

# The History of Rock Music: 1976-1989

New Wave, Punk-rock, Hardcore

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## The Blank Generation

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

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### *Akron 1976-80*

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The "blank generation" came out of a moral vacuum. While punks roamed the suburban landscape, blue-collar workers were feeling the pinch of an economic revolution: human society had left the industrial age and entered the post-industrial age, the age in which services (such as software) prevail over manufacturing.

Computers now rule the world, from Wall Street to Boeing. The assembly line took away a bit of the personality of the worker, but that was nothing: the new service-based economy takes away the worker completely, physically. In the post-industrial society the individual is even less of a "person". The individual is merely a cog in a huge organism of interconnected parts that works at the beat of a gigantic network of computers. This highly sophisticated economy treats the individual as a number, as a statistic. The goal is no longer to create a robot that behaves like a human being, but to create a human being that behaves like a robot: robots are efficient and lead to manageable and profitable businesses, whereas humans are inefficient and difficult to manage.

This work condition merely reinforces the uniformity of the "American way of life". There is little one can change without ending up a bum. Society is no longer the association of individuals: the individual is a member of society, meaning that society determines what the individual does and thinks. Inevitably, this reduces the value of each individual life. The individual "matters" less. The process that began when human beings moved from the rural society to the urban society continues with a further level of shrinking of personal identity.

At the same time, the very concept of human race is changing. Progress in medicine allows weak humans to survive beyond their biological limits. Organ transplants point to a future in which humans will be assembled out in a hospital. Progress in genetics shed light on how to engineer life. Human life is ever less magic, and ever more mathematic.

It is not surprising that films and cartoons project the vision of a human race that is becoming increasingly weak, ugly, illiterate and barbaric, and more and more similar to the machines that used to serve us.

This vision changes the emotional landscape. In the Sixties that landscape was sculpted mainly by the fear of the nuclear holocaust. That fear is now replaced by the vision of a radical mutation in the nature of the human being. We will not be exterminated: we will become monsters.

The "blank generation" agonizes within that vision. There is an alienated metropolis where faceless beings study, work and die. There is a future of machines and of moral apocalypse. There is a present of neuroses and fears.

The soundtrack for that generation is depressed, disconnected, unpleasant, even noisy.

The music that emerges from the "new wave" is one of the most philosophical forms of rock and roll since its inception. It has a depth that is almost the very opposite of punk-rock, although punk-rock is, after all, a complementary phenomenon.

It may not be a coincidence that Ohio, one of the most industrial states, ended up leading the charge. The school started in Akron by bands such as the [Mirrors](#), the [Electric Eels](#), and the Pagans became the most influential outside of New York.

[Pere Ubu](#) (124), one of the greatest (and most creative) bands of all times, featuring David Thomas, one of the greatest (and most eccentric) vocalists of all times, **The Modern Dance** (oct 1976/nov 1977 - jan 1978), one of the most important recordings in the history of rock music, was, first and foremost, the fresco of a civilization on the verge of collapse. It was also the soundtrack of a nervous breakdown, both individual and collective. Pere Ubu released deafening bacchanals of cryptic slogans, agonizing vocals, discordant strumming, electronic distortions and primordial pulsations. The "modern dance" was the grotesque dance of bodies possessed by the spasms of industrial alienation and post-industrial lethargy. The visceral rhythmic charge of ancestral tribal music was transposed to the ambience and to the cadence of the factory. Songs were orchestrated with free-form interludes, "concrete" and electronic clumps of sound, and sudden flarings of noise, aiming to evoke the cyclic motion, the steaming gusts and the menacing rumbling of the machines, as well as the inorganic bawling of the mob of workers and the apathetic decay of their minds. Thomas' demented vibrato and somnambulant weeping, that seemed to mock the emphatic style of agit-prop, increased the feeling of madness. His fervent babbling (running the gamut from Frank Sinatra-style crooning to Marvin Gaye's falsetto to Howling Wolf's roar to Captain Beefheart's delirium) painted the portrait of a tormented psyche. Meanwhile, Allen Ravenstine reinvented the role of keyboards in rock music, bringing about a revolution comparable to the one begun by Brian Eno a few years earlier. His anti-sensationalist style relied on atmosphere rather than technique, and favored "dirty", unorthodox sounds over melody. The most structured songs founded a new type of absurd lied. The least structured songs bordered on chamber music for broken cookware, discordant synth lines and psychedelic overdose. This is folk music for the industrial age, an extreme synthesis of the Velvet Underground, Pink Floyd and local heroes the Stooges.

A gothic tone began to emerge on **Dub Housing** (jul/sep 1978 - nov 1978), but was soon drenched in hallucinations on two stately masterpieces, **New Picnic Time** (may/jun 1979 - sep 1979) and **Art Of Walking** (jan 1980 - jun 1980), which benefited from the addition of Red Crayola's Mayo Thompson. The group's pataphysical dementia and sonic jungle became even less rational, while Thomas'

inarticulate whines and garbled visions became even less focused. The brutal and orgiastic rock'n'roll of yore was tempered by an ethereal and even serene contemplation of life. Anaemic and rarefied compositions simply floated, without reaching closure. Pere Ubu explored a soundscape that was closer to abstract painting than to rock'n'roll.

This process of implosion led to the fragile music of **The Song Of The Bailing Man** (aug 1981/jan 1982 - spring 1982), with Anton Fier on drums. **The Tenement Year** (nov 1987 - mar 1988), with John Kirkpatrick on accordion and Chris Cutler (ex-Henry Cow) on drums, sounded like an appendix to David Thomas' solo albums, which had made the group largely irrelevant. Instead, the group was reborn as a more commercial unit on **Cloudland** (jun 1988/feb 1989 - may 1989), ready to sell the "modern dance" as background music.

[Devo](#) (1), whose **Q: Are We Not Men?** (spring 1978 - aug 1978) proclaimed the advent of "de-volution" (the opposite process of Darwin's evolution) while rehashing psychedelic-rock and garage-rock, [Human Switchboard](#), [Styrenes](#) (1), whose *Drano In Your Veins* (1975) had been one of the earliest independent singles of the new wave and whose posthumous **Girl Crazy** (sep 1975/dec 1979 - ? 1982) is worthy of Pere Ubu, [Tin Huey](#), will be the most influential in the early years of the new wave. The [Waitresses](#) (1) continued that tradition into the 1980s with one of the school's masterpieces, **Wasn't Tomorrow Wonderful** (? 1981 - jan 1982), that applied the same rules of idiosyncrasy and creativity to vaudeville-pop. Tin Huey's multi-instrumentalist Ralph Carney formed the [Swollen Monkeys](#) (1), who released the equally bizarre **After Birth Of The Cool** (? ? - ? 1981).

These groups incorporated the frenzy of punk-rock, especially the [Dead Boys](#) (1) on **Young Loud And Snotty** (? 1977 - may 1977), but the atmosphere mattered more than the sheer violence. Their violence was, in fact, more internal than external, indirect rather than direct, psychological rather than physical. They depicted a wasteland populated with psychotic characters. Their songs were Freudian nightmares.

### **California 1974-81**

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Something similar was happening in California, and specifically in the San Francisco Bay Area which is the home of the Silicon Valley. An ideal line joined Ohio's industrial landscape and California's computer-driven economy. The Silicon Valley was the quintessence of everything that was happening to the collective subconscious of the "blank generation".

On top of it, California had been one of the cradles of experimental rock since the heyday of Frank Zappa. During the 1970s, freaks turned into punks and hippies switched from LSD to heroin, but the creativity kept flowing. Interactions with other forms of art were at a peak. Avantgarde clubs of all kinds spread all around San Francisco. California's new wave was more experimental, but the underlying theme remained the somewhat hallucinated and neurotic representation of a catastrophic present/future, of a horrible mutation of the human race.

Their music was even less related to punk-rock and to New York's intellectuals. California's new wave exhibited an amateurish tone that was unique. The "visual" aspect often prevailed. The Residents, Chrome and Tuxedomoon formed the San Francisco triad that created the third pole of the new wave, along with New York and Akron.

Perhaps the quintessential independent musicians of the 1970s, the [Residents](#) (125) performed in android costumes and never revealed their faces or identities. They debuted in 1972, during the dark age that followed the demise of the hippie movement and the collapse of acid-rock. They composed their most innovative works between 1974 and 1976, when the new wave wasn't even born yet, but their isolation from the music scene remained absolute until the new wave allowed them to emerge as new prophets of a way to make, perform and conceive music. "Obscure" and cryptic, their pieces were part of a multimedia show whose antics transposed the music-hall into the new wave and whose sound emphasized a collage-style approach to composition. **Meet The Residents** (feb/oct 1973 - apr 1974) gave "devolution" a sound. Inspired by Dada, surrealism and Frank Zappa, the Residents assembled fragments and debris of junk culture (commercials, orchestral easy-listening, cartoon soundtracks, pop muzak, exotica, marching-band fanfares) and proceeded to sculpt a sonic montage that was deliberately amateurish but also provided a chilling documentary of the western civilization, albeit disguised as a grotesque parody of its consumerism. Where Zappa was actually a virtuoso of composition and direction, a heroic implementer of sloppy ideas, the Residents were sloppy implementers of heroic ideas. Glacial, distorted, monotonous voices soared over instruments that merged chamber and atonal pretenses with puerile rhythms and clumsy melodies. Conceived too in 1974 but only released several years later, **Not Available** (feb 1974/? - oct 1978) was their most sophisticated work of art. Its suites virtually coined a new form of avantgarde music out of symphonic primitivism and cacophonous world-music. Despite the gargantuan display of sounds, they offered a bleak and terrifying vision of humankind. That vision was expressed in a more programmatic format with the futuristic ballet *Six Things To A Cycle* (1976). It reached its poetic apex with **Eskimo** (apr 1976/jun 1979 - sep 1979), which was basically an experiment of "musique concrete" set in the Arctic but also a touching tribute to ancestral humanity and its epic struggle in hostile environments. This time the Residents looked to expressionism, and to theatre, for crafting a work that was less chaotic than their early collages as well as more "ambient" in Brian Eno's vein. **Mark Of The Mole** (oct 1979/jul 1981 - sep 1981), the first installment of a three-part sci-fi fantasy, and the fairy tales of **Census Taker** (? 1984 - ? 1985) and **God In Three Persons** (? 1988 - ? 1988), continued their ventures into a musical realm that no other band dared approach. **Big Bubble** (oct 1983/jul 1985 - oct 1985), the third part of the trilogy, was one of the most thrilling post-modernist experiments on the human voice of the time.

[Chrome](#) (11) were the ultimate space-rock band, drenched both in hippy culture and in new wave culture, with an additional touch of art-rock. Helios Creed's superhuman guitar explorations and keyboardist Tom "Damon Edge" Weisse's sci-fi visions bridged Grateful Dead and Todd Rundgren on the rock opera **Alien Soundtracks** (? 1977 - ? 1977), which stand as swan songs of San Francisco's acid-rock as well as manifestos of the new wave, while **Half Machine Lip Moves** (? 1979 - ? 1979) twisted psychedelia towards the sonic massacres of Stooges and MC5, while acknowledging Neu's percussive nightmares and Throbbing Gristle's industrial implosions. Each piece became a terrifying shock wave, a stormy, tribal and hyper-distorted slab of moral apocalypse.

[Tuxedomoon](#) (11), formed by multi-instrumentalists Steve Brown, Blaine Reininger and Peter "Principle" Dachert, were the most erudite of the group. They were also natural descendants of progressive-rock, as demonstrated on **Half Mute** (dec 1979 - ? 1980), that scored pieces for keyboards, saxophone and violin besides the rock trio. The languid, seductive and stately demeanor of those avantgarde chamber lieder absorbed the spirit of both decadentism and surrealism. Their eclectic inspiration

turned **Suite En Sous-sol** (? 1982 - ? 1982) into a stylistic tour de force, running the gamut from chamber music (for unusual combinations of instruments) to disco-pop to world-music to raga-rock to psychedelic-rock to renaissance music etc. Later works such as **Holy Wars** (? 1984/? 1985 - ? 1985) settled on a form of neo-classical fusion/dance music that harked back to the Canterbury school's surreal, depressed and elegant jazz-rock.

An even more radical approach, that seemed to wed Jimi Hendrix and Morton Subotnick, was attempted by the likes of [Factrix](#) (2), whose **Scheintot** (? 1980 - ? 1981) and **California Babylon** (dec 1980/jun 1981 - ? 1982) built massive walls of distortion and set in motion wildly dissonant and chaotic porno-macabre-psychedelic nightmares, [Nervous Gender](#) (1), whose album **Music from Hell** (may 1981 - dec 1981) relied on excruciating synthesizer dissonances and uncontrolled cacophony, and [MX-80 Sound](#) (1), whose **Out Of The Tunnel** (? ? - mar 1980) contained abrasive torments delivered with the fury of heavy-metal.

[Monte Cazazza](#) and, in Los Angeles, [Non](#) (Boyd Rice), who conducted the noisiest experiments of the era, and [John Duncan](#), influenced and were influenced by Throbbing Gristle's industrial music.

The [Los Angeles Free Music Society](#), formed around Tom Recchion in 1972, was a collective of underground artists loosely inspired by Frank Zappa and Captain Beefheart (but also all jazz and classical avantgarde movements). Le Forte Four, who released four lunatic electronic-folk albums starting with **Bikini Tennis Shoes** (? 1973/? 1974 - ? 1975), Doo-Dooettes (two albums), Smegma (one album) and Airway (one album) were some of the performers devoted to free improvisation, abstract cacophony and demented chanting.

[Zoogz Rift](#) (5) was one of the most original figures of the time, although hard to classify. The quintessential "idiot savant", a natural heir to Captain Beefheart and Salvador Dali, Robert Pawlikowski displayed his eclectic albeit demented musical talent on **Idiots On The Miniature Golf Course** (? 1979 - ? 1979) and **Amputees In Limbo** (? 1982 - ? 1982). His aesthetic of indiscriminate chaos and parody shone on the instrumental jams of **Ipecac** (? 1984 - ? 1984) and **Water** (? 1987 - ? 1987), that borrow ideas from Frank Zappa and Tom Waits and raid oldies as well as world-music. Unabated wit helped rise **Nonentity** (? 1988 - ? 1988) to the occasion of a blaspheme reevaluation of the USA civilization.

[Barnes & Barnes](#) (1) were even less serious, and their albums, particularly **Voobaha** (? 1978/? 1979 - aug 1980), were demented parodies of genres and lifestyles in a Frank Zappa-esque vein.

San Francisco became the stage for all sorts of musical experiments. [Rhythm And Noise](#) (2), the brainchild of Naut Humon (Mark Sprague), played noise and electronic music that fused Karlheinz Stockhausen's manipulations of found sounds, Morton Subotnick's electronic fantasies, Throbbing Gristle's industrial music and Foetus' infernal symphonies. The most intense moments on **Contents Under Notice** (? 1984 - ? 1984) and **Chasms Accord** (? 1985 - ? 1985) recall Klaus Schulze's cosmic music applied to a black hole, while slabs of expressionistic violence collide with factory cadences and electronic dissonances.

[Slava Ranko](#) (1) released only one album, **Arctic Hysteria** (? 1980 - ? 1981), that quotes John Cage, Brian Eno, minimalism, Indian music

[Norman Salant](#)'s post-modernist jams on **Saxophone Demonstrations** (aug 1980/feb

1981 - ? 1981) spanned minimalism, jazz, disco and ambient music.

The [Club Foot Orchestra](#) (1) specialized in instrumental scores that trapped the warm soul of folk music into the icy structures of chamber music, as on **Wild Beasts** (? 1985 - ? 1986).

Like the Lounge Lizards on the other coast, the [Longshoremen](#) (1) concocted jazz scores that were musical oxymorons, but more demented and primitive, particularly on **Grr Huh Yeah** (? 1985 - ? 1985).

The [Ophelias](#) (1) engaged in a kind of surreal, futuristic music-hall that recalled both the United States Of America and Tuxedomoon, best on **Ophelias** (? 1987 - ? 1987).

### ***Manhattan 1977-***

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The same spirit of the "blank generation" took hold of Manhattan when [Suicide](#) (101) began spinning their tales of unbearable neurosis. The archetypical duo of keyboards (Martin Rev) and vocals (Alan Vega), they reinvented the line-up of the rock band, with the electronic keyboards replacing rhythm section and lead instrument. **Suicide** (summer 1977 - dec 1977), one of the milestones of the new wave, grafted the infinite modulations of minimalism onto a feverish rockabilly beat, thus coining "psychobilly". Vega's moribund vocals chased ghosts through an urban angst that was a close relative of the Velvet Underground's. Suicide sang about the individual and collective apocalypse, depicting lonely aching souls in a gothic landscape overflowing with fear, paranoia and claustrophobia. The pauses, the reverbs, the monotonous tones, the icy electronics were all functional to bleak visions of the future. **Alan Vega Martin Rev** (jan 1980 - mar 1980) used the same elements to concoct cybernetic ballads for the discos. The electronic shaman [Alan Vega](#) (2) continued the futuristic and decadent program of Suicide on albums such as **Alan Vega** (? 1980 - nov 1980) and **Collision Drive** (? 1981 - dec 1981) that offer cadaveric angst at infernal pace. Singing in his wavering voice, reminiscent of a Lou Reed devoid of any emotion, over a robotic rockabilly cadence, Vega staged a formidable assault on the rocker's stereotype.

The [Feelies](#) (12) were among the bands that focused on translating the emotional tension of the "blank generation" into a new song format. Formed in New Jersey by Glenn Mercer and Bill Million, they were a quiet and shy outfit, that rarely behaved like a rock band, thus predating the snobby attitude of college-pop. **Crazy Rhythms** (spring/summer 1979 - apr 1980), featuring Anton Fier on drums, was a unique album, imbued with a controlled frenzy that employed psychedelic guitars, trance-like vocals, repetition of patterns and hypnotic beats. The resulting sound was hermetic, almost extraterrestrial, despite being rock music all right. Songs shared an ascetic and a geometric quality that recalled Zen meditation rather than punk-rock. The mood was halfway between ecstatic transcendence and detached decadence. Even the laid-back folk-rock and country-rock of **Good Earth** (? 1985 - ? 1986), now featuring Stan Demeski on drums, had an hallucinated feeling, as if the band was performing traditional Earth music on the Moon. The eclectic **Only Life** (? 1988 - sep 1988) failed to clarify their true substance: it merely increased the sophistication of the game.

### ***Etc 1977-80***

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[Human Sexual Response](#) (later Concussion Ensemble) in Boston, [Gizmos](#) in Indiana, [Reds](#) in Pennsylvania, [Debris](#) in Oklahoma and [Oho](#) in Pennsylvania are among the overlooked legends of the time.

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