

# The History of Rock Music: 1989-1994

The Indie Revolution

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([Versione italiana](#))

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### The Early 1990s: After the Cold War

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In november 1989 an ecstatic crowd of young people climbed on the Berlin Wall and began dismantling it. That event marked the end of the

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Cold War that had spawned 50 years of worldwide proxy wars and a nuclear arms race. Coincidentally, four months earlier the very same city, Berlin, had held the first "Love Parade", a festival of electronic dance music attended by one million people. Two years later the Soviet Union would collapse altogether. In 1992 the treaty of Maastricht created the European Union, that spent the next two decades expanding and absorbing former satellites of the Soviet Union. As a consequence, the whole world (with the exceptions of a few small countries) converted to capitalism (even Russia and China), and most of the world also converted to democracy (with the notable exceptions of the Islamic world and China). The USA system had won the Cold War, the USA was the only superpower left, and all the other countries were struggling to emulate its winning system. The number of wars around the world decreased rapidly, as dictators were forced to retire. The USA, though, intervened militarily in Panama (1989), Iraq (1991), Somalia (1992), Haiti (1994), and got involved in the civil war of Yugoslavia until eventually it had to bomb Serbia (1999). These were wars fought on non-ideological grounds, in which the USA behaved like the police officer of the world.

The USA had reasons to celebrate. There were, however, disturbing signs of social disease. Street gangs terrorized entire neighborhood of the large cities. Racial riots erupted in 1992 in Los Angeles and other cities, leaving 48 people dead. Some of the problems of the previous decades had fathered worse problems. In 1989 Bush declared a "war" against hallucinogenic drugs (that was really a war against the cartels of Colombian and other "drug lords"). By the end of 1999 the World Health Organization estimated that 16 million people in the world had died of AIDS (more than half the victims being under the age of 25).

If the early 1980s had been the age of street gangs, during the rest of the decade the concepts and ideals of the street gang were progressively transferred to the digital world. Computer "hackers" realized that the Internet (the old "ArpaNET", renamed "Internet" in 1985 and extended to a much broader audience) made it possible to violate institutions such as banks, government agencies and even nuclear labs. The press started publicizing the digital exploits of the "Legion of Doom" (formed in Texas in 1984) and the "Masters of Deception" (formed by Elias Ladopoulos, aka "Acid Phreak", in 1989 in the Queens), who were brought to court in 1992. One of the legendary early hackers, Kevin Lee Poulsen, was finally apprehended in 1991. The term "cyberpunk" had been coined in 1980 by Bruce Bethke in a tale that basically predicted the advent of digital terrorism, and then William Gibson's "Neuromancer" (1984) publicized the notion of human beings that can connect into computer networks.

The "cyber" world was also becoming a substitute for the decline of the sense of community. For example, in 1985 the "Whole Earth Review", founded by Howard Rheingold in 1973 in Sausalito, established the "Whole Earth Lectronic Link" (or "WELL"). These were "sites" where people with similar interests could exchange ideas. The "usenet" on the Internet was divided in interest groups. And perhaps the first cyberspace for ordinary people was a game, "Dungeons & Dragons", introduced in 1980 by British student Roy Trubshaw, the first case of "MUD" ("multi-user dungeon").

Games were in fact evolving rapidly, from the first "Pong" invented in 1975 for the Atari by Nolan Bushnell and Alan Alcorn to Toshihiro Nishikado' "Space Invaders" (1978), the first blockbuster videogame, to Toru Iwatani' "Pac-Man" (1980) to Rick Dyer's and Don Bluth's "Dragon's Lair" (1983), an interactive animated film and the first game on laserdisc, to the Atari Lynx (1986), the first portable game system, to the boom of 1989-90, when the Sega Mega Drive and the Super Nintendo Entertainment System became mass phenomena.

Over the decades, rock music has always been the soundtrack of alternative youth lifestyles. The lifestyle of the generation of the 1990s was basically a transitional one, torn between the anger and frustration of the 1980s and the cyberworld to come.

Perhaps the most dramatic change in lifestyle affected the girls. They were the daughters of the women who had fought for emancipation and equality in the 1960s. They were the children of the sexual revolution. Women were becoming less and less dependent on men, and less oriented towards a family-based future. The "riot-grrrrls" movement that came out of Seattle was only the tip of the iceberg of a widespread grass-roots phenomenon of young women asserting their identity, their problems and their values; and beginning to create a history of their own, after centuries of male-dominated history. It is not a coincidence that the 1990s witnessed a boom of female musicians.

Musically, the 1990s saw the rock genres of the 1980s grow apart rather than fuse. Each of those genres (lo-fi pop, industrial, gothic, roots-rock, noise-rock, indie-pop, techno, ambient, etc) multiplied and evolved in a fashion largely independent of the others.

The 1990s marked, in many ways, the revenge of the "province". While the "new wave" and punk-rock (and rap and disco) had been centered around the big metropolitan areas in the North and in the West, the 1980s had slowly opened up to the rest of the country. By the time Bill Clinton became president (1992), the South, for example, had regained its grip on down-to-earth popular music, slowly establishing a supremacy over the whole gamut: alt-rock, pop, and, of course, roots-rock. The 1990s were also the age of Seattle, another relatively "provincial" center.

An involuntary catalyst for the commercial success of the various subgenres was the magazine Billboard, that finally changed the way it ranked singles and albums by tallying actual sales at retail stores instead of using the industry-manipulated word of mouth. Suddenly, rock outsold pop, and "minority" genres such as hip-hop and country entered the charts. This, in turn, led the industry to invest more in these genres.

There were perhaps fewer new genres created in the early 1990s than in any of the previous ages. Even grunge was, fundamentally, just a revival of hard rock. On the other hand, old genres diverged much more than in any previous decade, de facto splitting rock music into a loose federation of subgenres.

