

A haphazard history of indie music

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Five years ago, *indie music* was called *alternatyve music*, but that died because that phrase got overcommodified, so everybody had to move on to another phrase that meant "not mainstream" for the marketers to class everybody else into and then eventually water down to the point of uselessness. I wonder what the synonym is that we'll be using five years from now.

As with most of the world's dichotomies, the creative-indie vs cookie-cutter-mainstream dichotomy doesn't work in practice. Looking through the mainstream, one finds an abundance of cookie-cutterdom, but also details that indicate that these are musicians who have as much a sense of play and the avant garde as those who wear their experiments on their sleeve. Here is a history of key events in indie music, as told through works by people whom most people would consider to be entirely mainstream.

- 1770: Beethoven is born.
- 1830: Berlioz composes the *Symphonie Fantastique* about a crush, including a trip to hell and his eventual beheading by demons.
- 1867: Modest Moussorgsky (no relation to Modest Mouse) writes *Night on Bald Mountain* about Walpurgisnacht.
- 1937: Bela Bartok writes *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, using rhythms so complex they sound like noise until several listens through.
- 1959: The Bossa Nova hits it big, beginning with the *Black Orpheus* soundtrack, including tracks where Luiz Bonfá plays guitar with street noise such as dissonant drumming in the background. The album features occasional interjections such as the female lead of the movie being shocked by the devil. The Bossa Nova continues its ubiquity via Tom Jobim classics like *Insensantez*. ("How insensitive/ I must have seemed/ when she told me that she loves me.")
- early 1960s: Phil Spector works out what to do with multitracking, including strings, horns, and everything else that comes to mind, in otherwise basic doo-wop rock 'n' roll numbers.
- 1965: The Righteous Brothers put out a song entitled "Unchained melody", even though that phrase does not appear anywhere in the song itself.
- mid-late 1960s: Psychedelia.

- 1966: The Beach Boys and Beatles put out a few albums that are entirely not danceable, and somewhat histrionic. [007See prior postSee Beach Boys discussion]
- 1966: On the same album that brought you Scarborough Fair, Simon and Garfunkel sing "Silent Night" over a newsman reading the evening news headlines about Lenny Bruce dying of an overdose, Nixon complaining about war protesters, and a serial killer brought to trial.
- 1973: Roxy Music forms, featuring Brian Eno and Brian Ferry, putting out the only album ever produced in the genre of ambient glam rock. The star track is an ode to a blow-up doll. ("I blew up your body/ but you blew my mind.")
- 1975: The Ohio Players put out a peppy song entitled "Love Rollercoaster" with haphazard screaming at the tail end of the song.
- 1975: Lou Reed, who was indeed trained to write advertising jingles, puts out four sides of noise¹.
- 1978: Guitar Center, a supermarket vending musical instruments to kids trying to rebel and distinguish themselves from everybody else, incorporates in California.
- 1984: Benny and Björn, the Bs in ABBA, team up with Tim Rice to write an album (later a musical) about chess. The single, sung by Murray Head and also about the favorite game of math nerds, peaks at 3.
- 1991: R.E.M. scores a hit single with a song involving a mandolin. (single: 4, album (out of time): 1)
- 1991: Nirvana tries its hardest to be unpopular with the mainstream ("He's the one who likes all our pretty songs/ and he likes to sing along/... But he don't know what it means.") but fails miserably: *Nevermind* takes 1 on Billboard's charts, as frat boys the world over sing along to the above lyrics.
- early 1990s: Radio stations whose tag line is "The New Rock Alternative" crop up in every city in the U.S. larger than Austin.
- 1995: U2, a band with six albums to hit number one and a Superbowl appearance to its name, puts out an album in collaboration with Brian Eno and, oh, Luciano Pavarotti, mostly featuring ambient soundscapes, plus one song about Elvis ("[he] didn't mean sh*t to Chuck D".)
- 1995: Prince, author of an album that spent 24 weeks at number one, plus more number one singles than you can count, demands indie status from his label.
- 1997: The Spice Girls, who had a movie and a saturday morning cartoon and a following that was mostly born after CDs, put out an album including about a minute of vinyl end-of-record hiss.

¹<http://www.dancingaboutarc.com/essays/e050101.html>

- 2000: Gothiness and geekiness become mainstream and nobody sees any of the above as unusual anymore.