

The History of Rock Music: 1990-1999

Raves, grunge, post-rock, trip-hop

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Roots-rock in the Age of Alt-country

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

Alt Country

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A revolution in roots-rock began in the late 1980s in Chicago with Souled American and Uncle Tupelo, and in the 1990s became a new genre altogether. It was Nashville's country music transposed into the small bedrooms of the disaffected youth in the small towns of the heartland. Those bands had rediscovered country and folk music for the hardcore generation: their descendants dumped hardcore for the most spartan and traditional of sounds.

Led by singer-songwriters Jay Farrar and Jeff Tweedy, [Uncle Tupelo](#) (1) pretty much invented a new genre when they released **No Depression** (1990), a collection of country ballads played with the fury of hardcore. Abandoning the punk edge and focusing on the depressed stories, the acoustic tour de force of **March 16-20 1992** (1992) invented more than a genre: it created a movement for sincere, populist and political music. **Anodyne** (1993) hinted at the mainstream appeal of this idea. After they parted ways, the two leaders would form two of the most influential bands of the 1990s: Son Volt and Wilco.

Kentucky's [Will Oldham](#) (1), who also recorded under the monikers Palace Brothers, Palace Songs, Palace Music, Palace and Bonnie Prince Billy, virtually jumpstarted the "alt-country" movement with **There Is No One What Will Take Care Of You** (1993), an album that displayed the qualities of independent alternative rock while playing old-fashioned country music. Oldham's acoustic folk was not terribly emotional: **Days In The Wake** (1994) was perhaps his most personal statement.

The acoustic revival spread to Kentucky, where [Freakwater](#) had already

been active. A collaboration between Eleventh Dream Day's drummer Janet Bean and Catherine Ann Irwin, two singer/songwriters who seemed little concerned with the alternative/avantgarde rock of their time, Freakwater began in the vein of primitive folk music but evolved with **Old Paint** (1995) to deliver a bleak vision of humankind in a stark, neutral style.

Alt-country, or (from Uncle Tupelo's classic album) "no-depression folk", ruled the second half of the decade, and influenced even bands that had little to do with the acoustic revival.

New York's [Ida](#) delivered the old-fashioned, melancholy folk ballads of **Tales Of Brave Ida** (1994).

Chicago's [Handsome Family](#) (1) composed the solemn parables of **Milk And Scissors** (1996), infused with a cruel sense of urban alienation, and reached their "literary" peak with the dark, obsessive vignettes of **In the Air** (1999).

Los Angeles' [Grant Lee Buffalo](#) (1), led by Shiva Burlesque's guitarist Grant Lee Phillips, penned **Fuzzy** (1993), whose style was power-pop that sounded like folk music, an odd hybrid of American Music Club, Woody Guthrie and Big Star.

Tennessee's [Lambchop](#) (11) coined a form of "chamber folk". The pieces on **I Hope You're Sitting Down** (1994) were artful disguises of a gentle and downbeat minstrel (guitarist/frontman Kurt Wagner) in a maze of keyboards, horns and strings. The music was more often funereal than exuberant, and the atmosphere was the equivalent of "film noir" in a Nashville setting. **How I Quit Smoking** (1996) was a more private affair, but still wrapped in arrangements that were pastoral, neoclassical, nostalgic and dreamy. If sometimes Lambchop's albums sacrificed substance for elegance and occasionally veered into a bland hybrid of country and soul balladry, ever more formidable ensembles helped to craft works such as the rock opera **Nixon** (2000) that were poetic but formulaic, austere but diluted, gentle but superficial, transcendental but mundane: this intermediate state became the metaphysical location of Wagner's art, the ecosystem where the crystalline ambient elegies of **Damaged** (2006) and **OH** (2008) thrived. As Wagner's skills as an arranger matured, the most effective instrument on his crowded songs became his rough voice, simply because it was the ultimate antithetic sound to the gentle symphony that lay underneath.

Quite unique was the baroque, new-age sound of Louisiana's [Subdudes](#), for example on **Annunciation** (1994).

Country-rock

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Modern country-rock was best represented by Detroit's [Volebeats](#) (1), whose eclectic and schizophrenic style, that incorporated surf music, world music, Ennio Morricone and many other influences, was best immortalized on their fourth album **Solitude** (2000).

Ohio's [Ass Ponys](#) (1) concocted one of the most original variants on country-rock on **Mr Superlove** (1990), that was rustic in principle but afflicted by urban neurosis in practice.

Boston's [Blood Oranges](#) fused bluegrass and grunge on **The Crying Tree** (1994).

Among the works that renovated the country style with the impetus and eccentricity of alternative rock were: **Bottle Rockets** (1993), by Missouri's [Bottle Rockets](#); **Toreador Of Love** (1993), by Oregon's [Hazel](#), featuring guitarist Peter Krebs; **Play Cell** (1994), by San Francisco's [Tilt](#); **For The Sake Of Argument** (1995), the second album by Kentucky's [Stranglmartin](#); **The Medicine Is All Gone** (1998), the third album by Idaho's [Caustic Resin](#); **Too Far To Care** (1997), the third album by Texas' [Old 97's](#).

At the same time, cow-punks mutated into something even weirder. Chicago's [New Duncan Imperials](#) applied Bonzo Dog Band's aesthetics to the country and blues tradition on **Hanky Panky Party Voo** (1990); Pennsylvania's [Strapping Fieldhands](#) applied the Holy Modal Rounders aesthetics (atonal guitars and grotesque vocals) to Appalachian folk music on **Discus** (1994).

The [Grifters](#) (11), the project of Tennessee songwriters Scott Taylor and David Shouse, were the terrorists of alt-country: **So Happy Together** (1992) was to roots-music what Sonic Youth's noise-rock had been to classic rock, a barbaric psycho-industrial bacchanal that rarely coalesced, a merry-go-round of drunk vocals, atonal guitars and erratic rhythms. Just a bit less grotesque and abrasive, **One Sock Missing** (1993) still evoked the specters of Captain Beefheart, Red Crayola and Pussy Galore. A better structured and bluesier approach surfaced on **Crappin' You Negative** (1994) and the EP **Eureka** (1995) achieved a synthesis of sorts, offering "tunes" that were both catchy and demonic. Not surprisingly, **Ain't My Lookout** (1996) and **Full Blown Possession** (1997) ended up sounding like the Rolling Stones.

Southern blues-rock staged a powerful comeback with Georgia's [Black Crowes](#) (1), whose tasty imitation of the Rolling Stones and the Faces (but more soul-rock than blues-rock) on **Shake Your Money Maker** (1990) was briefly a sensation.

Folk-rock

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Several San Francisco-based groups significantly updated the folk-rock canon: [X-Tal](#), with **Reason Is 6/7 Of Treason** (1990), [Harm Farm](#), with **Spawn** (1990), [Bedlam Rovers](#), best on **Wallow** (1993), [Tarnation](#), with **Gentle Creatures** (1995). Best of this batch were [Swell](#) (1), who derailed the archaic structures of blues and country music with extravagant dynamics and arrangements. **Swell** (1991) and especially **Well?** (1993) were festivals of the irregular, coupled with existential lyrics.

But the most successful were the [Counting Crows](#), whose style on **August**

And Everything After (1993) was a humbler take on classic roots-rock (Van Morrison-ian vocals, Byrds-ian guitar jangle and gospel organ a` la Band).

[Cracker](#) (1), led by former Camper Van Beethoven's vocalist David Lowery, unleashed the virulent roots-rock of **Kerosene Hat** (1993).

Sacramento's [Cake](#) toyed with country, blues, tex-mex, funk, reggae and salsa stereotypes dressing them up on **Motorcade Generosity** (1994) with quirky arrangements and an eclectic sense of humour that evoked Camper Van Beethoven and Primus.

A South Carolina band, [Hootie & The Blowfish](#), which debuted with the charming **Cracked Rear View** (1994), was responsible with the Counting Crows for the continuing popularity of folk-rock. They were also the first rock band fronted by a black vocalist (Darius Rucker) to attain mainstream success.

Louisiana's [Better Than Ezra](#) (1), led by Kevin Griffin, attained a higher standard of philosophical depth with their second album **Deluxe** (1995).

Pan-ethnic music

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World-music got more and more sophisticated, but fewer and fewer artists offered original ideas. Notable among creative works that used ethnic styles were **Rapid** (1997), by Hungary's [Kampec Dolores](#), **Mlah** (1990), by the French acoustic mini-orchestra [Les Negresses Vertes](#), **Allegría** (1990), by French combo the [Gypsy Kings](#), **Phyidar** (1992), by Belgium's [Raksha Mancham](#), **Monostress 225L** (1992), by French steel band [Les Tambours Du Bronx](#), and **The Rhythm Of The Ritual** (1994), by Belgium's [Hybryds](#).

Perhaps the most creative world-music ensemble in the world was the Polish ensemble [Atman](#) (2), whose **Personal Forest** (1993) and **Tradition** (1999) were collages of surreal blends of Eastern and Western music, in the vein of the Third Ear Band and the Incredible String Band. Atman's multi-instrumentalist Marek Styczynski and vocalist Anna Nacher started a new project, Projekt Karpaty Magiczne, or [Magic Carpathians Project](#), devoted to an ambient, cosmic, jazz version of Atman's pan-ethnic music on **Ethnocore II** (2001).

One of the effects of globalization was that traditional ethnic music was being rapidly abandoned by the new generations for modern USA-style pop ballads or melodic rock music. The biggest stars in both China and India were singers of original material modeled after USA's pop melodies (and often set to electronic rhythms). Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East were perhaps the areas that best incorporated the traditional instruments and rhythms. However, globalization was creating a more and more uniform musical landscape across the globe. For example, Chinese superstar Han Hong, a Tibetan female singer who debuted on album in 1983, sang pop ballads over western rhythms. Even traditional songs and "classical" music were often performed with string orchestra

and drums. Basically, ethnic music as such was rapidly disappearing and being replaced by music rooted in western ideas of melody, harmony and rhythm.

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