

The History of Rock Music: 1976-1989

New Wave, Punk-rock, Hardcore

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Noise-rock

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

Minimal rock 1980-83

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The new wave opened the doors to hundreds of musicians that were playing or wanted to play unusual music. Very often they mingled with performance artists, with film-makers, and even with avantgarde composers such as Philip Glass, Elliott Sharp, Glenn Branca and Laurie Anderson.

The "minimalist" composers were particularly close to the new wave. In 1980, Philip Glass inspired bands such as [Polyrock](#) (1), whose **Polyrock** (1980) was the genre-defying work, and [Model Citizens](#).

Glen Branca, on the other hand, was the mentor of Barbara Ess' [Y Pants](#), a female trio that recorded the surreal **Y Pants** (1982), halfway between the Penguin Cafe` Orchestra and Weill's cabaret, and of [Sonic Youth](#) (25), who would go on to become one of the most influential rock outfits of all times. Sonic Youth marked both the end of the "new wave" and the beginning of an era that was building on the new wave's innovations. In fact, the Sonic Youth were initially more experimental and ambitious than most of the new wave acts. What broke with the new wave was their aim to transcend the cultural stereotypes of their epoch and explore new musical forms while remaining faithful to the nihilistic and alienated ethos of the punk generation. Sonic Youth inherited a world from the punks and the new-wave intellectuals, but Sonic Youth did not inherit their music. Initially, as documented by the instrumental *The Good And The Bad*, on their debut EP **Sonic Youth** (1982), Sonic Youth's music sprung from the repetitive style of Glenn Branca's guitar symphonies, from creative jazz and from progressive-rock. Three quarters of the band would remain stable over the years: guitarists Thurston Moore and Lee Ranaldo and

bassist Kim Gordon. Their milieu (the art galleries) harked back to the Velvet Underground, not to the CBGB's and the Max's Kansas City (where the new wave was born). The tracks on **Confusion Is Sex** (1983) were geometric, percussive, obsessive sonatas with abject vocals (reminiscent of the "no wave"); tortured and funereal ceremonies that emanated a sense of psychic unbalance in a totalitarian society; psychodramas that fused gothic, tribal and industrial sources. The guitar overtones became less bleak and almost transcendent on **Bad Moon Rising** (1985), featuring Bob Bert on drums. It is still an exhausting journey through urban hell that runs the gamut from spectral psychedelia to sheer horror (*Death Valley 99*). Contrary to appearances, Sonic Youth had never abandoned the song format. Their line-up, after all, was a classic rock quartet, and even their most experimental pieces were centered upon a core theme (and rarely extended beyond 4-5 minutes). **Evol** (1986), featuring new drummer Steve Shelley, began to bridge their intense paranoia and pop sensibility (*Expressway To Your Skull*). This program was completed by two albums that found a new "classic" equilibrium, **Sister** (1987) and **Daydream Nation** (1988). The latter marked the end of the road for their combination of glacial and detached vocals, dissonant guitars, chaotic counterpoint, tribal beats. The suspense of *Eric's Trip*, *Teenage Riot* and *Total Trash* was grounded in the semiotics of rock'n'roll, via sonic icons such as Bob Dylan and the Velvet Underground. Ensuing albums failed to improve over this model and failed to find the same magical balance of elements: **Goo** (1990), **Dirty And No Star** (1992), perhaps the best of the "pop" phase, **Experimental Jet Set Trash** (1994), which sounded like a senile version of **Sister**, the self-indulgent **Washing Machine** (1995), perhaps their most cohesive work of the 1990s. Guitar terrorist Jim O'Rourke joined the band for **Invito Al Cielo** (1998). Both Ranaldo and Moore have performed and released avantgarde music, often in collaborations with jazz musicians. Sonic Youth's legacy rests with its stories of alienation, sex and death which framed moral issues (both at the personal and at the social level) from a cynical and egocentric perspective. They repudiated the epos of the 1960s for a subdued obituary of vices. The core theme of their music was existential confusion.

The mood was really what set these musicians apart from the musicians of previous decades. The mood was, in a word, depressed. Their music showed no enthusiasm, no excitement, no exuberance. Whatever they played, they played it because it helped them vent their anger, frustration, loneliness, etc. It was the ultimate consequence of a decade of "realignment", when the "yuppies" ("young urban professionals") took over the "hippies", when the "baby boomers" reneged on idealism in favor of realism.

The new generation had no ideals to fight for. Drugs had been a "flag" for the hippies, but they became merely drugs, merely a way to escape reality, for this generation. Another flag of the Sixties, free sex, was turning into the tragedy of the century, thanks to AIDS. It was as if this generation was being punished for the "sins" of their parents' generation.

No wonder that gloomy, bleak atmospheres rule in the songs of Robin Lee Crutchfield's [Dark Day](#), A Certain General, Swans, Live Skull, UT. [Live Skull](#) (1) progressed towards the tense, lugubrious and jarring sound of

Dusted (1987), featuring monochord vocalist (and future Come founder) Thalia Zedek. **UT** (1), a female power-trio, offered a convincing update of the "no-wave" aesthetics (amateurish, irreverent and desperate cacophony of insane vocals, discordant guitars and frantic rhythms) on **Conviction** (1986).

The **Swans** (43), one of the most significant bands of the 1980s, initially introduced themselves as New York's claustrophobic and paranoid alter-ego of Britain's gothic punk, but were largely the vehicle for Michael Gira's apocalyptic angst, **Filth** (1983), featuring two drums (Roli Mosimann and Jonathan Kane) and two basses, was the ideal soundtrack for mass suicides or nuclear holocausts. Gira's agonizing roars echoed against a wall of sound as brutal as hardcore, as depressed as Joy Division, as strident as industrial music, as distorted as psychedelic-rock, as loud as heavy-metal. The music on **Cop** (1984) was born at the intersection of a Kafka tale, a Freud treatise, a black hole, a medieval exorcism, the first wails of a robot and the last spasms of a serial killer on the electric chair. Existential boredom exuded not only from Gira's (criminal, obscene and blasphemous) lyrics but also from Roli Mosimann's drumming and Norman Westberg's guitar noise. Their gothic phase peaked with *Young God* (1985), a slow, austere, terrifying journey into Gira's sinister psyche. The sound of the Swans changed dramatically when keyboardist and vocalist Jane Jarboe joined them. The apocalypse began to clear up with **Greed** (1986) and was replaced by a new genesis on **Holy Money** (1986): Gira and Jarboe sculpted chamber/orchestral arrangements, martial tempos that evoked esoteric rituals, catacomb-like atmospheres and liturgic/medieval tones. The new phase, officially inaugurated by Jarboe's and Gira's side-project *Skins*, whose EPs **Blood Women And Roses** (1987) and **Shame Humility Revenge** (1988) relied only on piano, violin, viola and oboe, peaked with the monumental **Children Of God** (1987), a set of stately, majestic lieder that rediscovered Gregorian chanting, church psalms and folk melodies. The setting ran the gamut from sparse, oneiric lattices of acoustic sounds to Wagnerian apotheoses, while the lyrics feigned the biblical vocabulary of sin and redemption. Although a little unfocused, **Burning World** (1989) further dilated the harmony, bringing in Nicky Skopelitis' guitar, Garo Yellin's cello, Bill Laswell's bass, Ravi Shankar's sitar and all sorts of percussions. The angelic and pastoral Jarboe had redeemed Gira the tormented devil. His Dante-esque descent into hell had ended up in purgatory, if not in heaven. **White Light From The Mouth Of Infinity** (1991) was even more medieval and exotic, its arrangements almost baroque, its melodies quite paradisiac, its tone mostly magniloquent and frequently ecstatic. After closing the trilogy of introspection, with the lesser **Love Of Life** (1992), Gira penned his most metaphysical work, **The Great Annihilator** (1995), virtually a book of allegoric sermons, as well as his most musically ambitious compositions, the lengthy and complex **Soundtracks For The Blind** (1996), which, de facto, represented a separate (albeit brief) phase of the Swans, one in which Gira's emotions materialized as abstract soundscapes. His entire oeuvre was basically a paranoid quest for a new form of religious music. No wonder that so many of his masterpieces sounded like spectral requiems for his race and his time.

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