

The History of Rock Music: 1989-1994

Raves, grunge, post-rock

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Alt-pop

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

Pop renaissance in the USA

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During the first half of the 1990s, pop music vastly outnumbered underground/experimental music. It was the revenge of melody, after a quarter of a century of progressive sounds. A cycle that began with the demise of the Beatles and the rise of alternative/progressive rock, and that continued with the German and Canterbury schools of the 1970s, and then punk-rock and the new wave, and peaked with the alt-rock and college-pop of the 1980s, came to an abrupt, grinding halt in the 1990s.

The more fashionable and rewarding route was, however, the one that coasted the baroque pop of latter-day Beach Boys, Van Dyke Parks, Big Star and XTC, the one that coupled catchy refrains and lush arrangements. The single most important school may have been San Francisco's, which had originated in the 1980s with the Sneetches. [Jellyfish](#) (2), featuring guitarist Jason Falkner, wrote perhaps the most impeccable melodies of the time. **Bellybutton** (1990), a milestone of naive, bubblegum melodic music inspired by Merseybeat and later Beach Boys, was both cartoonish and shimmering, while the arrangements on **Spilt Milk** (1993) were almost baroque.

Other devoted followers were [Imperial Teen](#), led by former Faith No More's keyboardist Roddy Bottum, the [Mommyheads](#), [MK Ultra](#), [Overwhelming Colorfast](#), [Smash Mouth](#), [Orange Peels](#), masters of the retro' on **Square** (1997), [Beulah](#), with **Handsome Western States** (1997), etc.

In Seattle, the melodic tradition of the Green Pajamas and the Young Fresh Fellows was continued by Juan Atkins' project, [764-Hero](#), with **Get**

Here And Stay (1999), and by [Super Deluxe](#) with **Famous** (1995).

Elsewhere, similar sounds were produced by [Velvet Crush](#) in Rhode Island; [Material Issue](#) in Chicago, with **International Pop Overthrow** (1991); [Rembrandts](#) in Los Angeles; etc.

The [Eggs](#) (1), in Virginia, were among the most creative, particularly on their second album, **Exploder** (1993), that featured exotic instruments, synthesizer, trombone, and oboe.

New York-based [Fountains Of Wayne](#), on the other hand, became the USA's prime Brit-poppers through **Fountains Of Wayne** (1996) and **Utopia Parkway** (1999).

Quite unique was the style of the [Ben Folds Five](#) in North Carolina, because keyboardist and vocalist Folds was an unusual disciple of Todd Rundgren and Elton John, best heard on the ballads of **Ben Folds Five** (1995).

In Oklahoma, Tyson Meade's [Chainsaw Kittens](#) (1) launched a revival of glam-pop with **Violent Religion** (1990), a concentrate of Aerosmith, New York Dolls, T. Rex, Cheap Trick, Patti Smith, Stooges, Velvet Underground, etc. Glam-pop's comeback continued with [Sponge](#) in New York, and [Running With Scissors](#) in Seattle.

In Texas, the hyper-pop muzak of Tim DeLaughter's [Tripping Daisy](#) evolved from the sugary **Bill** (1992) to the grandiose and baroque **Jesus Hits Like The Atom Bomb** (1998).

Canada's most successful pop bands were the [Barenaked Ladies](#), revealed by **Gordon** (1992), and the [Crash Test Dummies](#), with **God Shuffled His Feet** (1993).

Non-pop 1990-95

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The Pixies invented the most creative form of pop of the 1980s, one that conveyed the fractured tics of hardcore punk-rock and the enigmatic dynamics of the new wave into a melodic format that was not straightforward at all but sounded like it. The greatest disciples of the Pixies' late quirky-pop sound were the [Breeders](#) (2), a supergroup featuring the Pixies' bassist Kim Deal (now on guitar) and the Throwing Muses' guitarist Tanya Donnelly. **Pod** (1990) explored a broad range of tones, from the ecstatic nursery-rhyme of a naive little girl to the harsh, syncopated riff of a hard-rock band. The band continued to blur daydreaming and nightmare on **Last Splash** (1993), having replaced Donnelly with Kim's twin sister Kelley, an even more powerful post-feminist statement that employs an even wider repertory of "voices" (girl-groups, jangling folk-rock, country, even grunge). Donnelly went on to create [Belly](#) (1) and craft the charming and subtly primitive **Star** (1993), while the twins remained more faithful to the eccentric rhetoric of the Pixies, Kim with the Amps and **Pacer** (1995), and Kelly with the [Kelly Deal 6000](#) and **Go To The Sugar Altar** (1996).

Boston was also the home base of one of the greatest bands of the decade, [Morphine](#) (112), a guitar-less trio whose style borrowed heavily from blues and jazz but shared with the Pixies the same casual, detached approach to melody. Three masterpieces established them among the masters of the "noir" atmosphere. **Good** (1992) highlighted their ability to turn ballads and rockers into metaphysical dialogues between bass and saxophone. The languid crooning of former Treat Her Right's bassist Mark Sandman, who chiseled one of the most evocative voices of the era, added another layer of meaning, a Tom Waits-like mourner and Nick Cave-like preacher floating inside the stark, unreal, heavy fog of the music. The trio contrived melodies that offered a quiet vivisection of post-industrial anxiety. Sandman refined the way he rode (like a surfer) the gloomy and occasionally even lugubrious lines of Dana Colley's saxophone on **Cure For Pain** (1993), a less claustrophobic and more accessible work, featuring drummer Billy Conway (also ex-Treat Her Right). **Yes** (1995) followed the route that seemed less congenial to the trio, by emphasizing rhythm over melody. Less depressed and distressed, it almost sounded like a return to rock'n'roll and rhythm'n'blues of the 1950s. Their representation of reality provided an anti-spectacular synthesis of transcendental and mundane elements, additionally soaked into premonitions of a merciless destiny. After the mediocre **Like Swimming** (1997), Morphine's last album, **The Night** (2000), released after Sandman died of a heart attack on-stage in 1999, turned out to be both their most introspective and their most orchestrated work (piano, cello, horns, organ and choir).

Georgia was still a favorable turf for alternative pop. [Magnapop](#) (1), the band of vocalist Linda Hopper and guitarist Ruthie Morris, played in a style halfway between folk-rock and hard-rock on **Magnapop** (1992). [Toenut](#) delivered unsettling tunes on **Information** (1995).

Los Angeles' [Madder Rose](#) (2) was an oddly schizophrenic band that relied on the contrast/friction (rather than the amalgam/fusion) of Billy Cote's abrasive guitar and Mary Lorson's sweet vocals. **Bring It Down** (1993) and **Panic On** (1994) were poetic, idyllic works whose mood fluctuated between autumnal singalongs and tormented rockers. They converted to trip-hop with **Tragic Magic** (1997) and reinvented themselves with the surreal stylistic melange of **Hello June Fool** (1999).

Also in Los Angeles, [Further](#) (1) toyed with Dinosaur Jr-style noise-pop on **Sometimes Chimes** (1994).

North Carolina, which had become one of the main centers for alternative rock, was also one of the venues in which musicians truly tried to speak new melodic languages.

The brand of power-pop concocted by the [Archers Of Loaf](#) (2) on **Icky Mettle** (1993) and **Vee Vee** (1995) mixed the eccentric dynamics of the Pixies and the anthemic tone of the Replacements, and added a generous dose of Television's guitar noise. Archers Of Loaf's guitarist/vocalist [Eric Bachmann](#) (1), disguised as **Barry Black** (1995), revealed his real self (and ambitions) with a program of all-instrumental chamber music that was both demented and virtuosic. His next project, [Crooked Fingers](#) (1), capitalized on that experiment for a chaotic and eclectic repertory of carefully-arranged, dark, pensive ballads, particularly on their second

album **Bring On The Snakes** (2001).

Other notable albums of the North Carolina school were [Small 23's True Zero Hook](#) (1993) and [Spatula's](#) second album **Medium Planers and Matchers** (1995).

Franklin Bruno's [Nothing Painted Blue](#) (1) in Los Angeles experimented with an introverted and intellectual form of power-pop on their second album **Power Trips Down Lovers Lane** (1993).

Vancouver's [Superconductor](#), led by Carl Newman, toyed with a bizarre six-guitar line-up on the loud and tuneful **Hit Songs For Girls** (1993) and the rock opera **Bastardsong** (1996).

Holland was perhaps the most fertile place for college-pop, outside the USA. The Dutch contingent was led by [Daryll-Ann](#) (1), who pursued an implosion of country-rock and folk-rock stereotypes on their lyrical third album **Weeps** (1996), and [Bettie Serveert](#) (1), who served cold clever melodies on **Palomine** (1992).

Lounge-pop 1990-94

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A brief fad in the USA was "lounge-pop", that was rediscovered in Rhode Island by [Combustible Edison](#): the soundtrack to their "Combustible Edison Heliotropic Oriental Mambo and Foxtrot Orchestra", partly collected on **I Swinger** (1994), was its manifesto, while their third disc, **The Impossible World** (1998), wed it to the other big fad of the time, trip-hop.

In Canada, [Zumpano](#), the new project of singer/guitarist Carl Newman, fully acknowledged that zeitgeist on their second album, **Goin' Through Changes** (1996), adopting lounge music and easy-listening within the alt-rock framework.

In Sweden the [Cardigans](#) wrapped Nina Persson's soft, sensual and dreamy phrasing around sophisticated and lush lounge-pop arrangements, notably on their second album **Life** (1995).

Two Georgia bands flirted with easy-listening: [Jody Grind](#), whose vibrant jazzy vocalist Kelly Hogan propelled **One Man's Trash Is Another Man's Treasure** (1990), and the [Opal Foxx Quartet](#), with the elaborate **The Love That Won't Shut Up** (1993).

Seattle's [Satchel](#) (1), featuring Pigeonhed's vocalist Shawn Smith, crafted elegant pop-soul-jazz ballads, inspired by both Steely Dan and Prince, on **EDC** (1994).

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