

The History of Rock Music: 1989-1994

Raves, grunge, post-rock

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Lo-fi Pop

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

Oceania, 1991-94

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Lo-fi pop, the great invention of New Zealand's independent musicians, became one of the main phenomena, world-wide, of the 1990s.

The scene in New Zealand was largely dominated by members of the old bands, and little was added to the canon by the new generations. Graeme Jefferies' [Cakekitchen](#) (1) concocted the adult blend of austere melodies, bitter philosophy and elegant arrangements of **World Of Sand** (1992), eventually achieving the intrepid and rarefied atmosphere of **The Devil And The Deep Blue Sea** (1996). [Bailter Space](#) (1), led by guitarist Alister Parker, gave their best with the hypnotic and atmospheric noise-rock of **Vortura** (1994), that capitalized on the innovations of My Bloody Valentine and Galaxie 500.

[King Loser](#) were unique in producing a huge noise à la Blue Cheer on **Sonic Super Free Hi-Fi** (1994) and **You Cannot Kill What Does Not Live** (1996). More conventional hard-rock was played by the [3Ds](#).

In Australia, former Cannanes guitarist Randall Lee's [Nice \(Australia\)](#) and [Ashtray Boy](#) were typical of how the dynasties of the 1980s survived the 1990s. **All Souls Alive** (1994), by the [Blackeyed Susans](#) (1), formed by vocalist Rob Snarski and bassist Phil Kakulas, owed the charm of its folk/country chamber elegies to Triffids' guitarist David McComb, Dirty Three's violinist Warren Ellis and drummer Jim White. The [Moles'](#) **Untune The Sky** (1991), featuring Richard Davies, was perhaps the most charming oddity, worthy of New Zealand's classic pop. The [Underground Lovers](#) (1) updated the psychedelic canon with **Leaves Me Blind** (1993), drenched in exotic and mystical sounds.

USA, 1990-94

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The legacy of lo-fi pop was felt much stronger in and around the colleges. Olympia, near Seattle, ruled by Beat Happening, boasted the most fertile scene: Al Larsen's [Some Velvet Sidewalk](#) with their second album **Whirlpool** (1995); Rebecca Gates' [Spinanes](#), with the shy and soulful **Manos** (1993); the [Kicking Giants](#) with **Halo** (1993); Sam Jayne's [Lync](#), pioneers of "emo" with **These Are Not Fall Colors** (1994).

One pioneer of the style was actually a veteran. [Sebadoh](#) (1) was born as the home project of Dinosaur Jr's bassist Lou Barlow, who enjoyed sketching very brief songs (sort of nursery rhymes) in a variety of minimal settings. The early material was collected on **The Freed Man** (1989), but a group sound did not emerge until Jason Loewenstein on guitar and Eric Gaffney on drums helped him record **III** (1991), a much more focused document of youth's alienation. As the role of Barlow's partners increased (and pushed Sebadoh's sound towards the pop mainstream), Barlow regressed to his claustrophobic roots with his alter egos Sentriddoh and Folk Implosion.

Some acts embodied the concept that humility was the secret to artistic success. For example, the naive pop of Florida's [Vulgar Boatmen](#) (1) on **You And Your Sister** (1989) was devoted to simple stories of everyday life.

However, the most influential lo-fi band of the 1990s was California's [Pavement](#) (2). **Slanted And Enchanted** (1992) was more attitude than art (and certainly more epigonic than original), but the chaotic, erratic and unassuming delivery was precisely the point, especially when combined with Stephen Malkmus' bizarre philosophy. **Crooked Rain Crooked Rain** (1993) was even catchy and marginally innocuous.

Malkmus helped David Berman's [Silver Jews](#) (1) in Virginia coin a "lo-fi" version of the Velvet Underground's boogie-trance, like a cross between Luna and Pavement, on **Starlite Walker** (1994).

Rock music was flooded by a new generation of independent bands armed with the most spartan of musical skills and influenced by loony independents of the past such as Syd Barrett, Jonathan Richman, Robyn Hitchcock and Daniel Johnston. Among the most interesting were: Los Angeles' [Refrigerator](#), who penned **How You Continue Dreaming** (1995), an adult and romantic concept dedicated to their suburban community; New York's [Fly Ashtray](#), best represented by the nonsensical ditties of **Tone Sensations Of The Wonder-Men** (1993); Matt Suggs' [Butterglory](#) in Kansas, with the hummable psychodramas of **Crumble** (1994);

Unfortunately, Pavement's idea was frequently misunderstood as meaning that a mediocre musician could produce an unlimited amount of music while at the same time disregarding any musical obligation. Independent musicians became more and more prolific, and often less and less interesting.

Primitivism, 1992-95

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The more creative strand, the one that descended from Half Japanese and the Residents, was kept alive by groups that shunned linearity.

San Diego's [Trumans Water](#) (2) were the stereotypical "antimusical" act. **Of Thick Tum** (1992) sounded like a group of musicians who had no desire to play anything, and therefore each song was a bit of a torture. Their music was the opposite of "entertainment", as **Spasm Smash XXXOXOX Ox and Ass** (1993) proved: a carousel of spastic gestures. It was rock'n'roll filtered by the no wave and Royal Trux's **Twin Infinitives**.

Trumans Water's bassist Glen "Galaxy" Galloway dedicated his project, [Soul Junk](#), to Christian themes, starting with **1950** (1993) and peaking with **1952** (1995).

Maryland's [Velocity Girl](#) (2) synthesized the new sounds of their time: Sonic Youth's noise-rock, Uncle Tupelo's alt-country and Pavement's lo-fi dynamics. The dissonant pop of **Copacetic** (1993) was a study in contrast: effervescent tempos, wildly off-key guitars, Sarah Shannon's seductive pop-soul register, naive melodies; **Simpatico** (1994) merely capitalized on the primitive style of strumming/jamming that they had invented to produce a postmodernist dissection of pop, soul and even jazz cliches.

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