

# 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](#)

---

(Copyright © 2009 Piero Scaruffi)

---

## Concrete Avantgarde

---

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

---

(The following is an excerpt from my book on avantgarde music).

### *The avantgarde of ordinary sound*

TM, ®, Copyright © 2005 [Piero Scaruffi](#) All rights reserved.

Innovative concepts in the arts of field recording and of collage were introduced during the 1990s.

[Gen Ken Montgomery](#) assembled the environmental noise symphony *Father Demo Swears* (1989), a terror-inducing wall of noise for amplified violin, voice, street noise and (massive) feedback.

[David Dunn](#) (1) used computers to assemble "environmental sound works", works that manipulate field recordings, such as *Chaos And The Emergent Mind of the Pond* (1992), off **Angels And Insects** (1992).

Under the moniker [Crawling with Tarts](#) the San Francisco-based duo of composer [Michael Gendreau](#) and Suzanne Dycus concocted **Operas** (1993), or, better, "surface noise operas" (operas composed out of field recordings and studio manipulations) via "transcription discs", a program refined on **Grand Surface Noise Opera Nrs 3 (Indian Ocean Ship) and 4 (Drum Totem)** (1994), the former scored for four turntables and the latter scored for turntables and percussion. Michael Gendreau's **55 Pas de la Ligne au nø3** (2002) was devoted to the excruciating sound of a rotating disk on a modified turntable. *Grand Surface Noise Opera Nr 7 - The Decadent Opera - Rococo* (1995) first assembled voices (taken from various sources) and then injected all sorts of musical snippets into the process, each grotesquely deformed, as in a collaboration between Frank Zappa and Karlheinz Stockhausen.

By electronically and digitally processing the sounds of objects and places, [Steve Roden](#) created "possible landscapes", such as **Humming Endlessly in the Hush** (1996), credited to In Be Tween Noise, that require "deep listening" to appreciate the subtlety of slight variations in the mostly

silent wasteland; while **Four Possible Landscapes** (1999) bordered on the glitch aesthetic of Bernhard Guenter.

[Deathprod](#), the solo project of Motorpsycho's keyboardist Helge Sten, pushed the abstract electronic soundsculpting of **Treetop Drive 1-3/Towboat** (1994) into the age of digital audio manipulation with **Morals and Dogma** (2004). Using low-tech home-made recording devices, and emphasizing the very limitations of those devices (the hiss of an old tape recorder, or the distortion of a defective sampler, or the deteriorating sound of a digital-to-analog transfer), and then mixing them with traditional instruments, Deathprod de facto ventured into digital chamber music.

Fueled by Dadaistic eccentricity, the Argentinean trio [Reynols](#) (drummer Miguel Tomasin and guitarists Roberto Conlazo and Anla Courtis) released all sorts of sarcastic musique-concrete symphonies, from **Gordura Vegetal Hidrogenada** (1995) to **10.000 Chickens Symphony** (1999) for chicken sounds ("the only record in the world where all the participants were killed and eaten afterwards") to **Blank Tapes** (Trente Oiseaux, 2000) for amplified blank tapes. In parallel, [Anla Courtis](#) continued to use the tape as his main instrument in a series of extremely chaotic works, especially the 16-minute expressionist nightmare of *Encjas de Viento* (1996).

[Ellen Band](#) bridged musique concrete and deep-listening music with collages such as *Radiatore* (1998) in which apparently harmless (and lifeless) sounds collected in the streets are scrutinized, repeated, amplified, deformed, enhanced until they become very much alive. The mundane becomes extraordinary: "no sound is ordinary".

The electronic processing of microscopic bodily noises by [Daniel Menche](#) yielded the monstrous intensity of **Screaming Caress** (1997).

The compositions of [John Hudak](#) employ minimalist and subsonic repetition of electronically-processed found sounds, as in **Pond** (1998), that uses underwater insects as its main source.

Heir to the glorious French traditions of musique concrete and sound collage, French sound-sculptor Christian Renou, aka [Brume](#), specialized in the dense, rapid-fire sonic montage that culminated with the concrete symphony **Fragments and Articulations** (2002).

Spanish composer [Francisco Lopez](#), one of most prolific composers in history (not a compliment), focused on collages of field recordings and sound-manipulation of natural phenomena. The resulting music was often static subsonic ambient music (frequently bordering on utter silence) rather than traditional (noisy) concrete music. Typical of his method was the trilogy of **La Selva** (1998), a collage of sounds from the tropical forest, **Buildings** (2001) and **Wind** (2007), a repertory of wind sounds from Patagonia,

German composer [Marc Behrens](#) used a computer and feedback-based devices to organize the collage of field recordings of **Elapsed Time** (2001).

Sacramento-based digital composer [Joe Colley](#) specialized in generating sounds from negative feedback loops, achieving an austere and mature balance of tones with the droning **Everybody Gets What They Deserve**

(1999) and the almost serene **Stop Listening** (2000), released under his moniker Crawl Unit, a phase that culminated with the 19-minute **Static For Empty Life** (2001) and the two pieces of **Sound Until The World Ends** (2001). His art of ad-hoc feedback-driven installations was refined on **Desperate Attempts At Beauty** (2003) and especially the "industrial" symphony **Psychic Stress Soundtracks** (2005), five lengthy collapse of noises from mechanical devices, and acquired expressionist overtones on **Waste Of Songs** (2006).

The early recordings of British composer [Janek Schaefer](#) (2) focused on two elements: studio manipulation of field recordings, and his self-built twin and triple armed varispeed turntables. The resulting collage is unusually dense and dynamic, culminating with the concrete symphony *Cold Storage* (2004), **Songs For Europe** (2004), a collaboration with Philip Jeck that builds ambient soundscapes from old Greek and Turkish records as well as radio broadcasts, the dance soundtrack **Migration** (2006), concocted out of manipulated field recordings, and **In The Last Hour** (2006), a piece in four movements that leveraged the combination of live instrumentation and turntable-derived textures to create an electronic poem that was both lugubrious and romantic.

Canadian electroacoustic composer Paul Dolden (2) specialized in "maximalist" music for a computer-generated orchestra of instrumental and vocal snippets, a technique that yielded the monumental collages of *Below The Walls Of Jericho*, off **The Threshold Of Deafening Silence** (1990), and *L'Ivresse De La Vitesse*, off **L'Ivresse de la Vitesse** (1999), whose chamber cacophonies rise to hurricane dimension with industrial/punk ferocity, as well as *Entropic Twilights* (2002), off **Delires De Plaisirs** (2005). His "cut and paste" audio art diverged significantly from traditional musique concrete because it embraces the whole instead of dissecting the parts. Where early scholars of sound manipulation favored an agonizing analysis of sound properties, Dolden did the exact opposite creating catastrophic hyper-percussive hyper-kinetic music according to a principle of endless apotheosis.

The hyper-realistic field recordings of Japanese composer [Toshiya Tsunoda](#) consist in capturing the sound of inert matter. Each object has a "sound": it is just a matter of finding a way to render that sound so that it can be appreciated by the human ear. The music of **Pieces Of Air** (2001), literally recordings of air vibrations, is thus one of minimal subsonic vibrations.

[Seth Nehil](#) sculpted the quiet blurred pieces of **Tracing the Skins of Clouds** (1998) for found objects and instruments.

More traditional collages of field recordings survived in the work of three French soundsculptors. [Syllyk](#) (a collaboration between Eric LaCasa and Sylvie Laroche) dedicated their ambitious collages of manipulated field recordings to mythological themes: the 27-minute *Le Sacrifice*, off **O Comme Icare** (1992), the 19-minute *Terre Ciel Soleil Feu*, off **Frontieres** (1992), and especially the 66-minute piece of **Ascendre A L'Ombre Du Vent** (1996). [Eric LaCasa](#)'s four lengthy compositions collected on **L'Empreinte de L'Ivresse** (1999) represented an ambitious fresco of human life. [Jean-Luc Guionnet](#), also a free-improvising jazz saxophonist, and [Eric Cordier](#), also a body art performer, created the two installations of **Synapses** (1999) in which a sound produced on an instrument was propagated to other instruments. a way that plucking one string causes a chain reaction of sounds. Guionnet was investigating the synthetic masses

of musique concrete in a serene context bordering on new-age music, as displayed in the three works for electronics and natural sounds composed between 1989 and 1996 and collected on **Axene** (2000). Cordier reconstructed audio sources to compose the sound sculptures of **Houlque** (1996), whereas **Digitalis Purpurea** (Ground Fault, 2003) collects four audio installations for multiple loudspeakers, one of his specialties. Jean-Luc Guionnet, Eric LaCasa and Eric Cordier constituted the musique-concrete ensemble [Afflux](#) that focused on electronic improvisation with environmental sounds as they occur in an open landscape, a method first documented on **Azier St. Martin-Sur-Mer Dieppe** (2002).

The 1990s, as the sampler became ubiquitous in popular music, witnessed a generation of sound sculptors who toyed with samples of the musical repertory, field recordings and acoustic instruments.

[Bob Ostertag](#), one of the earliest free-jazz improvisors at the electronic keyboards, embraced the sampler and realized the string quartet *All The Rage* (1992), that employed popular music and sounds of a riot (as well as string instruments) as sources.

[David Shea](#), who had already established his reputation as one of the first turntablists (mainly in John Zorn's ensembles), further legitimized the sampler as an instrument with his works, both the ones for ensemble, such as *Shock Corridor* (1992) for samples and instruments (Anthony Coleman on piano and organ, Shelley Hirsch on voice and electronics, Ikue Mori on drum-machine, Zeena Parkins on electric harp, Jim Staley on trombone and didjeridoo, Jim Pugliese on percussion), a kaleidoscopic merry-go-round of stylistic detours, and those for solo sampler, such as *Alpha* (1995), a real-time collage of record snippets, *Satyricon* (1997), a sophisticated survey of the collective unconscious, *Sita's Walk Of Fire* (2001), a demented study in frenzy and contrast.

### ***The avantgarde of computer sound***

TM, ®, Copyright © 2005 [Piero Scaruffi](#) All rights reserved.

While the pioneers of computer music (basically from the 1950s to the 1980s) were mostly fascinated by a tool that challenged the pillars of western music (i.e., the relationship between performer and composer, and even the very notions of composer and performer), the wide diffusion of software for composing music on relatively cheap and portable computers (or "laptops") made it possible for a new generation of musicians to simply use the compositional algorithms and the synthesized sounds of a laptop in broader contexts. Fundamentally, computers had contributed to the breakdown of the traditional concept and role of harmony. The new generation exploited that very breakdown to create a kind of music directly referencing "sound". Basically, computers helped musicians focus more on the "sound" that they wanted to produce and less on the process to obtain it.

The eclectic Japanese musician [Ikue Mori](#) went through several stages before arriving at computer music: first as a drummer for the experimental rock band Mars, then as a free-jazz improviser, then as the electronic composer of the five long meditations for drum machines and samplers of **Garden** (1996), and finally as the laptop soundpainter of **Labyrinth** (2000) and **Myrminerest** (2005). Thus she was ideally suited to bridge the aesthetics of dissonance, improvisation and machine music.

[Achim Wollscheid](#) used household objects as percussion instruments "played" according to a computer algorithm for **Moves** (1997).

Germany's [Lutz Glandien](#) composed the wildly dissonant music of **The 5th Elephant** (2002) assisted by a computer in selecting and assembling "samples" from recordings of acoustic instruments.

[Furt](#), the duo of British electronic musicians Richard Barrett and Paul Obermayer, assembled the tetralogy "Out Of Time", notably **Angel** (1995) and *Ultimatum* (2000), off **Defekt** (2002), of free-form studio collage.

---

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