 1981) frequently betrayed the debt to the Canterbury school, while the ethno-funk single *Animal Rhapsody* (1983) and **Moving** (oct/nov 1982 - jan 1983) revealed a competent and versatile band.

Lawrence Hayward's [Felt](#) (1) played hypnotic pop that was often derivative of Television and the Velvet Underground. The singles, such as *Something Sends Me To Sleep* (1981), *Penelope Tree* (1983), *Sunlight Bathed The Golden Glow* (1984) and *Primitive Painters* (1985), and the mini-album **Splendour Of Fear** (nov 1983 - feb 1984) created a dense and shimmering texture for the vocalist to face his Lou Reed-ian ghosts. Martin Duffy's keyboards embellished the lengthy enchanted madrigals of **Forever Breathes The Lonely Word** (? 1986 - sep 1986).

The [Blue Aeroplanes](#) were merely the vehicle for Gerald Langley's avantgarde rap/folk/poetry.

After initially wasting their talent with silly synth-pop ditties, [Talk Talk](#) (11) invented a new form of music, one in which a complex atmosphere is created out of slow, inorganic, inarticulate streams of simple sounds. The six lengthy, free-form, brooding and cataleptic ruminations of **Spirit Of Eden** (mar 1987/mar 1988 - jul 1988) pioneered "slo-core". Each one is abstract soundpainting in which melodies implode into gentle litanies, spectral whispers, psychedelic chanting and droning blues laments, as if Van Morrison's **Astral Weeks** and Robert Wyatt's **Rock Bottom** were played at half speed. The extended instrumentation of **Laughing Stock** (sep 1990/apr 1991 - nov 1991) pushed the envelop of their technique, and landed Talk Talk into the realm of chamber music.

Pop revival 1981-84

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The renaissance of pop music had many faces, and soon even the most traditional genres were revived by new stars: [Everything But The Girl](#) (former bedroom folksingers Ben Watt and Tracey Thorn, the ultimate in yawn-inducing lounge music); [Scritti Politti](#) (funk-jazz-soul ballads for the discos); [Prefab Sprout](#) (sophisticated easy-listening); [Style Council](#) (former Jam's singer Paul Weller, now impersonating the purely melodic soul singer); [Simply Red](#) (specialists of the romantic rhythm'n'blues ballad); [Swing Out Sister](#) (a sort of supergroup formed by former A Certain Ratio's keyboardist Andy Connell). The most original of the bunch were perhaps Paddy McAloon's Prefab Sprout, whose **Steve McQueen** (? 1985 - jun 1985) was a model of luxuriant kitsch music.

Scotland and Ireland 1979-86

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An inexhaustible source of pop bands was Scotland. Scotland had largely avoided punk-rock's devastation. It was, therefore, no surprise that Scottish pop tended to be the least inventive. [Altered Images](#), [Associates](#), [Orange Juice](#), [Josef K](#), led the avalanche circa 1980-81.

But, mostly, Scottish pop was predictable and emphatic ([Big Country](#), [Del Amitri](#), [Texas](#)). [Aztec Camera](#), in a folkish/nostalgic vein, and particularly [Blue Nile](#) (1), whose **A Walk Across The Rooftops** (? 1983/? 1984 - apr 1984) mixed Van Morrison's pathos and Robert Wyatt's spleen, were the only positive attempts to reform the genre.

Well into the 1980s, Scotland produced a new generation of pop bands, under the banner of "anorak pop" (so called from the simple jacket preferred by simple kids): [Pastels](#), [Biff Bang Pow](#), [Shop Assistants](#), [Weather Prophets](#), and the best of them all, the [Vaselines](#) (1), the most qualified disciples of the Buzzcocks, despite having recorded only a few EPs and one album, **Dum Dum** (dec 1988/jan 1989 - ? 1989).

Then came "twee-pop" (so called for its obsessive quest for the sweet, romantic, naive refrain), a genre best exemplified by [Talulah Gosh](#).

At the end of the decade, Scottish bands would still be refining the pop lingo ([Soup Dragons](#), [Fini Tribe](#), [Cud](#), etc).

Ireland had a fertile scene, although not very original and mostly derivative of U2 (the [Hothouse Flowers](#), [A House](#)). [Microdisney](#) were notable not so much for the fragile tunes of **Everybody's Fantastic** (aug 1983/apr 1984 - may 1984) as for featuring guitarist Sean O'Hagan (who would form the High Llamas) and singer Cathal Coughlan (who would form [Fatima Mansions](#)).

England 1979-88

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The least creative and most predictable of folk-pop schools was actually the British one, which also happened to spawn the most successful bands. [James](#), [Alarm](#), [McCarthy](#), [Dentists](#), [Dream Academy](#), [Red Lorry Yellow Lorry](#), were terribly predictable and old-

fashioned. Their only value was that they offered guitar-pop in an era in which synthesizers and drum-machines ruled.

By far the most successful of the guitar-pop bands of the late 1980s were the [Smiths](#) (2), with a style that was in many ways the opposite of the fashionable music of their time: intimate and tender instead of emphatic and/or macho. Their gentle melodies were grafted onto Stephen Morrissey's ascetic and vulnerable muezzin-like crooning and Johnny "Marr" Maher's transcendental guitar arpeggios. The introverted and hyper-sensitive lyrics captured the imagination of a generation that was locked into dark rooms, not roaming the streets, a generation that identified with Morrissey's desolate world and lonely life. The elegiac trance and gloom of *Hand in Glove* (1983), *This Charming Man* (1983), *What Difference Does It Make* (1984), *William It Was Really Nothing* (1984), *How Soon Is Now* (1984), and of the entire **The Smiths** (jun/oct 1983 - feb 1984) was demanding in emotional, not musical, terms. Despite being a content-oriented act, the Smiths ended their career with the formal perfection of **The Queen Is Dead** (winter 1985-86 - jun 1986) and singles such as *Girlfriend In A Coma* (1987). The Smiths defined the term "post-punk" better than anyone else: they had absolutely nothing in common with the punk civilization. In fact, they were for punk-rock what the Beatles had been for rock'n'roll: the antidote.

Paul Heaton's [Housemartins](#) crafted the quintessential album of the retro-pop movement with **London 0 Hull 4** (? 1985/? 1986 - oct 1986), basically a tribute to the history of rhythm'n'blues, and later morphed into the [Beautiful South](#).

On the other hand, the [Wedding Present](#) (2) were truly formidable popsters. Their career, framed by their two pop masterpieces **George Best** (summer 1987 - oct 1987) and **Watusi** (spring 1994 - sep 1994), is basically the story of David Gedge's growth as a songwriter. Different kinds of production lent *My Favourite Dress* (1987), *Brassneck* (1989), *Kennedy* (1989), *Dalliance* (1991) and *Corduroy* (1991) different kinds of "edge", but basically the Wedding Present's countless singles and albums constitute a uniform and coherent stream of consciousness.

However, the most original pop bands of England were the ones that offered a more personal interpretation of the old genres. The [Woodentops](#) (1), for example, created an intriguing new style based on feverish tempos (a mixture of T. Rex, Suicide and Feelies). Their singles *Move Me* (1985), *Well Well Well* (1985), *Get It On* (1986), as well as their album **Giant** (? 1985 - jun 1986), were more restless than exuberant.

The hooks of the [Primitives](#) (1) were simply irresistible. The breezy melodies of **Lovely** (nov 1986/early 1988 - apr 1988), which collected singles from the previous years such as *Thru The Flowers* (1986) and *Stop Killing Me* (1987), echoed Phil Spector's girl-groups, Mersey-beat, Tamla soul, and the whole iconic system of the Sixties.

Expanding on the Smiths' mellow, introverted aesthetics, Bob Wratten's [Field Mice](#) coined "bedroom-pop" with singles such as *Sensitive* (1989) and the gentle elegies of the mini-album **Snowball** (? 1989 - aug 1989).

On the other hand, by exaggerating the triviality of the idea, bands such as [Pooh Sticks](#) and [Wonderstuff](#) will end up coining the late-1980s equivalent of bubblegum music.

The folkish style of the Waterboys, the [Proclaimers](#) and the [Oyster Band](#) was interesting for a couple of months, but it smelled too strongly of Fairport Convention. Best of the bunch were Mike Scott's [Waterboys](#) (1), particularly on the eclectic and melodic **This Is The Sea** (feb/aug 1985 - sep 1985), featuring keyboardist Karl Wallinger and saxophonist Anthony Thistlewaite. [All About Eve's](#) **All About Eve** (sep 1987 - feb 1988) was also

rooted in folk music.

The Clash's crossover experiment was continued by Mick Jones' B.A.D., or [Big Audio Dynamite](#) (3), particularly on **This Is Big Audio Dynamite** (? 1985 - oct 1985) and **Megatop Phoenix** (? 1989 - sep 1989), that focused on a fusion of rock'n'roll, hip-hop and heavy metal within a pan-ethnic context. **F-Punk** (? 1995 - jun 1995) would be the crowning achievement of Jones' post-modernist stylistic con/fusion.

[Throw That Beat](#) were perhaps the most interesting of Germany's naive-pop bands. But Germany produced a number of catchy and surreal hits that marked those years: [Trio's Da Da Da Ich Lieb Dich](#) (1981), the glorious anti-anthem of the era, Nena's *99 Luftballons* (1983), Peter Schilling's *Major Tom* (1983), Johann "Falco" Holzel's *Der Kommissar* (1982) and *Rock Me Amadeus* (1984), etc.

International pop 1981-88

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The pop revival of the late 1970s and early 1980s was somewhat obscured by the grandiose renaissance of hardcore during the 1980s, but came back stronger towards the end of the decade.

Britain pretty much monopolized the pop scene in Europe, although Sweden managed to launch [Roxette](#) in the international charts with the elementary hooks of **Look Sharp** (mar/jun 1988 - oct 1988).

Canadian bands included: [Tragically Hip](#), [Blue Rodeo](#), [Pursuit Of Happiness](#) and [13 Engines](#).

Iceland's [Sugarcubes](#) (1), fronted by Bjork Gudmundsdottir, laid the foundations for the surreal dance-pop of the following decade with **Life's Too Good** (summer/fall 1987 - apr 1988).

Cui Jian inaugurated Chinese rock music with *Nothing to My Name* (1986), that became the anthem of the Tiananmen Square riots of 1989, and the album **Rock 'N' Roll On The New Long March** (? 1986 - fall 1986), and became an Asian star with *Wild in the Snow* (1991).

Australia and New Zealand 1978-86

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While Britain was awash in pop hooks, Australia had the neo-romantic elegies of Robert Forster's and Grant McLennan's [Go-Betweens](#) (1), at their best on **Before Hollywood** (oct 1982 - mar 1983), and the suave pop micro-symphonies of the [Church](#) (11). The latter began by taking melancholy, pathos and angst from the book of glam-rock and mixing it with the "jangling" guitars and the melodic progressions from the book of folk-rock, on songs such as *Unguarded Moment* (1981) and *When You Were Mine* (1982), dominated by vocalist Steve Kilbey. The atmospheric, oneiric arrangements of **Heyday** (winter/spring 1985 - jan 1986) reinvented their sound, emphasizing the semi-psychedelic counterpoint of guitarists Peter Koppes and Marty Willson-Piper, for example on *Under The Milky Way* (1988). The more complex constructions of **Sometime Anywhere** (summer 1993 - may 1994), which was de facto an album of the duo of Willson-Piper and Kilbey, led to the superb quasi-symphonic synthesis of **Magician Among The Spirits** (nov 1995/? 1996

- jun 1996), a production reminiscent of both King Crimson and Pink Floyd, their most versatile and intricate effort.

The [Hunters And Collectors](#) (1) came up with the inventive stylistic blend of **The Fireman's Curse** (summer 1983 - sep 1983) and with the acrobatic arrangements of **The Jaws Of Life** (jul 1984 - aug 1984).

Australia's pop scene of the 1980s was varied to say the least. [Midnight Oil](#) played political hard-rock. Men At Work concocted the greatest single of the era, *Down Under* (1983). The [Triffids](#) were grim and funereal on collections such as **Born Sandy Devotional** (aug 1985 - mar 1986). [Inxs](#) coined one of the most successful styles, straddling the line between tribal funk, hard-rock and glam-rock with *Devil Inside* (1987), *Disappear* (1990) and *Suicide Blonde* (1990). The [Cannanes](#) sang about personal and domestic issues.

Even better, New Zealand was raising a generation of bands that had absolutely nothing in common with Britain's super-commercial null-artistic-content star-oriented wave. New Zealand's anti-heroes created a new genre for the 1990s: "lo-fi pop".

The [Clean](#) were formed by four musicians who would remain among the most influential of their generation: vocalist David Kilgour, drummer Hamish Kilgour, guitarist Peter Gutteridge and bassist Robert Scott. The output of their first incarnation comprised a handful of songs: the single *Tally Ho* (1981), two EPs, the magnificent **Boodle Boodle Boodle** (sep 1981 - early 1982) and **Great Sounds Great** (? ? - ? 1982), and the last, aggressive single, *Getting Older*. The quartet indulged in quirky punk-pop, as if the Buzzcocks were covering Syd Barrett and the Velvet Underground. The idea was simple, but all revolutions started with a simple idea. The Clean recorded their first album, **Vehicle** (jul 1989 - jul 1990), when lo-fi pop had become mainstream, and came close to match their early class only on **Unknown Country** (fall 1995/mar 1996 - nov 1996).

The repertory of the [Tall Dwarfs](#), almost entirely recorded at vocalist Chris Knox's house, excels at skewed, drum-less melodies. The EPs, **Three Songs** (? 1981 - ? 1981) and **Louis Likes His Daily Dip** (? 1982 - ? 1982), the mini-album **Canned Music** (may 1983 - ? 1983) and the EP **Slugbucket Hairybreath Monster** (? 1984 - ? 1984) specialize in kaleidoscopic collages of ideas that rarely coalesce into a regular song but often "waste" enough cleverness worth an entire career. Their mini-album **Throw A Sickie** (? 1986 - ? 1986) was still a madhouse of improbable pop music, but subsequent albums (when the Tall Dwarfs had finally become a regular band) adopted a more traditional format.

Clean's guitarist Peter Gutteridge helped vocalist Martin Phillips form the [Chills](#) (1), whose *Kaleidoscope World* (1982), *Rolling Moon* (1982), *Pink Frost* (1984) and the EP **Lost** (mar 1984/mar 1985 - jul 1985) sprinkled cliches of folk-rock, psychedelia, garage rhythm'n'blues and Mersey-beat over naive lullabies. Several years later, a new line-up assembled by Phillips recorded the best Chills album, **Submarine Bells** (oct 1989 - feb 1990), more overtly inspired by the Beach Boys and Big Star, the first step towards the conversion to the mainstream that was endorsed by **Soft Bomb** (fall 1991/feb 1992 - jun 1992).

Clean's bassist Robert Scott (now on guitar) formed the [Bats](#) (1), who followed the same pattern: a series of singles and EPs, and finally an album, **Daddy's Highway** (jul 1986/may 1987 - oct 1987), that presented the band in a more conventional format. In this case, the format was folk-rock and soft-rock. The influence of R.E.M. got stronger on **Law Of Things** (sep/oct 1988 - ? 1989), but even the late **Couchmaster** (jun/jul 1995 - oct 1995) maintained their classic touch.

Closing the golden era of New Zealand's lo-fi pop, [This Kind Of Punishment](#) of the brothers Peter and Graeme Jefferies mixed folk-rock ballads and abstract pieces on **Beard Of Bees** (feb/oct 1984 - dec 1984); the [Jean Paul Sartre Experience](#) played a unique mix of R.E.M.-style folk-rock and Velvet Underground-ian psychedelia on **Love Songs** (sep/nov 1986 - ? 1987); [Scorched Earth Policy](#), featuring drummer Peter Stapleton and guitarist Brian Crook, released two EPs of mind-bending acid-pop, **Dust To Dust** (? 1984 - ? 1984) and **Going Through A Hole In Back Of Your Head** (? 1985 - ? 1986); the [Able Tasmans](#) (1) concocted the magical chamber pop of **A Cuppa Tea And A Lie Down** (? 1986 - ? 1986); and the [Verlaines](#) (1) delved into the melancholy and erudite kitsch of **Bird-Dog** (aug 1986/mar 1987 - ? 1987).

It was ironic, therefore, that New Zealand's biggest success came with [Crowded House](#) (formed by Split Enz's Neil Finn), a band that, instead, played Beatles-ian pop.

The towering personality in the second half of the decade was [Peter Jefferies](#) (12). The surreal all-instrumental pieces of **At Swim Two Birds** (nov 1986/jul 1987 - ? 1987) and the cryptic **The Last Great Challenge In A Dull World** (? 1989 - ? 1990), which alternates between Satie-inspired piano vignettes and atmospheric, depressed ballads à la Julian Cope, documented the artist's tormented personality. After indulging in more undecipherable unhappiness on **Electricity** (? 1992/? 1993 - jan 1994) and **Elevator Madness** (jan/jun 1996 - oct 1996), Jefferies crafted his masterpiece (returning to the purely instrumental format), **Substatic** (aug 1997/may 1998 - sep 1998), containing five nightmarish compositions that mix Steve Reich's minimalism, Faust and Peter Green's **End Of The Game** with his downcast folly.

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