

The History of Rock Music: 1989-1994

Raves, grunge, post-rock

[History of Rock Music](#) | [1955-66](#) | [1967-69](#) | [1970-75](#) | [1976-89](#) | [The early 1990s](#) | [The late 1990s](#) | [The 2000s](#) | [Alpha index](#)

Musicians of [1955-66](#) | [1967-69](#) | [1970-76](#) | [1977-89](#) | [1990s in the US](#) | [1990s outside the US](#) | [2000s](#)

[Back to the main Music page](#)

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Garage Music for the Generation X

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

Blues-punk, 1990-93

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Jon Spencer was not the only one to adapt the blues to punk-rock. New takes on the blues and rhythm'n'blues were experimented by bands throughout the nation, from New York's [Railroad Jerk](#) (1), with the subnormal psycho-blues of **Railroad Jerk** (1990), to Ohio's [Prisonshake](#), with **A Girl Named Yes** (1990), from Los Angeles' [Clawhammer](#) (1), led by former Pontiac Brothers' guitarist Jon Wahl, that fostered the unlikely wedding of Captain Beefheart and Devo on **Clawhammer** (1990), to Kansas' [Mercy Rule](#) (1), formed by 13 Nightmares' guitarist John Taylor and thundering vocalist Heidi Ore, with **God Protects Fools** (1993). Their sloppy, primitive, barbaric sound resonated with the suicidal psyche of the Generation X.

Ohio's [Gits](#) (1), featuring the witchy vocals of Mia Zapata, crossed punk-rock and blues-rock, halfway between X and Sex Pistols, with the addition of an angry feminine touch, on **Frenching The Bully** (1992).

Michigan's [Mule](#) (1), formed by guitarist Preston Long and Laughing Hyenas' formidable rhythm section (Jim Kimball and Kevin "Munro" Strickland), played blues-rock for hell's saloons. **Mule** (1993) offered harsh, truculent and discordant music that borrowed from Z.Z.Top, Captain Beefheart, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Jimi Hendrix and Creedence Clearwater Revival but savagely deformed the original sources.

Chicago's [Red Red Meat](#) (12) started from similar premises but evolved towards a more intellectual exploration of music. **Red Red Meat** (1992) and **Jimmy Wine Majestic** (1993) unleashed the dirty, feverish and unstable vibrations of all the blues irregulars of the past (the Rolling

Stones, Captain Beefheart, Pussy Galore, etc), but the atmospheric **Bunny Gets Paid** (1995) veered towards desolate free-form "pieces" that felt like scarred remnants of pop songs. This, in turn, led to the abstract framework of **There's A Star Above The Manger Tonight** (1997), replete with synthesizer and other sophisticated arrangements, which was, de facto, a postmodernist exercise in stylistic deconstruction, bordering on trip-hop and ambient music while retaining the cacophony of Captain Beefheart and Pussy Galore. Red Red Meat guitarist (and original founder) Tim Rutili, drummer Ben Massarella and bassist Tim Hurley set out to further investigate this unfocused sea of sounds as [Califone](#) (2). The brooding acid-blues sound of their early EPs, **Califone** (1998) and **Califone** (2000), and of their full-length albums **Roomsound** (2001) and **Quicksand Cradlesnakes** (2003) absorbed jazz, post-rock, samples and loops into the canon of blues depression and gospel ecstasy. **Heron King Blues** (2004) further disintegrated the format of the roots-rock song, with the mostly instrumental jam *Heron King Blues* performing a bold balancing act between organic free-form abstraction and geometric pulsing pattern, a worthy addition to the program of Captain Beefheart's **Mirror Man**. The dusty interplay of voice, guitars, banjos, hurdy gurdies, drums and electronics concocted an understated post-everything mayhem.

In Australia, [Bloodloss](#) (1), which were basically Lubricated Goat with Mudhoney's vocalist Mark Arm replacing Stu Spasm, assembled some of the ugliest blues albums of all times: the sinister **In A Gadda Da Change** (1993) and especially **Live My Way** (1995), disfigured by saxophones, trumpets and keyboards, and influenced by Captain Beefheart and the Rolling Stones.

Garage-rock, 1992-94

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San Francisco's [Mummies](#) (1) were perhaps the ideological leaders of the garage revival, even if they lasted only one album, the orgiastic and lo-fi **Never Been Caught** (1992).

Notable albums from the Pacific Northwest included **Wrecker** (1992) by the [Mono Men](#) and **Outta Sight** (1993) by [Sinister Six](#) (1). Seattle's [Makers](#) (1) unwound a manic frenzy of fuzz, treble and feedback at full throttle on **Howl** (1994), and enhanced the show with nihilistic overtones on **Makers** (1996).

Ohio boasted two of the best rock'n'roll groups. Heirs to MC5's bacchanals, but also a bridge to contemporary genres such as grunge, thrash-metal and hardcore, [God And Texas](#) (2) drenched the songs of **History Volume One** (1992) and **Criminal Element** (1993) with feverish distortions and catastrophic drumming. The [New Bomb Turks](#) (2) were even more barbaric and breathtaking, particularly on **Destroy Oh Boy** (1993), but anchored the songs of mature albums such as **At Rope's End** (1998) to linear progressions and anthemic melodies.

MC5's agit-prop was also relived in Washington's [Love 666](#) ferocious anthems, notably on the EP **Love 666** (1994) and the mini-album **American Revolution** (1995).

The [Dynamite Masters Blues Quartet](#), fronted by Shinji Masuko, played raw, abrasive and loud rock'n'roll on **DMBQ** (1995) and **EXP** (1996), like a marriage of the Boredoms, Blue Cheer and the Stooges.

Crampsiana, 1993-95

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The spring of garage-rock was not dry yet. The Cramps' punkabilly, in particular, was a massive influence on USA garage-rock, from Tennessee, where the [Oblivians](#) recorded the mini-album **Never Enough** (1994) and especially **Popular Favorites** (1996), to Kentucky, where [Bodeco](#) recorded **Bone Hair And Hide** (1992). [Reverend Horton Heat](#) (Texan rocker Jim Heath) continued the tradition of mad rockabilly on albums such as the demonic **The Full Custom Sounds** (1993).

Seattle's [Gas Huffer](#) (2) played epileptic rock'n'roll with the psychotic impetus of the Heartbreakers and the Cramps but also with the childish silliness of the Ramones. **Janitors Of Tomorrow** (1991) and **Integrity Technology And Service** (1992) were collections of time-warp aberrations.

The Honeymoon Killers' leader Jerry Teel went on to join the [Chrome Cranks](#) (1), with whom he produced at least one aberration worthy of the Honeymoon Killers, **Chrome Cranks** (1994).

In North Carolina, [Southern Culture On The Skids](#) (2) delivered a stew of old-fashioned styles (surf, rockabilly, country, garage-rock and rhythm'n'blues) with a punk attitude, reaching back to Rolling Stones, Creedence Clearwater Revival and Cramps. They were at their best when they let the bad vibrations flow, such as on **For Lovers Only** (1993), a madhouse of a roots-rock album, and the even more eclectic and exuberant **Ditch Diggin'** (1994).

In Minnesota, the veterans of the [Lee Harvey Oswald Band](#) (1) concocted the infernal party of **A Taste Of Prison** (1994), which also indulged in the most perverted side of life.

Instrumental revival, 1993-94

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Instrumental music staged a massive revival during the 1990s, searching for a balance of sorts between nostalgic revival and post-rock ambitions.

Raised on sci-fi serials and horror movies, Alabama's [Man Or Astroman](#) (2) invented a cyberpunk version of Shadowy Men On A Shadowy Planet's postmodernist surf that recalled Devo's satirical/mythological philosophy but dispensed with the silly lyrics. From the naive and exuberant **Is It Man Or Astro-man?** (1993) to the more adventurous **Experiment Zero** (1996), they defined a science of epic guitar twangs, epileptic surf hoedowns, suspenseful vibratos and menacing reverbs.

Seattle's [Pell Mell](#), the group of Pigeonhed's keyboardist Steve Fisk,

carried out a similar program on collections such as **Interstate** (1994), whereas groups such as the [Phantom Surfers](#) in San Francisco were paying tribute to Los Angeles's surf music and to the Northwest's garage-rock on albums such as **The Exciting Sounds Of Model Road Racing** (1994).

The [Mermen](#) (3), from San Francisco, altered surf music via Neil Young's blues-psychedelic neurosis and Jimi Hendrix's devastating spasms on **Food For Other Fish** (1994), and achieved a miraculous balance between revival and experimentation with the three creative jams of **A Glorious Lethal Euphoria** (1995). Their compositions, led by guitarist Jim Thomas, alternated between slow and tortured dirges that flowed towards controlled cacophony, somber and colloquial meditations, majestic and symphonic twang-drenched odes, John Fahey-ian East/West fusion, jazz-rock and raga. **The Amazing California Health And Happiness Road Show** (2000) contained their tour de force, *Burn*.

[continues...](#) | [back...](#) | [Index](#)