

The History of Rock Music: 1989-1994

Raves, grunge, post-rock

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From Grindcore to Stoner-rock

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

A metal nation

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If the 1980s had been the golden age of heavy metal, the age when heavy metal was accepted by the masses and climbed the charts, the 1990s saw the fragmentation of the genre into rather different styles, that simply expanded on ideas of the 1980s.

As usual, pop-metal, the genre that appealed to the masses, was, artistically speaking, the least significant variant of heavy metal. It spawned stars such as Los Angeles' [Warrant](#), with **Cherry Pie** (1990); Boston's [Extreme](#), who specialized in "metal-operas" à la Queen such as **Pornograffiti** (1990); and Pennsylvania's [Live](#), with **Throwing Copper** (1994); etc.

Los Angeles had to live with remnants of its "street-scene" (Guns N' Roses, Jane's Addiction), although they sounded a lot less sincere and a lot less powerful than the original masters: [Ugly Kid Joe](#), [Life Sex And Death](#), [Dishwalla](#), [Ednaswap](#), etc.

Glam-metal staged a comeback of sorts in Florida with [Marilyn Manson](#) (1), the product of Brian Warner's deranged mind. Propelled by the brutal sounds of keyboardist Madonna Wayne-Gacy and guitarist Daisy Berkowitz, Warner's theatrical exhibition of degenerate, depraved animal instinct wed Alice Cooper's scum-rock and Nine Inch Nails' industrial-hardcore on **Portrait Of An American Family** (1994). By borrowing the energy of speed-metal, **Antichrist Superstar** (1996) sold the gimmick to the masses.

The connection between hardcore and heavy-metal ("metalcore") had been

kept alive by New York's [Biohazard](#), especially on **Urban Discipline** (1993), and Boston's [Converge](#), best on later albums such as the explosive **Jane Doe** (2000) and **You Fail Me** (2004). Converge also exhibited the influence of post-rock and therefore pioneered "mathcore". So did New Jersey's [Rorschach](#) on **Protestant** (1993).

Prog-metal

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Progressive-metal was more capable of producing new ideas. Notable USA albums of the 1990s in the style of Queensryche and the likes included: **Last Decade Dead Century** (1990), by Michigan's [Warrior Soul](#); **Wonderdrug** (1994), by New York's [Naked Sun](#); etc.

[Dream Theater](#) (11), formed at Boston's prestigious Berklee College of Music, established a new standard for progressive metal. Their second album, **Images And Words** (1992), constructed lengthy melodic fantasias that relied on symphonic magniloquence (Kevin Moore on keyboards), fluid instrumental passages (John Petrucci on guitar), haphazard rhythms (Mike Portnoy on drums) and romantic emphasis (James Labrie on vocals). At the same time breathless and catchy, rock and neoclassical, impulsive and brainy, this style became even more elaborate on **Awake** (1994), although it lost some of its bite, which got further diluted in the seven-movement suite *A Change Of Seasons* (1995). At the same time colossal pieces such as *Octavarium* (2005) became compendia of the prog-rock vocabulary.

Texan band [Absu](#), fronted by drummer Prosciptor (Russ Givens) and featuring a synthesizer, coined an erudite and epic black-metal style devoted to esoteric and exotic themes with their second album **Sun of Tiphareth** (1995).

Likewise in Europe there were a few significant prog-metal contributions such as the symphonic metal of **Land Of Broken Hearts** (1993) by Denmark's [Royal Hunt](#).

Switzerland's [Alboth!](#) (2), a piano-bass-drums trio, invented a new genre at the border between jazz and industrial metal, between Cecil Taylor and Young Gods. The jackhammer rhythms and torrential piano clusters of **Liebefeld** (1992) and **Ali** (1996) were both visceral and sophisticated.

Death-metal

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The terrifying sound of grindcore and death-metal continued to thrive in the USA thanks to New York's [Brutal Truth](#) (1), with **Extreme Conditions Demand Extreme Responses** (1992), Buffalo's [Cannibal Corpse](#), with **Tomb of the Mutilated** (1992), and Louisiana's [Acid Bath](#), with **When The Kite String Pops** (1994). However, Death's **Human** (1991) led to a "technical" renewal of the field, of which the main proponents were two bands from New York: [Suffocation](#) with their **Effigy of the Forgotten** (1991), and [Immolation](#) with **Dawn Of Possession**

(1991).

Thanks to the creative work of three groups in the USA, "death-metal" was rapidly mutating into something at the same time more terrible and more musical.

[Type O Negative](#) (101) in New York achieved the most shocking fusion of metal, industrial and gothic languages. With vocalist Peter "Steele" Ratajczyk convincingly impersonating a psychopath who uttered nihilist, racist, sexist and fascist invectives, keyboardist Josh Silver molding grandiose sonic architectures, and guitarist Kenny Hickey highlighting the turpitude of the stories with excoriating noises, the terrifying vision of **Slow Deep And Hard** (1991) acquired a metaphysical dimension besides and beyond its hyper-realistic overtones, bridging the philosophical themes of sex and death the way a black mass would do. Moral ambiguity translated into musical ambiguity, as anthemic choruses wavered like funereal dirges, epic riffs shrieked like agonizing spasms in the struggle for survival, and homicidal fantasies peaked with evil apotheosis. Contrasts and juxtapositions blurred the difference between hell and paradise. Each song was structured as a sequence of movements, each movement arranged in a different fashion, and the sequence leading to unrelenting suspense. They sounded like Wagnerian mini-symphonies composed in Dante's Inferno and supercharged with fear and despair. The apocalypse subsided on **Bloody Kisses** (1993), a more sincere fresco of urban violence.

[Today Is The Day](#) (23), in Tennessee, straddled the border between grindcore, noise-rock, death-metal, hardcore, progressive-rock and industrial music. The visceral nightmares of **Supernova** (1993) were full of sonic experiments and stylistic twists, but **Willpower** (1994) went beyond the "ambience" to extract sheer angst from Steve Austin's screams and the trio's assorted cacophony. Each song sounded like a natural catastrophe, each song was the soundtrack of an irrational state of mind. Scott Wexton's sampling machines (replacing the bass player) bestowed an electronic flavor to **Today is The Day** (1996). The effect was to enhance the progressive-rock part of the equation, a fact that helped sustain the stylistic collage of **Temple Of The Morning Star** (1997): no less macabre and emphatic, the music also felt surreal and cathartic. It was still the sound of a psychological torture, but one that mirrored some kind of supernatural beauty. After the brief bursts of super-charged grindcore and religious fervor packed on **In The Eyes Of God** (1999), Austin unleashed the orgy of experimentation of the satanic monolith **Sadness Will Prevail** (2002), running the gamut from eerie piano ballads to Jimi Hendrix-style cacophony to Middle-Eastern music.

[Fear Factory](#) (11), in Los Angeles, painted their harrowing mural of urban decadence with an emphasis on rhythm: thrashing, grinding beats spread like neurotransmitters inside the nervous system of the cyberpunk manifesto **Soul of a New Machine** (1992). Songs evolved rather than just erupted. The music of **Demanufacture** (1995), featuring Front Line Assembly's keyboardist Rhys Fulber, seemed to come from another world, saturated with blasphemous truths about this world. Its cascading bombshells kept morphing into cingulate beasts and emanating poisonous miasmas.

This triad pretty much subverted the conventions of the genre, and created a new kind of music, tailored for the issues and the mood of the cyberpunk generation.

A rare attempt to fuse death-metal with progressive-rock and even jazzcore was carried out simultaneously in Florida by [Atheist](#) on **Unquestionable Presence** (1991), and by [Cynic](#) on their lone album, **Focus** (1993). [Gorguts](#)' third album **Obscura** (1998), the first one by the line-up of vocalist Luc Lemay, guitarist Steeve Hurdle, bassist Steve Cloutier and drummer Patrick Robert, offered an even more explosive fusion of atonal avantgarde, free jazz and death-metal.

Pennsylvania-based trio [Exit-13](#), featuring vocalist Bill Yurkiewicz and guitarist Steve O'Donnell, turned **Green Is Good** (1990) into a caricature of grindcore by injecting elements of doom, jazz, acid-rock and even music-hall; basically, grindcore the way Frank Zappa would have done it.

Sweden, instead, boasted an Iron Maiden-inspired melodic death-metal movement that peaked with [At The Gates](#)' **The Red In The Sky Is Ours** (1993), [Dissection](#)'s **Storm of the Light's Bane** (1995) and [In Flames](#)'s **The Jester Race** (1996).

On the other hand, Sweden's [Entombed](#) embodied the classic sound of death-metal, especially on their second album **Clandestine** (1991).

Czech band [Forgotten Silence](#) ranked among the most experimental death-metal bands of their age. They established their progressive death-metal style with the double-disc **Senyaan** (1998), a concept in seven (lengthy) chapters with interludes, while the esoteric/mystical Egyptian theme became more prominent. *Come With Me As Far As Behind The Horizon*, off the mini-album **Bya Bamahe Neem** (2004), and the three extended suites of **Kro Ni Ka** (2006) unfurled stylistic kaleidoscopes that transcended the genre.

Scandinavian black metal

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More or less independently of death-metal, a new school of "black metal" arose out of northern Europe, particularly in Norway where Mayhem and Bathory had planted the seeds.

[Darkthrone](#)'s **A Blaze In The Northern Sky** (1991) and the bass-less **Under a Funeral Moon** (1993) coined a raw, brutal and buzz-intense sound, almost like a "garage" version of their forefathers Bathory and Mayhem, while the growling noise coming out of vocalist Ted "Nocturno Culto" Skjellum's mouth enhance the sense of damnation.

[Forgotten Woods](#)' **As The Wolves Gather** (1994), and [Immortal](#)'s **Battles In The North** (1994) were the other albums that launched the genre.

[Enslaved](#) (1) were emblematic: they employed medieval and epic arias inspired by the Scandinavian folk tradition in lengthy majestic songs of dark, piercing, intense agony enhanced with synthesizers and piano on

Vikingligr Veldi (1994), transitioning towards progressive-rock on **Eld** (1997), etc.

In The Nightside Eclipse (1994) by **Emperor** (1) stood as a concentrate of violence (thanks to lightning-speed drumming, satanic shrieks and frantically distorted guitar), but also as a metaphysical (and symphonic) inspection of the otherworld.

Satyricon (1) experimented with a fusion of folk music and dark metal on **Dark Medieval Times** (1993), while their "metal opera" **Nemesis Divina** (1996) stuck to the basics, erecting a dense and intricate wall of guitar distortions and epileptic beats.

Burzum (2), the project of former Mayhem's Christian "Count Grishnackh" Vikernes (who was in prison for murder), coined an original ambient version of dark metal with the four massively droning, distorted, glacial tracks of **Hvis Lyset Tar Oss** (1994). On the other hand the instrumental monolith *Rundtgaing Av Den Transcendentale Egenbetens Stotte*, off the more eclectic **Filosofem** (1996), was just a sparse, drum-less, riff-less, drone-less electronic soundscape. Besides providing the demonic vocals, Grishnackh played all the instruments, mixing romantic keyboards with extremely distorted guitars, setting the music to demented rhythms, and screaming the lyrics like a damned soul burning in hell.

Sweden's **Katatonia** represented the suicidal extreme of doom-metal with **Dance of December Souls** (1993), wrapped in romantic guitar solos and atmospheric keyboards.

Sweden's **Marduk** (fronted by guitarist Morgan Haakansson) and Norway's **Gorgoroth** invented a lightning-speed version of black metal on albums such as the former's **Those of the Unlight** (1993) and **Opus Nocturne** (1994) and the latter's third album **Under The Sign Of Hell** (1997).

Finland's **Beherit** (1) sounded like a black-metal band drawn into a psychedelic freak-out on **Drawing Down The Moon** (1993), as close to white (black?) noise as black metal had ever come, dominated by satanic vocals (Marko Laiho) that were more interested in hissing and growling like an invisible demon than in shrieking like a wild beast.

Thanks to the harrowing lives (and deaths) of its protagonists, black metal now competed with hip hop as the most anti-social form of music in the world, having displaced hardcore punk-rock from that title.

Outside of Scandinavia, the most influential practitioners of black metal were perhaps England's **Cradle Of Filth**, who wed the ever more malevolent guitar riffs and drum beats of the genre with a theatrical and literary gothic stance and with symphonic keyboards on the vampire-based concept **Dusk and Her Embrace** (1997); and **Abigor**, an Austrian trio of black metal that featured a vocalist, a guitarist and a drummer but no full-time bassist, especially on the third album **Nachthymnen/ From the Twilight Kingdom** (1995).

Russia's **Forest** were faithful disciples of Burzum, except that their debut cassette **Forest** (1996) also contained the 20-minute psychedelic and progressive suite *Winter Howl* (recorded in 1994).

[Graveland](#), the brainchild of Polish multi-instrumentalist Rob "Darken" Fudali, embraced a brooding midtempo style on their fourth album **Immortal Pride** (1998), with its two lengthy epics, on **Creed of Iron** (2000), with four lengthy visions of medieval warfare, and on **Memory And Destiny** (2002), steadily moving towards an ambient pagan folk-metal.

The 1990s also witnessed the birth of an influential school of black metal in France. Among the pioneers were the two duos that shared the split cassette album **March to the Black Holocaust** (1995): [Vlad Tepes](#) and [Belketre](#). Most influential of all were Willy Roussel's [Mutilation](#), whose **Vampires of Black Imperial Blood** (1995) was the best approximation of the Scandinavian classics.

Dark ambient music in continental Europe peaked with [Paysage D'Hiver](#) (Swiss guitarist Tobias Moeckl), whose keyboard-based **Die Festung** (1999) was even reminiscent of Popol Vuh's spiritual ambience. Its alter-ego was the massive super-heavy glacial hypnotic drone of the 21-minute *Die Zeit des Torremond*, off **Schattengang** (1999). *Welt Aus Eis*, off **Paysage D'Hiver** (2000), added violin to the keyboards in a soundscape devastated by blastbeats and hysterical guitars.

Doom metal

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"Doom-metal" (a slow, gothic, baroque exaggeration of Black Sabbath's deadly grooves) became more and more popular in England thanks to a number of progressively more sophisticated groups. [Paradise Lost](#), that debuted with **Paradise Lost** (1990), were not particularly creative, but [Cathedral](#) (1), featuring vocalist Lee Dorrian (ex-Napalm Death), invented a new format with the lengthy and stately elegies of **Forest Of Equilibrium** (1991), whose relation with progressive-rock was evident in colossal suites such as *The Voyage of the Homeless Sapiens* (1994) and *The Garden* (2006). [Anathema](#) (1) gave the movement a spiritual dimension with **Serenades** (1993) and a delirious medieval dimension with the mini-album **Pentecost III** (1995). [My Dying Bride](#) (1) perfected that format with an almost baroque grandeur on their third album **The Angel & The Dark River** (1995). [Solstice](#)'s second album **New Dark Age** (1998) mixed epic riffs with Celtic and medieval influences.

Doom-metal in the USA had fewer and lesser adherents. Los Angeles' [Obsessed](#), the band of former Saint Vitus member Scott "Wino" Weinrich, stood out with the cadaveric dirges of **The Obsessed** (1990) and **Lunar Womb** (1991). North Carolina's [Confessor](#) offered a technical version of doom-metal on **Condemned** (1991). **Into The Depths Of Sorrow** (1991) by Texas' [Solitude Aeternus](#) was the epitome of epic doom.

Super-doom

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The Melvins had pioneered a different kind of "doom rock", a style that

manically emphasized and extended the psychedelic grooves of Black Sabbath. Their "super-doom" grunge was continued in Seattle by [Earth](#) (11), who were the most extreme of Seattle's "doom-rockers". The titanic instrumental tracks of the EP **Extra-Capsular Extraction** (1991) and the album **2** (1993) relied on colossal drones and heavy rhythms seen through the distorted lense of Dylan Carlson's neurosis. Earth's music sounded like the casual jamming of extraterrestrial monsters. It merged elements of LaMonte Young's avantgarde minimalism and Eastern music's transcendental ecstasy and drenched them into gothic-scifi atmospheres. They were not "songs", they were hyper-psychedelic states of mind. **Phase 3** (1995) and the more accessible **Pentastar - In The Style Of Demons** (1996) continued Carlson's virtual sampling of historical riffs of hard-rock in a more earthly setting. Compared with their evil symphonies, Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music* was classical music.

[Karp](#) (1) packed a mad carnival of cacophonous maelstroms, spasmodic psychodramas, rowdy voooodoo-billy and monolithic trance on **Mustaches Wild** (1994).

Louisiana's [Eyehategod](#) (2), who debuted with the ferocious **In the Name of Suffering** (1990), opened the way to an entire "sludge-core" scene in the South dedicated to truculent, feedback-laden, deep-groove rock music. Their third album **Dopesick** (1996) was the ultimate feedback experience.

Two bands coined dreamy introspective styles that stood out amid the bombast of their peers.

Finland's [Thergothon](#) pioneered a slow-motion otherworldly version of doom for cadaveric vocals and funereal keyboards on **Stream From The Heavens** (1992).

Australia's [Disembowment](#) crafted **Transcendence Into The Peripheral** (1993), an album of contrasts in which blasts of noise crashed into lakes of ghostly melodies.

[Esoteric](#) (1) pioneered an epic version of doom with their triple guitar attack and their passion for colossal (double-disc) albums such as **Epistemological Despondency** (1994) and **The Pernicious Enigma** (1997), devoted to minimal quasi-ambient hyper-psychedelic meditations.

Stoner rock

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"Stoner-rock" was an evolution of Blue Cheer's brutal hard-psychedelic-blues sound: super-distorted, super-heavy and super-loud.

The genre was first pioneered in southern California by [Kyuss](#) (11). **Wretch** (1991), basically, expanded on Chrome's hurricanes from the perspective of hard-rock (Chrome without the new-wave frills), but **Blues For The Red Sun** (1992) was a majestic work in a completely new dimension, a collection of disturbing symphonies for bulldozers and bombers, with disorienting interludes worthy of acid-rock. The waves of feedback and the cascades of melting steel coming from Josh Homme's

guitar, the vibrant eloquence of John Garcia's crooning, the seismic bass of Nick Oliveri and the tribal drums of Brant Bjork, combined to produce the effect of high-tension electroshocks, breakneck gallops and incandescent lava. **Welcome To Sky Valley** (1994), on the other hand, was almost baroque in the way it fused all those elements into a uniform and organic one, like an act of vanity from a bunch of cannibals.

Stoner-rock thrived in the San Francisco Bay Area. [Sleep](#) (1), the band of vocalist Al Cisneros and guitarist Matt Pike, bridged doom-metal and stoner-rock with the slow, dark, booming dirges of **Volume One** (1992). And then it fell prey to a Black Sabbath obsession on **Sleep's Holy Mountain** (1993). Everything came into focus (i.e., to a virtual standstill) with the cryptic lumbering hour-long suite of **Jerusalem** (1998), originally recorded in 1995 and reissued in its 63-minute entirety as **Dopesmoker** (2003), one of the most austere attempts at scoring the deepest torments of the human psyche, a turgid mass of convoluted guitar monologues and werewolf howls which actually sounded like one deep coma.

Sleep's guitarist Matt Pike built a career from stretching out Black Sabbath's riffs into earth-shaking hyper-lysergic trances. His next project was [High On Fire](#), that debuted with **Art Of Self Defense** (2000). In the meantime Cisneros had formed a bass-and-drums duo, [Om](#), devoted to trancey stoner jams, best on the mini-album **Conference of the Birds** (2006)

The second epicenter of stoner-rock was New York, where [Monster Magnet](#) (1), led by guitarists David Wyndorf and John McBain (and later Ed Mundell), concocted a crazy variant of Hawkwind's space-rock on **Spine Of God** (1991). It almost sounded like a parody of (soon to be called) stoner-rock, but the sound actually became heavier on **Superjudge** (1993), although Jimi Hendrix's soul-blues blood ran through its veins. These cathartic baths in guitar distortions dissolved into the heavily arranged (mellotron, strings, sitar) **Dopes To Infinity** (1995) and the more conventional grunge sound of **Powertrip** (1998).

[Acrimony](#) was perhaps the best of the British stoners, having discovered a hypnotic way of wrapping catchy riffs into droning and repetitive structures, especially on their second album **Tumuli Shroomaroom** (1996).

Funk-metal

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The real money machine of the 1990s was funk-metal. In the 1980s bands such as Red Hot Chili Peppers and Primus had coined a style that was a hybrid of funk and hard-rock. Earlier, Run DMC had already experimented with a fusion of rap and heavy-metal. These two simple ideas made up the scaffolding of much heavy-metal of the 1990s.

Los Angeles was funk-metal's home turf: [Infectious Grooves](#), the side-project of Suicidal Tendencies' vocalist Mike Muir, with **The Plague That Makes Your Booty Move** (1991); [Eleven](#), with **Eleven** (1993); etc. But, more importantly, rap-metal was headquartered in Los Angeles. [Rage](#)

[Against The Machine](#) (1), the band that launched the style worldwide, realized one of the most important leitmotifs of the decade: a fundamental unity of purpose between the music of black urban rebels and the music of white urban rebels. **Rage Against The Machine** (1992), one of the most violent albums of the time, a worthy heir to MC5's homicidal fury, sustained seismic shocks after seismic shocks thanks to Tom Morello's guitar explosions (from Hendrix-ian glissandos to Page-esque hard-rock riffs), Zack de la Rocha's visceral and frantic rapping and ultra-syncopated hail-like rhythms. The sinister and morbid atmosphere of **Evil Empire** (1996), virtually a philosophical essay on willpower, and the passionate call to arms of **The Battle of Los Angeles** (1999) reached new depths although they lost most of the bite.

Rap-metal turned into something completely different, halfway into the decade, with the advent of [Korn](#) (1). Jonathan Davis embodied the post-yuppie pessimism at the turn of the century, and made a career of focusing on the anxieties of disaffected teenagers of the middle-class. Thus the tone of **Korn** (1994) was bleak, and, while not as aggressive as other funk-metal bands, it had few rivals in terms of dramatic tension. It was only fitting that **Life Is Peachy** (1996) and **Follow The Leader** (1998) were confused and insecure albums, compensating a lack of songwriting skills with an emphasis on mood swings and claustrophobic atmospheres.

The main representatives of funk-rock in New York were [Scatterbrain](#), the new band by Ludichrist's vocalist Tommy Christ and guitarist Glenn Cummings, whose **Here Comes Trouble** (1990) in fact predated the fad.

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