

The New Wave: Alternative Rock from the Mid-1970s to the Early 1980s

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Course Description

In the mid-1970s, one of rock's most explosive styles challenged conventional musical and social norms as acts like Patti Smith, Blondie, the Clash, and the Sex Pistols injected new forms of raucous energy into popular music. Within a few years this new wave spawned related genres like post-punk, no wave, and indie pop. Acts like Talking Heads, the Police, and R.E.M. helped bring it into the pop mainstream. Moving from its mid-'70s birth to its wider acceptance with the early-'80s launch of MTV, this course highlights the origins and rise of punk and new wave.

Week One

The Birth of US Punk and New Wave

A. A few groups during the late-'60s/early-'70s psychedelic/hard rock era help set a blueprint for punk with their raw and uncompromising music and lyrics. These include the Velvet Underground, the Stooges, the MC5, and the Modern Lovers.

B. Early punk and new wave groups start to form by the mid-1970s in New York, many of them getting their start at the influential CBGBs club. These include the New York Dolls, Television, Blondie, Talking Heads, the Ramones, and the Patti Smith Group.

C. After a few scattered independent singles, some of these groups record their first albums. While they aren't big hits, they attract media attention, influence others to form groups, and generate increasing interest among big and small labels. The Patti Smith Group's *Horses*, in late 1975, is the first to make some commercial impact.

Other themes: The birth of punk fashion; stale arena rock scene as a

factor in generating an alternative rebellious style.

Week Two

The Birth of UK Punk and New Wave

A. Some of the artier glam rock acts provide a more energetic and flamboyant alternative to a British rock scene dominated by art rock and hard rock, including David Bowie, T. Rex, and Roxy Music.

B. Pub rock groups revitalize small venues as a way to build grassroots followings outside of big arena rock shows, like Dr. Feelgood and Brinsley Schwarz.

C. Spurred by the small scene around manager Malcolm McLaren's fashion shop, the Sex Pistols originate British punk with their crude noisy guitar attack, controversial lyrics, and equally controversial clothing and appearance. Other early punk groups quickly form in their wake, the Clash becoming the most popular.

Other themes: A punk scene starts to develop in Manchester as well as London; public and media outrage over early punk.

Week Three

The Heyday of British Punk and Early British New Wave

A. In 1977, the Sex Pistols have several hit singles and record their only album. The Clash are quickly becoming about as popular, and many other groups record their first punk discs, including the Damned, the Jam, and the Buzzcocks.

B. A more melodic and, to many listeners, more accessible style spins off punk without sacrificing much bite or energy. Elvis Costello is the most popular of these acts, which also include Nick Lowe, Generation X, Ian Dury, and the Undertones.

C. Punk and new wave starts to spin off into both more experimental and more pop-friendly directions. The Police and the Pretenders become the most popular new wave act in the UK and, though it

takes some time, the US and around the world. Artier new wave artists with some pop success include Lene Lovich and Siouxsie & the Banshees.

Other themes: The role of independent labels like Rough Trade and Stiff in early punk and new wave; the prominent role of women in new wave.

Week Four

The Growth of US Punk and New Wave

A. A few CBGBs acts, particularly Blondie and Talking Heads, start to make commercial headway by matching punk energy and irreverence with pop and funk influences. Others from their New York scene are destined to remain more cultish acts, like Television and Richard Hell.

B. A few US groups that only tap ingredients of the new wave are sometimes lumped into the new wave after achieving commercial success, like the Cars and Tom Petty.

C. Active local punk scenes sprout across North America, along with a network of clubs willing to present the music, especially in California and some cities like Boston. Most of these bands will gain only fervent specialized followings with independent labels, though a few, like X in Los Angeles, will eventually break through to a wider audience.

Other themes: The roles of college radio stations, fanzines, and independent labels in popularizing punk and new wave.

Week Five

New Wave at the End of the 1970s and Beginning of the 1980s

A. With a greater emphasis on experimental dissonance and less on guitar rock, a style will later be termed post-punk starts to emerge, particularly in the UK with acts like Joy Division, the Raincoats, and

the Gang of Four, but also in the US with bands like Pere Ubu.

B. Some artists take the rougher edges of punk and new wave to more remote extremes. At the artier end, there are no wave acts, more in New York than elsewhere, like Lydia Lunch and Arto Lindsay. At the punkier end, a harder-faster-louder approach solidifies into hardcore punk, especially in California, with groups like Black Flag and Fear.

C. The Two Tone movement, which mixes rock with ska, becomes a huge commercial force in the UK with bands like the Specials and Madness, without taking off in North America.

Other themes: Many punk and new wave groups form and record outside the US and UK, though few become internationally successful; pop-oriented groups take the new wave's alternative mindset of recording idiosyncratic music on independent labels without adhering to standard new wave musical styles; new wave record producers; mixed US industry and audience response to new wave.

Week Six

Reggae, Rap, and Their Influence on New Wave; New Wave in the MTV Generation

A. Outside of rock, other styles with roots in African-American soul also take popular music in new directions, sometimes influencing punk and new wave. Reggae performers like Bob Marley and Peter Tosh, as well as more cultish ones like Lee Perry and Burning Spear, expand their followings from their Jamaican origins to the entire world, influencing some white acts like Public Image Limited and Blondie.

B. Perceived at first as a novelty for matching spoken words and rhymes to beats without conventional melodies and musical instruments, rap rises to become a major trend in African-American music in the early 1980s. Early rappers like the Sugarhill Gang emphasize boasting and having a good time, but the words start to get political with acts like Grandmaster Flash.

C. The rise of MTV in the early 1980s both gives wider exposure to many new wave artists and drifts new wave itself closer to the pop mainstream. Synthesizers begin to be used as much or more than guitars with artists like Duran Duran and Thomas Dolby.

D. By mixing pop and new wave, some groups achieve huge success in the early 1980s, including all-woman bands the Go-Go's and the Bangles.

E. Guitar groups with roots in new wave achieve mass success by the mid-1980s with bigger production, including U2 and R.E.M. Some of the original punk pioneers soften their sound and/or break up, like the Clash, though some others are still going strong by the mid-1980s, like Talking Heads and the Pretenders.

Other themes: early crossovers between rap and rock artists; increased polarization between the mainstream and underground rock scenes; wider divide between the operations of large major labels and more specialized small independent ones.