

The History of Rock Music: 1976-1989

New Wave, Punk-rock, Hardcore

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Singer-songwriters of the 1980s

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

Female folksingers 1985-88

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Once the effects of the new wave were fully absorbed, it became apparent that the world of singer-songwriters would never be the same again. A conceptual mood had taken over the scene, and that mood's predecessors were precisely the Bob Dylans, the Neil Youngs, the Leonard Cohens, the Tim Buckleys, the Joni Mitchells, who had not been the most popular stars of the 1970s. Instead, they became the reference point for a new generation of "auteurs".

Women, in particular, regained the status of philosophical beings (and not only disco-divas or cute front singers) that they had enjoyed with the works of Carole King and Joni Mitchell. Suzy Gottlieb, better known as [Phranc](#) (1), was the (Los Angeles-based) songwriter who started the whole acoustic folk revival with her aptly-titled **Folksinger** (? 1984/? 1985 - nov 1985), whose protest themes and openly homosexual confessions earned her the nickname of "all-american jewish-lesbian folksinger". She embodied the historic meaning of that movement because she was a punkette (notably in *Nervous Gender*) before she became a folksinger, and because she continued to identify, more than anyone else, with her post-feminist and AIDS-stricken generation in elegies such as *Take Off Your Swastika* (1989) and *Outta Here* (1991).

New Yorker [Suzanne Vega](#) (1), with **Suzanne Vega** (jan/mar 1985 - apr 1985) and subsequent hits *Luka* (1987) and *Tom's Diner* (1987), which explored simple people's traumas in a subdued tone, and Bostonian [Tracy Chapman](#) (1), a black folksinger (a rarity) who was perhaps Joni Mitchell's more direct heir, mixing the personal and the political on **Tracy Chapman** (may 1987 - apr 1988), conquered the air-waves and made it popular for

young women to sing about their psyches.

Los Angeles boasted the most prolific school. **Melissa Etheridge** (oct/nov 1987 - may 1988), the debut by [Melissa Etheridge](#) (1), was wild and passionate, and her delivery was the closest to Janis Joplin's of any acoustic folksinger, especially in gospel and r&b-infected numbers such as *Bring Me Some Water*.

Who's Gonna Save The World (? 1987 - oct 1987), by [Cindy Lee Berryhill](#), **Union** (? 1986/? 1988 - apr 1988), by [Toni Childs](#), and **The Indescribable Wow** (? 1988 - aug 1988), by (Leslie) [Sam Phillips](#), exploited the underground success of these folksingers to launch pop careers.

The most genuine street experience was depicted by Texas-born [Michelle Shocked](#) (2). She recorded the humble and fiery **Texas Campfire Tapes** (may 1986 - nov 1986) in the spirit of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, singing about the issues of her (punk and post-feminist) generation. Her songwriting peaked with the electrifying **Short Sharp Shocked** (? 1988 - aug 1988), but then Shocked began a stylistic pilgrimage that took her to visit the era of jazz big-bands on **Captain Swing** (? 1989 - oct 1989), folk and blues of the early days on **Arkansas Traveler** (? 1991/? 1992 - apr 1992) and gospel (on her unreleased fifth album). She finally managed to wed her populist passion and her jazz-blues sound on **Kind Hearted Woman** (mar 1994 - mar 1994), her most poignant work, reminiscent of John Mellencamp's rural epics, and to synthesize her musical explorations on the erudite **Deep Natural** (jun 2000/? ? - apr 2002). Despite her tormented biography and rebellious attitudes, Shocked was fundamentally a collector of sonic icons à la Ry Cooder.

That standard of female folksinger migrated to the Bay Area via [Barbara Manning](#) (1), who had sung on two legendary folk-rock albums such as 28th Day's **28th Day** (? 1984 - dec 1984) and World Of Pooh's **The Land Of Thirst** (nov 1987/jan 1989 - ? 1989). Her **Lately I Keep Scissors** (jun 1986 - ? 1988) was one of the most intimate and harrowing confessions of the era.

Two Los Angeles-based songwriters who came from the background of saloon-oriented roots-rock and Nashville-ian country music stood out. [Lucinda Williams](#) (1) proved to be a worthy heir to Gram Parsons' progressive country-rock on **Lucinda Williams** (jun 1988 - ? 1988) before going pop with **Sweet Old World** (? 1991/? 1992 - aug 1992) and relocating to Nashville with the nostalgic and philosophical **Car Wheels On A Gravel Road** (? 1995/? 1998 - jun 1998). [Victoria Williams](#) (1) went in the other direction when she followed **Happy Come Home** (? 1986 - ? 1987), arranged and produced by Van Dyke Parks, with **Swing The Statue!** (? ? - ? 1990), an eclectic and austere collection that mixed her childish warble, elegant post-modernist studies, and personal journeys to the otherworld, while evoking Tom Petty, Van Morrison and Leonard Cohen. It was fitting that she eventually struck a stylistic balance with the chamber ambience of **Musings Of A Creekdipper** (? 1996/? 1997 - jan 1998).

A more traditional take on folk and country was advocated in Georgia by

the [Indigo Girls](#) (1), i.e. Amy Ray and Emily Saliers, whose vocal harmonies and country guitars penned introspective journeys such as **Strange Fire** (? 1987 - oct 1987) and especially **Indigo Girls** (? 1988 - feb 1989).

Canada 1980-88

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Canada boasted two of the greatest female voices of the time (and of all times).

[Jane Siberry](#) (23) was, first and foremost, a versatile and poignant "actress". Rarely had such a plain voice engineered such a phenomenal web of emotions. **No Borders Here** (? 1983 - apr 1984) mixed romantic ballads, oneiric meditations and lugubrious psychodramas. Her eclecticism was sober and artless, but actually extraordinary. The music drew inspiration from the music-hall, easy-listening, tv commercials, off-kilter disco-music as well as from folk and rock music. Siberry did not hesitate to absorb anything in order to confer maximum incisiveness to her hyper-realistic streams of consciousness on the female condition. The balance of an almost childish persona and erudite, post-modernist arrangements was also the scaffolding of **Speckless Sky** (spring 1985 - sep 1985), a work that further expanded the psychological and stylistic range of her pieces. That sonic overload reached monumental proportions on **The Walking** (spr/sum 1987 - feb 1988), amid lush, jazzy, funky, electronic arrangements. Siberry's delirious imagination had reached a terminal point: **Bound By The Beauty** (spring 1989 - aug 1989) regressed to an acoustic setting (and to a "rootsy" feeling). However, **When I Was A Boy** (jun 1991/jan 1993 - aug 1993), a collaboration with producer Brian Eno, was even more avantgarde, a lattice of intricate filigrees immersed in an eerie ambience and scoured by a crowd of voices (whispered, insane, epic, fearful, catatonic, traumatized, numbed). The ghosts of Van Morrison and Tim Buckley hovered over **Maria** (sep 1994/apr 1995 - aug 1995), an almost surreal meeting of Freud and jazz. Siberry's acrobatic fusion yielded one of the most disturbing experiences in the history of popular music.

It took [Mary Margaret O'Hara](#) (10) four years to complete the avantgarde concept **Miss America** (dec 1984/summer 1988 - nov 1988). O'Hara's quirky voice was an instrument in itself, a super-human fusion of avantgarde techniques (such as those pioneered by Meredith Monk) and gospel/soul styling. Coupled with her sophisticated blues and jazz arrangements, it made for memorably intense atmospheres. After the commercial failure of this masterpiece, her second album was never released.

An even more personal and moody style was coined in Canada by [Sarah McLachlan](#) (1). She debuted with **Touch** (? 1987/? 1988 - sep 1988), a collection of miniature acoustic settings handcrafted like jewels. With the cold and stark **Solace** (? 1990/? 1991 - jun 1991) she developed into a melancholy and pensive chanteuse who could transcend her realistic topics and achieve a sort of sorrowful trance.

Eccentrics 1982-86

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The new wave allowed solitary and fiercely independent musicians to find an audience. Such is the case with [Jandek](#) (Sterling Smith), in Texas, who released over 30 albums between 1978 and 2000, and [Stevie Moore](#) (1), in New Jersey, who released more than 100 records, cassettes and discs between 1973 and 2000, starting with the hilarious **Phonography** (? 1974 - mar 1976).

The crazy genius of [Daniel Johnston](#) (4) blurred the line between the convivial joker and the tragic bard. Despite mental illness and an erratic lifestyle, his quest for unadulterated pop was meant to be no-nonsense. His home-made cassettes, beginning with the blissful meanderings of **Songs Of Pain** (? 1980/? 1981 - ? 1981) and staging an early exploit with the jovial and naive **Hi How Are You** (? 1983 - sep 1983), introduced a character who was ideologically and musically closer to Jonathan Richman than, say, Syd Barrett. While these early cassettes only partially revealed the full contours of Johnston's time-warp, **Yip/Jump Music** (may 1983 - summer 1983) gave meaning to his primitive, spartan art. **Continued Story** (? 1985 - dec 1985), his first real studio recording, and **Respect** (? 1984 - jan 1985) contained snapshots of greatness, so Johnston's masterpiece, **1990** (? 1988 - jan 1990), did not come as a surprise. Its merry-go-round of catchy ditties and mad romps composed a demonic concept. The path towards a more accessible sound began in earnest with **Artistic Vice** (jul 1991 - ? 1991), the first album on which Johnston fronted a real band, and **Fun** (? 1993/? 1994 - sep 1994), featuring two Butthole Surfers (Paul Leary and King Coffey). **Fear Yourself** (? 2002/? ? - mar 2003), basically a collaboration with producer Mark Linkous (Sparklehorse), highlighted his melodic talent.

A veteran of the new wave, Pere Ubu's vocalist [David Thomas](#) (23) continued the insane program of Pere Ubu's modernist primitivism (or primitive modernism), relying on the same lethal combination of Captain Beefheart-ian vocal transgressions, grotesque and lyrical jamming, spastic dance tempos (or absence thereof). **The Sound Of The Sand** (jan/jun 1981 - oct 1981), that gathered old cohorts such as Anton Fier, Allen Ravenstine, Mayo Thompson and Ralph Carney, as well as expats of British prog-rock such as Chris Cutler, John Greaves and Richard Thompson, set the course once and forever: frantic convulsions and cartoonish accompaniments; abstract mini-sonatas for acoustic instruments and electronics that display the casual euphoria of circus and fair music; vocals that radiate candid childishness and proclaim utter nonsense; pyrotechnic lullabies and rigmarales that lose their thread in merrily apocalyptic soundscapes; a vast and demented range of moods. **Variations On A Theme** (mar 1983 - jun 1983), featuring Thompson, Fier, Cutler and Lindsay Cooper, was a work obsessed with Thomas' favorite mood, a mood that is neither tragic nor comic but a perfect (and impossible) fusion of the two. The further deranged picaresque adventures of **More Places Forever** (jul/sep 1984 - may 1985), with Cooper, Cutler and Tony Maimone, betrayed the erudite amalgam of Bertold Brecht, jazz, James Joyce and Dada. **Monster Walks The Winter Lake** (nov 1985 - mar 1986) was perhaps his most accomplished work, due to the terrific

chamber quartet of cellist Garo Yellin, keyboardist Ravenstine, bassist Tony Maimone and accordionist Daved Hild. They performed free-form chamber jazz-rock pieces that duly emphasized the voracious absurdity and agonizing madness of the vocalist. **Blame The Messenger** (sep 1986 - jan 1987), which was in a sense his "rock" album, showed that the border between Pere Ubu and David Thomas' solo work was merely an imaginary line (Cutler, Jim Jones, Maimone and Ravenstine were, de facto, a typical rock line-up). Thomas' oeuvre as a whole was a premonition of the universal judgement.

As an adult, [Alejandro Escovedo](#) (3), who had played punk-rock with the Nuns in San Francisco, country-rock with Rank And File (1982) in Los Angeles, and roots-rock with the True Believers (1986) in Texas, became one of the most solemn voices of his generation. The melancholy and bleakly autobiographic **Gravity** (jan 1992 - sep 1992) was a post-party hangover crossed with Nick Drake's moribund dejection. **With These Hands** (? 1996 - apr 1996) proved that orchestral music and rock'n'roll can coexist without sacrificing the outpour of emotions and confessions. The darker **The Boxing Mirror** (dec 2005 - may 2006) recast his humble ditties and rockers as moody, meditational elegies.

California 1985-88

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One of the most original albums of the era was crafted by former Wall Of Voodoo's vocalist [Stan Ridgway](#) (10): **The Big Heat** (? 1985 - ? 1986), a set of tragic, sinister, noir tales set to martial, epic and/or danceable rhythms, enhanced by mourning or nostalgic strings, and imbued with Ennio Morricone's sense of destiny.

Another veteran of the Los Angeles scene, [Dave Alvin](#) (ex-Blasters) specialized in moral and realistic vignettes, starting with **Romeo's Escape**, at first out in England as **Every Night About This Time** (? 1986/jun 1987 - dec 1987).

San Francisco was graced by the isolated voice of [Chris Isaak](#) (2), a leftover from the "Sixties revival" movement who internalized Roy Orbison's romantic crooning, Elvis Presley's sobbing tenor, languid lounge music, Ennio Morricone's epic soundtracks, and the Ventures' atmospheric instrumentals. The melancholy and stoic mood of **Silvertone** (? 1984 - feb 1985), well rendered by subterranean guitar strumming, revealed an existential malaise that was not desperate and not frightened, but rather impotent in the face of an immanent and universal force, as if contemplating a nirvana of absolute and eternal sorrow. **Chris Isaak** (? ? - dec 1986) was an equally compelling show of desolate private masses and unfocused photographs of a distant grey landscape. His art peaked with the trance-like recital of *Wicked Game* (1989), despite the fact that **Heart Shaped World** (? 1988 - jun 1989), **San Francisco Days** (? ? - apr 1993) and **Forever Blue** (? ? - may 1995) offered more lively and less personal reproductions of the 1950s and 1960s.

When he debuted in 1988 with a home-made lo-fi cassette, [Smog](#) (14), the alias of Bill Callahan, was a further exaggeration of Isaak's manic

depression. A superb architect of fatalist and oneiric atmospheres, Callahan devoted *Smog* to the paranoid exploration of an obsessive theme, the theme of a life that slowly fades away in nothingness. *Smog* identified so deeply with his poetry of loneliness that his songs seemed to lull himself into an intoxicating state of apathy and languor. Like Nick Drake before him, *Smog* conveyed the dismal sense of angst felt by one who did not want to live in a world that he did not love. With the brief, primitive and minimal compositions of ***Sewn To The Sky*** (? ? - ? 1990) and ***Forgotten Foundation*** (? ? - may 1992), *Smog* experimented a format of gloomy litanies set to irrational arrangements that recalled Daniel Johnston. ***Julius Caesar*** (? ? - jul 1993), instead, introduced a sophisticated composer and arranger, no matter how spectral and tragic the mood. Songs that ran the gamut from expressionist psychodrama to neoclassical lied, and often sounded like a rehearsal for Lou Reed's funeral, reached deep into the singer's alienation. The even more "mundane" approach of ***Wild Love*** (? ? - mar 1995) refined *Smog*'s chamber pop, the artist spinning his rosary of self-flagellation in a solemn tone, no matter how dark the catacomb in which he was buried alive. On albums such as ***Red Apple Falls*** (oct/nov 1996 - may 1997), *Smog* became a master of scripting soundtracks for an ordinary daily life: melodies borrowed from pop, country and classical music hinted at inner tragedies that never surface but simmer in absolute emptiness.

Also based in San Francisco, [Carraig DeForest](#) was a childish and irreverent folksinger in the vein of Jonathan Richman who accompanied his lullabies with a ukulele on ***I Shall Be Released*** (? ? - may 1987).

Popsingers 1982-86

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Several singer-songwriters rediscovered "pop" melody from the vintage point of the Sixties revival, particularly Michigan's [Marshall Crenshaw](#) (1), whose ***Marshall Crenshaw*** (jan 1982 - apr 1982) evoked memories of Buddy Holly, and Los Angeles' [Tommy Keene](#).

[Matthew Sweet](#) (2) was a product of the era (and of the land) of R.E.M. He coined a kind of simple, melodic ballad that drew from Big Star's power-pop and the Byrds' jangling folk-rock. Despite the impressive cast (Jody Harris, Fred Maher, Chris Stamey, Anton Fier, Don Dixon, Bernie Worrell, Adele Bertel), Sweet played most of ***Inside*** (? 1985 - ? 1986) on electronic keyboards and drum-machines. Thanks to the dual guitars of Robert Quine and Richard Lloyd, ***Earth*** (? 1988 - ? 1989) and ***Girlfriend*** (? 1990 - oct 1991) presented a far more intriguing sound. While paying homage to the classics of guitar pop, Sweet maintained a tone that was slightly neurotic and off-kilter (à la Television). The intricate group sound of ***Altered Beast*** (jan/feb 1993 - jul 1993) crowned his personal calvary, while the slick production of ***100% Fun*** (? 1994 - feb 1995) hinted at mainstream pop. The coupling of gentle melodies, introverted lyrics and raw guitars would become one of the most abused cliches of the following decade.

[Ben Vaughn](#), from New Jersey, was a nostalgic bard whose ***The Many Moods*** (? 1985 - ? 1986) harked back to the classics of rhythm'n'blues and

rockabilly.

Britain 1981-88

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Britain had a very minor scene for singer songwriters, who were mainly veterans of punk-rock and of the new wave. They seemed mainly interested in recreating sounds of the past. Basically, they reinvented kitsch for the post-punk generation: [Lloyd Cole](#), a master of easy-listening; [Paul Roland](#), an aristocratic and decadent bard who excelled in medieval and gothic themes, such as on **Danse Macabre** (? 1987 - ? 1987); [Jazz Butcher](#) (Pat Fish), a witty and whimsical observer; [Martin Newell](#) (who also wrote Captain Sensible's best songs), an elegant XTC-style pop composer; [World Party](#) (ex-Waterboys Karl Wallinger), an even more baroque compendium of melodic music; [Peter Murphy](#), the former Bauhaus vocalist and gothic icon, who converted to the orchestral and electronic ballad; [Nikki Sudden](#) (Nicholas Godfrey), the former Swell Maps, a nostalgic rocker; his brother [Epic Soundtracks](#) (Paul Godley), another orchestral pop singer in the tradition of Frank Sinatra and Burt Bacharach; [Marc Almond](#), the former Soft Cell who became an eccentric French-style chansonnier on **Untitled** (may/jul 1982 - sep 1982); [John Foxx](#), the former Ultravox vocalist who crafted the sophisticated synth-pop of **The Garden** (? 1981 - sep 1981); [Gavin Friday](#), the former Virgin Prunes who walked a similar path at the intersection of Weill's cabaret, Jacques Brel's existential chansons and Tom Waits' noir, on **Each Man Kills The Thing He Loves** (apr/jul 1988 - may 1989), featuring Bill Frisell, Marc Ribot and cellist Hank Roberts; Orange Juice's [Edwyn Collins](#), also seduced by orchestral pop on albums such as **Hellbent On Compromise** (? 1989 - jun 1990); etc.

Relatively few British singer-songwriters of the era broke new ground.

[Billy "Idol"](#) Broad pioneered the pop song in which electronic keyboards, electronic rhythms and a heavy-metal guitar (instead of a rock band) accompany the songwriter. The singer-songwriter for the cyberpunk generation was born with *White Wedding* (1982), *Rebel Yell* (1984), and *Sweet Sixteen* (1986).

[Thomas Dolby](#)'s **The Golden Age Of Wireless** (sep 1981 - mar 1982) was a milestone for home-made keyboards-oriented pop: one of the first solo collections of electronic songs. [Thomas Leer](#) had pioneered the idea of making music in one's bedroom using drum-machines and electronic keyboards on his **The Bridge** (jun/jul 1979 - ? 1979), a collaboration with avantgarde composer Robert Rental.

[Billy Bragg](#) was the authentic, populist folksinger of the punk generation. **Life's A Riot** (feb 1983 - may 1983) introduced a solitary bard devoted to an obsessive and scathing satire of contemporary customs (*A New England*, 1983; *Man In The Iron Mask*, 1983; *Between The Wars*, 1985; *Levi Stubb's Tears*, 1986).

Ex-Soft Boys vocalist [Robyn Hitchcock](#) (2) created his own musical universe. **Black Snake Diamond Role** (jun 1980/jan 1981 - may 1981)

was basically **Underwater Moonlight** without Kimberley Rew (not a negligible detail), but the real Hitchcock was perhaps better represented by the mostly acoustic **I Often Dream Of Trains** (? 1984 - sep 1984), which wed the ethereal and surreal style commonly associated with Syd Barrett and an intimate tone that was uniquely his own. With his new band, the Egyptians, he embraced a fuller sound on **Fegmania** (? ? - mar 1985), his most eclectic work, and the heavily-arranged **Element Of Light** (? ? - sep 1986).

The greatest of the British songwriters was probably the former Teardrop Explodes vocalist, [Julian Cope](#) (12), one of the craziest and most creative minds of his generation. **World Shut Your Mouth** (nov/dec 1983 - mar 1984) introduced an eclectic and oneiric bard devoted to kitschy melodies, majestic tempos and psychedelic arrangements (enhanced with electronic keyboards). His eccentric vision was fully captured on **Fried** (may 1984 - sep 1984). His songs had the same classic quality of the Doors' melodramas, although his insane lyricism was probably a closer relative of Syd Barrett's. **Saint Julian** (? 1986 - mar 1987) and **My Nation Underground** (may 1988 - oct 1988) focused on his tremendous melodic gift, abandoning the odder edges of the first two albums. A stunning ability to craft impeccable songs led him to more ambitious endeavors: the socio-political concept **Peggy Suicide** (oct 1990 - mar 1991) and **Jehovahkill** (? 1992 - oct 1992), so imbued with cryptic symbols to resemble a medieval bestiary. A world expert in German rock of the 1970s, Cope also recorded avantgarde pieces such as **Rite** (? 1992 - feb 1993). He continued to refine his synthesis of Doors, Syd Barrett and Popol Vuh on **Autogeddon** (nov 1993 - mar 1994) but failed to fully capitalize on his unique talent.

The most important voice of the decade was probably [Nick Cave](#) (124), the Australian expatriat (ex-Birthday Party) who created a unique style of emphatic, metaphysical storytelling. **From Her To Eternity** (sep 1983/mar 1984 - jun 1984), featuring the Bad Seeds (Einsturzende Neubaten's guitarist Blixa Bargeld, Magazine's bassist Barry Adamson and Birthday Party's guitarist Mick Harvey on drums), revealed Cave as a preacher of the moral apocalypse. Over the course of several psychodramas, Cave agonized undertook an expressionistic odyssey in a nightmarish atmosphere which was sustained by a subtle texture of sounds at the edge of dissonance. Cave's paranoid crooning or hysteric whining soared towards the negative absolute in the middle of grotesque orgies of hammering instruments or propelled by funeral marches. **The Firstborn Is Dead** (nov/dec 1984 - jun 1985) perfected Cave's harrowing narrative art while emphasizing the bluesy and gothic overtones. His "murder ballads" wrapped in increasingly dark symbolism, Cave proceeded to carve a metaphysical hell within the real hell of the human world. His morbid fantasies ideally bridged a werewolf's call of the wild to Verdi's requiem. Compared with so much tension, the meditations of **Your Funeral My Trial** (jul/aug 1986 - nov 1986) sounded like light fare. Harvey switched to keyboards for **Tender Prey** (aug 1987/jan 1988 - sep 1988) and helped sculpt a more powerful sound. That sound (truly a voice of the apocalypse) propelled Cave's aesthetics of universal sorrow to the spiritual frenzy of **The Good Son** (oct 1989 - apr 1990). Its hymns (which drew from spiritual and gospel) were still lugubrious, spectral and demonic, but at the same time drenched in visionary folly and rescued by a sense of

redemption and salvation. Parallel to his Christian conversion and his relocation to Brazil, it sounded like Cave had reached a cathartic point: his inner ghosts were mutating into guardian angels, and his music was transformed from a soundtrack of hell to an anthem of the universal judgement. This breath-taking synthesis of Jim Morrison, Tom Waits and Bob Dylan, of William Blake, Walt Whitman and William Faulkner, was a mixed blessing: Cave indulged in his verbose noir stories on **Henry's Dream** (nov/dec 1991 - apr 1992), and ended up repeating himself on **Let Love In** (sep/dec 1993 - apr 1994). The twelve gruesome allegorical **Murder Ballads** (? 1993/? 1995 - feb 1996), the love odes of **Boatman's Call** (jul 1996 - mar 1997) and the piano-based elegies of **No More Shall We Part** (sep/oct 2000 - apr 2001) still showed glimpses of his deranged and quixotic genius, but Cave had little to add to his personal Bible. Then suddenly a rejuvenated bard adopted the stance of the demonic pervert on **Grinderman** (mar 2006 - mar 2007) and seemed to have found a new mission in life.

The figure of the sensual, decadent chanteuse was reborn in the second half of the 1980s, albeit in new settings. Notable female interpreters were Nigerian-born chanteuse [Sade](#) Adu, the elegant entertainer who was both a late practitioner of the languid pop-soul ballad for cocktail lounges and a pioneer the atmospheric music that would be called "trip-hop"; [Tanita Tikaram](#), a sophisticated disciple of Rickie Lee Jones; [Anna Domino](#), a ghostly jazz-blues performer; and country-pop songwriter [Kirsty MacColl](#) (who wrote *They Don't Know* for Tracey Ullman); [Neneh Cherry](#), Don Cherry's daughter and former Rip Rig & Panic's vocalist, who also predated trip-hop with the erotic hip-hop ballads of **Raw Like Sushi** (? 1988 - dec 1988).

Former Lemon Kittens vocalist [Danielle Dax](#) (1), proved to be an eccentric arranger and acrobatic singer on **Pop Eyes** (? 1982 - may 1983), entirely composed, arranged and performed by her, and on the stylistic hodgepodge of the EP **Jesus Egg That Wept** (? 1984 - late 1984).

Former Police vocalist and jet-set personality Gordon Sumner, better known as [Sting](#), coined an introverted, romantic pop-jazz kitsch with the velvety ballads of **The Dream Of The Blue Turtle** (mar/apr 1985 - jun 1985), delivered in his world-famous falsetto. **Nothing Like The Sun** (mar/aug 1987 - oct 1987) attempted an ethnic/atmospheric fusion along the lines of Peter Gabriel's **So** or Paul Simon's **Graceland**, but Sting was more credible with the somber **The Soul Cages** (apr/nov 1990 - jan 1991), which was basically a set of classical lieder and allegoric poems.

Ex-Smiths vocalist [Morrissey](#) launched his solo career with **Viva Hate** (end 1987/early 1988 - mar 1988), but maintained the worst clichés of the Smiths (the dreadfully pathetic crooning, the operatic melodies, the easy-listening arrangements, the depressed autobiographical meditations) until **Your Arsenal** (mar 1992 - jul 1992), his best, most aggressive (or, better, less whining) work.

[Momus](#) (Nicholas Currie) wed Wilde's decadent aesthetics, Byron's romantic spirit, Russell's erudite world knowledge and Pet Shop Boys' synth-pop in a controversial series of meditations on sex and death. If the results rarely matched his ambitions, his style progressed from the pseudo-

biblical concept album **Circus Maximus** (sep 1985 - jan 1986) to the catchy synth-pop of **Tender Pervert** (? 1988 - apr 1988) to the superbly arranged disco-music of **Philosophy** (? 1994 - may 1995).

Costello was a major influence on the 1980s, as proven by auteurs such as [John Wesley Harding](#).

Ireland's [Sinéad O'Connor](#) (10), one of the most televised women of her time, channeled punk anger into an acrobatic melisma made of glacial, murderous shrieks and childish, guttural gasps. Her style fused Gregorian chants, African-American spirituals, celtic ballads, middle-eastern litanies, and Meredith Monk's experiments on the human voice. In the process, she became an icon of asexual rebelliousness (as opposed to Madonna's sexual kind). That schizoid persona was propelled on **The Lion And The Cobra** (apr/jun 1987 - nov 1987) by hard-rock riffs, discordant electronics, neoclassical arrangements, funk grooves and hip-hop tremors, that delivered the full impact of her traumas. The shocking, epic and articulate vehemence of that debut was lost on **I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got** (? 1989 - mar 1990), which reverted to sophisticated soul-pop music (such as Prince's *Nothing Compares*).

Magazine's bassist [Barry Adamson](#) (1) became a prominent "auteur" of atmospheric music. **Moss Side Story** (? 1988 - mar 1989) and **Soul Murder** (? ? apr 1992), performed by a star-studded cast on vocals, electronic keyboards and chamber ensemble, were "imaginary soundtracks" that appropriated the sounds of bebop jazz, film-noir soundtracks and lounge music.

Celtic pop, 1985-87

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One of the most significant styles of the decade was the atmospheric new-age folk invented by the Irish singer Enya and the Canadian singer Loreena McKennitt, both largely inspired by Celtic music.

[Enya](#) Brennan (13), or, better, Eithne Ni Bhraonain (one of the Clannad family), concocted a potion of Celtic-like melodies, exotic rhythms, neoclassical electronics and angelic whispers that would be hugely influential, particularly on new-age music (which, in turn, was also her main influence). Her solo debut, **Enya**, reissued in 1992 as **The Celts** (? 1986 - mar 1987), highlighted her talent for composing catchy and celestial melodies, embellishing them with all sorts of crescendos and bridges, and adding march-like tempos to them. The symbiosis between her childish tone and Nicky Ryan's meticulous, almost orchestral arrangements was magical. **Watermark** (jun 1987/apr 1988 - sep 1988) refined the idea, increasing the similarities of Enya's tunes (broadly based on nursery rhymes and lullabies) with madrigals, vespers and motets of the Middle Ages and of the Renaissance, while at the same time increasing the doses of exotic ingredients. Rather than speculating on the hummability of the tunes, Enya and Ryan bestowed on them a lyrical, austere, solemn and ethereal quality. They also introduced a technique that was pure avantgarde: bring the tune to a standstill, until it becomes abstract sounds in slow, majestic motion. The melody then disappears, but only to

reappear after lengthy pauses of immaculate ecstasy. Enya's sound continued to "faint", reaching a sort of coma on the even more ornate **Shepherd Moons** (? 1989/? 1991 - nov 1991) and **The Memory Of Trees** (? 1993/? 1994 - nov 1995). But her fundamental gift remained the melodies, as proven by the sublime carillon of *Only If* (1997).

Just like Enya, [Loreena McKennitt](#) (2) too had begun interpreting traditional Celtic music. However, she began writing her own music for the oneiric concept **Parallel Dreams** (? ? - ? 1989), and then expanded her musical horizons to India and the Far East (and her arrangements to harp, accordion and keyboards, with **The Visit** (? ? - nov 1991). Her angelic and neoclassical approach to Celtic-like melodies peaked with the medieval concept **The Mask And Mirror** (? ? - mar 1994), the most intriguing document of her ethnic and temporal eclecticism, a collection of little symphonies for percussion, wind, string and keyboard instruments. The progression towards the pop world continued with **Book Of Secrets** (? ? - sep 1997), a varied and elegant set of baroque string serenades, cossack dances, elegies for violin and tablas, hymns for piano, violin, contralto and choir, etc.

Enya and McKennitt soon had countless imitators in England, notably [Heidi Berry](#).

Turning decade, 1986-88

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Surprisingly, towards the end of the decade, the US witnessed a revival of the traditional, brooding folksingers. They sowed the seeds for the styles of the following decade.

Los Angeles-based "poete maudit" [David Baerwald](#) (3) debuted in the duo [David + David](#) with David Ricketts. Their concept **Boomtown** (? ? - ? 1986) began his chronicle of the moral apocalypse, his journey through the existential "wasteland" of the post-industrial society. He calmly ventured into this Dante-esque hell with the bleak meditations of his **Bedtime Stories** (? ? - may 1990), but then the anger vented through **Triage** (? ? - oct 1992) made him sound like an angel of punishment.

In New York, [Roger Manning](#) was an angry young folksinger in the tradition of early Bob Dylan and led an "anti-folk" crusade à la Michelle Shocked. In Texas, [James McMurtry](#) penned richly-detailed vignettes of the depressed USA wasteland, particularly on **Candyland** (? 1991 - jun 1992). In Nebraska, native-American [John Trudell](#) sang harsh political sermons. In Los Angeles, [Michael Penn](#) penned the catchy folk-pop ditties of **March** (? ? - sep 1989).

In Ohio, Mark Edwards' project [My Dad Is Dead](#) (1) was devoted to introverted and highly personal confessions (bordering on the suicidal) in an unusually adult tone. Once he embraced power-rock riffs and forceful singing, on **The Taller You Are The Shorter You Get** (? 1988/? 1989 - aug 1989), he discovered a new version of Warren Zevon's or Bruce Springsteen's rock'n'roll passion.

Detroit-native Paul Kopasz, better known as [Paul K](#), entrusted his bleak vision of life to bluesy and brooding collections such as **Patriots** (spring 1987 - jan 1988) and **Blues For Charlie Lucky** (? ? - ? 1993), overflowing with blue-collar frustration and suburban alienation.

New York's [Joe Henry](#) (3), staged one of the most impressive metamorphosis, the epitome of his generation's stylistic wandering. On his third album, the acoustic **Shuffletown** (apr 1990 - aug 1990), featuring guitarist T-Bone Burnett and jazz musicians Don Cherry (trumpet), Cecil McBee (bass) and Phil Kelly (piano), Henry embraced Van Morrison's folk-jazz, while **Short Man's Room** (jun/dec 1991 - jun 1992) echoed the Band's gospel-rock and Bob Dylan's folk-rock, and **Kindness Of The World** (apr 1993 - sep 1993) hinted at conventional country-pop. But **Trampoline** (oct 1994/jun 1995 - mar 1996), **Fuse** (? 1998 - mar 1999) and **Scar** (sep 2000 - may 2001) presented an artist meddling with hip-hop, hard-rock, electronic arrangements, programmed drumming, tape manipulation and sampling.

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