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LEFT OF THE DIAL:
An introduction to underground rock, 1980-2000

Cassie Wagner and Elizabeth Stephan

ABSTRACT: This essay is a brief history of American underground/independent music from 1980 to 2000. The authors examine twenty-one of what they believe are the best and most influential bands of the period and provide an annotated list of representative recordings. These artists provide the inspiration and sonic blueprint for much of today's cutting edge music. Even so, their recordings are often absent from library collections and many librarians and patrons are unfamiliar with them. The groups discussed are Bad Brains, Beat Happening, Big Black, Bikini Kill, Black Flag, Camper Van Beethoven, Dead Kennedys, Fugazi, Galaxie 500, Hüsker Dü, Melvins, Minor Threat, Minutemen, Mission Of Burma, Pixies, R.E.M., the Replacements, Sleater-Kinney, Sonic Youth, Throwing Muses, and Uncle Tupelo.

KEYWORDS: popular music, rock music, indie rock music, underground music, punk

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: Cassie Wagner serves as Web Development Librarian at Morris Library, the main library at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Carbondale, Illinois. Elizabeth Stephan is the Business Reference Librarian at J. D. Williams Library at the University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi. Both authors earned a Masters Degree in Library and Information Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2003. Ms. Wagner would like to thank the Manitowoc, Wisconsin, public library for making possible her first exposure to many of the groups discussed here and the staffs at Pmac Music and Plaza Records in Carbondale, Illinois, for their advice. Ms. Stephan would like to thank her friends who introduced her to the bands listed below as well as the friends who helped her develop her class, "Indie Rock 101: From the Underground to the Mainstream." She would also like to express her thanks to Gabe's Oasis in Iowa City, Iowa. Now open under new management (and a new name), Gabe's was where she experienced some of her first punk shows as a teen.

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In every era of popular music since the introduction of the radio, some musicians have achieved popularity and lasting fame over the airwaves. A far greater number have toiled in obscurity. The efforts of these unknown groups are not wasted, however, as they have often served as inspirations for the more popular groups that follow. In the 1980s and early 1990s, as the American airwaves were awash in synthesizer pop, hair metal, and Michael Jackson, an underground scene inspired by punk rock bubbled up in small clubs across the country.

The bands from this era set out to make music, but along the way they changed the music scene, both nationally and locally. They wanted to play, but only a handful of clubs would welcome them. They found those clubs and set up a touring network that is still in place. They wanted to record, but no label would pay to record them, so they did it themselves. They recorded on their own, they shared information, and they inspired numerous kids to start their own bands. The logic was ‘if those guys can start a band and tour, anyone can.’ This willingness to work without the support of the established music industry and to do things on their own led to the movement being nicknamed “D.I.Y. music,” an acronym for “Do It Yourself.”

These bands also developed around scenes: Groups of bands from a geographic area that often shared sounds or attitudes. There were big scenes in places like Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., but as bands toured and played, scenes popped up all over the country: Iowa, South Dakota, Georgia, Oregon, Minnesota. These were not places one would think of as “hip” and they produced bands the entire country noticed. These bands, few of which achieved anything like fame in their careers, built the

foundation for much of the music that dominates the radio today. Still, they are often overlooked by both music historian and pop culturists.

Why did we decide to create this essay? Co-author Elizabeth Stephan taught a for-credit writing seminar based on 1980s indie rock. She collaborated with co-author Cassie Wagner to gather information and music for the class. Together, we found that obtaining these albums from academic libraries was difficult, even through interlibrary loan. We could not believe it was as hard as it was. It seemed so simple to us. This music is important, we know about it, we grew up with these bands, yet there were gaps in our own libraries' collections. After a month-long email conversation, we realized there was a need for an article like this: One aimed toward libraries and librarians who want to add some of the core bands from the American underground to their collections. We wanted to provide a place to start.

We examine what we consider twenty-one of the most influential and important American bands to record between 1980 and 2000. Beginning on the West Coast as 1980 dawned, we work our way back and forth across the country before returning to the Pacific Northwest at the end of the millennium. Along the way, we examine bands of all backgrounds and approaches to music. In these groups, we see the seeds of many of today's common genres—alternative rock, indie rock, twee pop, punk, emo, slowcore, alt country, and post punk. All of them made fascinating music and are intriguing stories on their own. We can only hope to give readers the briefest of overviews.

For each band, we include a brief biography and analysis, along with recommended CDs for purchase. For each album, we give the original release date, the

name of the record label currently distributing the album, and the current manufacturer's number for the CD.

We left out a few bands some might consider essential. The most obvious may be Nirvana. Why? Nirvana will be in most library collections based on popularity, if nothing else. Most people have heard of them and most will know they are important. But we included bands like R.E.M.—a well-known band still recording today. Why? Because their earlier albums were their most influential but are the ones least likely to be found in libraries. This is not a definitive list; this is a list created by music lovers, fans, and librarians. If you have suggestions or comments, please feel free to contact us.

Dead Kennedys

The explosive sound of the first wave of British punk bands (which, of course, drew their inspiration from American bands like the Ramones) quickly reached the U.S. west coast. By early 1978, the Dead Kennedys, a San Francisco band that combined the energy and politicism of the Brits with an only-in-California surf guitar sound, were at the forefront of the scene. Led by the fiery Jello Biafra, the Dead Kennedys packed their songs with more political and social satire and big fat guitar hooks than just about any punk band before or since. In the process, Biafra, guitarist East Bay Ray, bass player Klaus Fluoride, and drummer Ted became one of the most influential bands in the history of punk. Biafra's wit was razor sharp as he took aim at slumlords ("Let's Lynch the Landlord"), the poverty draft ("When Ya Get Drafted"), California governors ("California Über Alles" and a revised version of it called "We've Got a Bigger Problem Now"), vapid rock stars ("Pull My Strings"), and just about anyone else who got in the

way. The Dead Kennedys were easily the most fun band dedicated to raising listeners' political consciousness. The band broke up in 1987 after surviving serious legal problems and amid growing personal tensions. Biafra continues as a spoken word artist and political speaker with his fire undiminished. He, in collaboration with the Melvins, recently revamped "California Über Alles" yet again to take on current California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Recommended albums:

***Fresh Fruit for Rotting Vegetables* (1980; Manifesto, MFO 42909)**

The Dead Kennedys' debut is undeniably one of the classics of American punk. From the opening salvo of "Kill the Poor" to the closing parody of "Viva La Vegas," *Fresh Fruit* never lets the tempo or the politics slack. In between are some of the band's best and most famous songs: "When Ya Get Drafted," "Let's Lynch the Landlord," "Chemical Warfare," and "Holiday in Cambodia," which is perhaps the most successful hardcore single ever and one of the genre's defining tracks.¹ The twenty-fifth anniversary reissue from Manifesto Records includes a documentary DVD.

***Give Me Convenience or Give Me Death* (1987; Manifesto, MFO 42904)**

The closest thing to a greatest hits package Dead Kennedys fans can get. In addition to reprising their two most famous songs, "Holiday in Cambodia" and "California Über Alles," it contains other favorites like "Too Drunk to Fuck," "Pull My Strings," and a cover of "I Fought the Law" complete with new lyrics. While not quite as consistent as *Fresh Fruit*, it's a worthwhile investment.

Black Flag

Black Flag were the trailblazers of the American hardcore scene. Hardcore took the three-chord riffs of punk and sped them up to sometimes ludicrous speeds. Black Flag, setting the trend for the hardcore bands to follow, was known for the violence their shows often inspired. They found the clubs across the country that would let punks play, found the crash pads, pioneered the independent label, and used what they learned to help the bands that came after them. They went through a string of short-stint singers before settling on Henry Rollins, then a roadie for Washington, D.C. band Minor Threat. Rollins and songwriter/guitarist Greg Ginn became the mainstays of Black Flag. The band created much of the mould for American hardcore, shifting away from the external political focus of the early British bands and groups like the Dead Kennedys and Minor Threat, and directing their rage inward, at their own flaws and failings. In fact, Rollins became the poster boy for this brand of musical self-flagellation. This would have sunk a band that was less musically inventive. Black Flag combined the standard hardcore stomp with a little bit of metal to come up with a distinctive sound that inspired countless later bands. Drained by legal troubles and issues of ego between Ginn and Rollins, Black Flag broke up in 1986. Besides its recordings, Black Flag's lasting legacy is its independent record label, SST, which released albums by Hüsker Dü, the Minutemen, Sonic Youth, Meat Puppets, and dozens of other bands.

Recommended albums:

***Damaged* (1981; SST, SST CD 007)**

Black Flag's debut full-length album remains the group's definitive recording. On it, the band walks the line between humor, rage, and self-loathing like few bands before or since. The fist-pumping opener "Rise Above" is a rallying cry for disaffected youth, with Rollins' chanted chorus "We are tired / Of your abuse / Try to stop us / It's no use." If none of the following songs have quite the hook of "Rise Above," the quality is consistently high, from the humorous "Six Pack" and "TV Party" to the brutal "Thirsty and Miserable" and "Depression." *Damaged* is an unquestioned hardcore classic.

***In My Head* (1985; SST, SST CD 045)**

While the self-loathing and anger exuded by Rollins approaches parody, the inventiveness of the music on *In My Head* more than compensates. Greg Ginn's guitars were never sharper, nor his arrangements more challenging. As Black Flag's final studio album, *In My Head* shows the evolution of one of hardcore's most important bands.

Bad Brains

Bad Brains started in 1979. The original line-up of Dr. Know, H.R., Darryl Aaron Jenifer, and Earl Hudson fused jazz, rock, punk, and reggae. They played punk faster than any previous band, creating a blueprint for the American hardcore sound. The members were African-American—a rarity in punk both then and now. Explosive, powerful, political, and spiritual, Bad Brains was, according to Ian MacKaye of Minor Threat and Fugazi, "really one of the great bands that existed of any time."² Bad Brains' ethos deeply affected MacKaye and others in the Washington, D.C. scene. Their Rastafarian spirituality and politics made MacKaye and others realize that punk was more

than just music—there could be a powerful message behind the speed and the fury.³ Bad Brains moved closer to a heavy metal sound over time, losing some of their breakneck speed. Their earliest albums were released on small, now-defunct labels as well as Black Flag's SST. Bad Brains' influence would be apparent in genre-crossing bands like Living Colour, Beastie Boys, and Jane's Addiction. The line-up changed over the years and by 1989 both H.R. and Hudson left the band. In 1993 they signed to Epic but were unable to recapture the fury of their earlier work. Bad Brains broke up again in 1995 but reformed in 1998 under the name Soul Brains.

Recommended albums

***Bad Brains* (1982; ROIR, RUSCD8223)**

On their self-titled full-length debut, Bad Brains jumps from the fastest punk you have ever heard to heavy metal to reggae. *Bad Brains* contains their first single, "Pay to Cum," the lightning fast "Banned in D.C.," and "I." "Jah Calling" and "I Luv Jah" are traditional reggae songs. The mix of genres makes the album a little uneven, but the velocity and intensity of the music cannot be ignored.

***I Against I* (1986; SST, SST CD 065)**

I Against I is more cohesive. Leaning towards rock and roll with a reggae twist, Bad Brains still has a punk edge and attitude. This is Bad Brains at their best. You can hear their influence on bands like Living Colour and Jane's Addiction on *I Against I*.

Hüsker Dü

When one looks back at the underground bands of the 1980s perhaps none was more important or influential than Minneapolis' Hüsker Dü. Bob Mould, Grant Hart, and Greg Norton combined elements of hardcore, '60s pop, classic rock, psychedelic rock, and—believe it or not—folk to create a potent brew that affected just about every band that followed. Begun in 1979 as a straight hardcore band, the Hüskers quickly outgrew the ideological and sonic limits of the genre, hinting at their dislike of the genre's lockstep mindset in the early song "Real World": "You want to change the world / By breaking rules and laws / People don't do things like that / In the real world at all." Despite the sentiments, the song still followed the hardcore blueprint. With their cover of the Byrds "Eight Miles High," the Hüskers truly declared their independence. They explode the psychedelic classic into a million screaming pieces, taking it to a completely different level. "Eight Miles High" was only a warning shot compared to the album that followed it, *Zen Arcade*. A twenty-three-song double album, *Zen Arcade* did to the genre of hardcore what "Eight Miles High" did to a single song. Piano interludes, acoustic tracks, pop songs, and ballads jostle for position with brutal hardcore numbers. *Zen Arcade* set the standard for everything that came after. Two more brilliant albums, *New Day Rising* and *Flip Your Wig*, followed while the band toured relentlessly. Much of the group's strength came from its two songwriters. Mould and Hart attack each song as if trying to outdo the other, goading each other to new heights. It was perhaps no surprise when Hüsker Dü became the first underground band of its generation to sign with a major label, committing to Warner Bros. in late 1985. Their deal allowed them creative control over their music, a condition uncommon up to that point. After two more albums,

including another double album, Hüsker Dü called it quits, driven apart by substance abuse and tension between Mould and Hart.

Recommended albums:

***Zen Arcade* (1983; SST, SST CD 027)**

Zen Arcade redefined the possibilities of independent rock. No longer constrained by the three-chord stomp of hardcore, the Hüskers expand into acoustic folk, psychedelia, pop, and classic rock with barely a slip on this magnum opus. The occasional misstep only brings the better tracks into sharper focus. Highlights include the resigned “Whatever,” the twisted pop of “Pink Turns to Blue,” the knowing thrash of “Something I Learned Today,” the classic rocker “Turn on the News,” and the twelve-minute jam “Reoccurring Dreams.”

***Flip Your Wig* (1985; SST, SST CD 055)**

On their last independent album, the Hüskers produced a perfect slab of diamond-edged pop. Easily the most accessible album the band ever made *Flip Your Wig* moves from strength to strength, with each songwriter fighting to outdo the other. From the sunny “Makes No Sense at All,” the gorgeous ‘60s-style pop of “Green Eyes,” the punk momentum of “Divide and Conquer,” to the sharply observant “Games,” *Flip Your Wig* belongs in every indie rock collection.

The Replacements

The Replacements were part of a trinity of 1980s indie bands (R.E.M., the Replacements, and Hüsker Dü) that made the underground accessible to the average listener. They were punk without sounding punk. Originally called Dogbreath and then the Substitutes, the Replacements officially formed in 1979 when Paul Westerberg discovered Chris Mars, Bob Stinson and Bob's little brother Tommy playing in the Stinson's basement. They were typical blue-color Midwestern adolescents who started a garage band, got drunk, smoked pot, and took speed. They were self-effacing. They rarely took anything seriously and, unlike their contemporaries, they had people to take care of them. There was someone to drive the van, book the shows, and record their albums. They didn't have people because they were wealthier or better than anyone else—they had people because without them they would never have made it to the shows. Called the 'Mats by fans, they would go on to become one of the most infamous bands of the 1980s. College students easily identified with Westerberg's average Joe lyrics—he wrote about driving around town with nothing to do, drinking in an empty field, going to local parties, and about feeling like he was never going to get out of his small town. Westerberg and the rest of the Replacements could easily have moved into the mainstream earlier than they did but their doubts, substance abuse, and recklessness held them back. The 'Mats changed the face of music forever. Of course, no one noticed until the mid-'90s when every other band sounded like the 'Mats (the ones that didn't sounded like R.E.M.). They signed to a major label but quickly began to fall apart. It could have been Westerberg's dictatorial style. It could have been the heavy drinking. It could have been the tension between Mars and Westerberg or the tension between Westerberg and Bob Stinson after Westerberg tried to get sober. Likely, it was all of the above and more.

The 'Mats officially broke up in 1991. Bob Stinson died of a drug overdose on February 15, 1995. On June 13, 2006, Rhino Records released the retrospective *Don't You Know Who I Think I Was?: The Best of the Replacements*; the remaining members of the 'Mats reformed to perform two new songs for the set.

Recommended albums:

***Let it Be* (1984; Restless, 73761)**

Let it Be showcased the Replacements' potential. Songs like "I Will Dare" (R.E.M.'s Peter Buck played the guitar solo), "Androgynous," a song about a gender-bending couple, and "Answering Machine," were the first to make Westerberg's tremendous songwriting capabilities apparent. But it is "Unsatisfied" where the 'Mats really come together and Westerberg proves himself one of the most underappreciated songwriters of his time. Emotionally raw, moving, and powerful, "Unsatisfied" reveals a sensitive side of Westerberg that he had not shown before. Of course, this being a 'Mats album, the seriousness is juxtaposed with numbers like "Tommy Got His Tonsils Out" and "Gary's Got A Boner."

***Tim* (1985; Sire, 9 25330-2)**

Their first major-label release, produced by Tommy Erdelyi of the Ramones, *Tim* is the 'Mats at their best. Ragged yet controlled, serious yet silly, anthemic yet ... well, the Replacements. "Bastards of Young," with lyrics like "We are the sons of no one / Bastards of young" and "Clean your baby womb / Trash that baby boom," could easily be seen as the first rallying cry for Generation X. "Kiss Me on The Bus" and "Left of the

Dial” further show the ‘Mats growth as musicians and songwriters. The album ends with “Here Comes a Regular,” a melancholy and lonely song about being a barfly. The song, like *Let it Be*’s “Unsatisfied,” shows Westerberg’s emotional songwriting at its best.

Mission of Burma

Mission of Burma are perhaps the most underrated band of the era. Critics and other bands loved them, but success and a wider audience eluded them. The band formed in Boston in 1979, when guitarist Roger Miller and bass player Clint Conley recruited drummer Peter Prescott and tape manipulator/soundman Martin Swope. They sounded like no one else, though they had some ideas and sounds in common with Cleveland’s Pere Ubu. With Prescott’s rock solid, if “upside down beats,”⁴ and Conley’s fluid basslines as a foundation, Miller alternately coaxes otherworldly sounds from his guitar and pounds out riffs that would make most hardcore punks jealous. Swope’s contribution was tape loops—sounds captured from the band, manipulated, and fed back into the mix. Live, these phantom sounds (Swope would be at the mixing board, not on stage) mystified audiences. Mission of Burma recorded a couple of singles, an EP, and a single full-length album, all of which are now regarded as classics. The group broke up in 1982, at the height of its powers, because of Miller’s worsening tinnitus, a condition exacerbated by the incredible volume at which Mission of Burma played. Miller and Prescott continued with a variety of projects, while Conley worked as a television news producer. Swope eventually moved to Hawaii and all but disappeared. Bands like Sonic Youth, Fugazi, Jawbox, and, more recently, Interpol, owe an admitted debt to the Boston pioneers. After a nineteen-year hiatus, Mission of Burma, with Bob Weston (a veteran of

a number of bands, including Shellac with Big Black's Steve Albini) replacing Swope, reunited to play a small number of shows in New England. Clint Conley referred to the reunion as "the opportunity for just massive humiliation—massive humiliation on a scale that's just truly terrifying."⁵ The shows were anything but an embarrassment and the band proved that they are still at least a step ahead of the music world. Two more albums, *OnOffOn* and *The Obliterati*, and a series of longer tours have followed so far.

Recommended albums:

***Signals, Calls and Marches* (1981; Rykodisc, RCD 10339)**

The CD reissue of Mission of Burma's debut EP contains the band's two most famous songs, "Academy Fight Song" (a song once covered by R.E.M.) and "That's When I Reach for My Revolver" (famously covered by Moby). For those two tracks alone, it's worth the price. Also included is "Academy Fight Song"'s B-side, "Max Ernst," possibly the only punk song ever about a surrealist painter.

***Vs.* (1982; Rykodisc, RCD 10340)**

An album built around tension: tension between the songs, between the instruments, between the notes. From the slow-building momentum of the opening "Secrets" to the shriek at the end of "That's How I Escaped My Certain Fate," *Vs.* is a masterpiece. "Mica," a claustrophobic song about mental illness, is made downright harrowing by Swope's layers of manipulated vocals, sounding like an army of demons inside the listener's head. "Trem Two" spirals downward majestically on a graceful guitar figure and muted vocals. Like all Mission of Burma recordings, it sounds best **loud**.

Minor Threat

One of the best American hardcore bands to come out of the early 1980s, Minor Threat established Washington, D.C. as a major D.I.Y. music scene, started the Straight Edge movement, and created the Dischord record label—one of the standard bearers in indie music. Influenced by their West Coast peers Black Flag, '70s punk bands like the Ramones, and fellow D.C. band Bad Brains, Minor Threat also drew on '70s rock god Ted Nugent. Made up of high school friends Ian MacKaye and Jeff Nelson, together with Brian Baker and Lyle Preslar, Minor Threat created mind-blowingly fast songs that maintained a melody. MacKaye's intelligent fast lyrics addressed the over-indulgent lifestyle of the 1980s. Minor Threat's music was created by teens for teens: They made music that addressed things that kids in their hardcore scene could relate to, like drunken losers, pushy know-it-alls, and the futility of trying to talk to someone whose mind is made up. Their chant-and-call style invited audience participation at live shows. Songs like "Straight Edge" and "In Your Eyes" showcased MacKaye's no drinking, no drugs, clean lifestyle. Picked up on by the kids attending the shows, this philosophy became a movement called Straight Edge and spawned its own music genre consisting of bands like Youth of Today and 7 Seconds. Minor Threat started in 1980 and broke up in 1983 due to conflicts surrounding the band's future. MacKaye wanted to continue with the fiercely independent punk ethos while other members wanted to take a more conventional route, including hiring a manager and signing to a major label.⁶ Dischord survived the breakup and became the most influential label of the 1980s indie scene. Theirs (band and label splits profits 50/50) became the model used by future indie labels.

Recommended Albums:***Complete Discography* (1988; Dischord, DIS 40)**

Minor Threat released two full-length albums and two EPs: *In My Eyes* (EP), *Minor Threat* (EP), *Out of Step*, and *Minor Threat*. In 1988, Dischord released Minor Threat's complete recorded output of twenty-six songs on one CD aptly titled *Complete Discography*. Covering their short career, this CD showcases their distinctive sound and allows the listener to hear the band's progression.

***20 Years of Dischord* (2002; Dischord, DIS 125)**

This three-disc box set is not a Minor Threat release, but it does demonstrate the influence Minor Threat and Ian MacKaye had on both the local and national music scenes. A showcase of Dischord bands from 1980-2000, *20 Years of Dischord* includes a disc of unreleased material that includes three Minor Threat songs: "Straight Edge," "Understand," and "Asshole Dub."

Minutemen

San Pedro, California's Mike Watt, D. Boon, and George Hurley formed one of the most influential bands to come out of the early-'80s punk scene. Blue collar to the core, the Minutemen mixed punk, jazz, folk, blues, and classic rock and roll and played it lightning fast. Many songs clocked in at less than one minute long. Unlike their contemporaries Black Flag, Minutemen sang about injustices outside of their immediate world. They tackled Vietnam, Central America, and racism, but they also wrote fun and

playful songs. The Minutemen summed up their style as “jamming econo”: They did everything for as little money as possible. This meant taking the D.I.Y. ethos to heart and doing as much as possible by themselves—like touring, moving equipment, and recording. Ethical to the core, they toured constantly and developed a loyal fanbase. According to Allmusic.com, they were on the brink of breaking into the mainstream music scene in 1986 when D. Boon was killed in car accident on his way home from Arizona.⁷ While the band’s prospects for commercial success were debatable, Boon’s death was one of the most tragic events in the world of punk (and rock and roll in general) and ended a band that influenced an entire genre both musically and philosophically.

Recommended albums:

***The Punch Line* (1983; SST, SST CD 004)**

The Punch Line was the Minutemen’s first full-length album. It was, according to Mark Deming at Allmusic.com, as “wildly inventive as anything spawned by American punk.”⁸ This album showed the world what the Minutemen could do. The band mixed their distinct sound and melody with politics. Other albums, namely *3-Way Tie for Last*, may show a more mature Minutemen but in order to fully appreciate a great band, you need to know where they started. *The Punch Line* in its entirety is also included on the CD *Post-Mersh, Volume 1* (1987; SST, SST CD 138) along with the Minutemen’s second album, *What Makes a Man Start Fires?*.

***Double Nickels on the Dime* (1985; SST, SST CD 046)**

Double Nickels on the Dime is not only a punk classic, it is a rock and roll classic. Forty-three songs long, the double album was an answer to Hüsker Dü's *Zen Arcade*. The release of *Zen Arcade* was even delayed so that the two albums would come out on the same day. *Double Nickels* shows the Minutemen at their musical and lyrical best. "This Ain't No Picnic" addresses classism with lyrics like, "But our land isn't free / So I'll work my life away / In the place of a machine / I refuse to be a slave." One of the classic songs on the album is "History Lesson Part II." Almost a love song from D. Boon to Mike Watt, this song sums up Minutemen history in less than three minutes: "Our band could be your life / Real names's be proof / Me and Mike Watt played for years / Punk rock changed our life / We learned punk rock in Hollywood / Drove up from Pedro / We were fucking corndogs / We'd go drink and pogo."

R.E.M.

When R.E.M. played their first show on April 5, 1980, in Athens, Georgia, they could not have known they would go on to be one of the most influential bands of the 1980s. R.E.M., consisting of Michael Stipe, Peter Buck, Mike Mills, and Bill Berry, combined the '60s-pop sound of the Byrds with southern rock and punk attitude. Using Stipe's mumbling vocal as an instrument alongside Buck's jangly twelve-string Rickenbacker guitar and the melodic rhythm section of Mills and Berry, R.E.M. created a sound that would become known as college rock. Their initial albums covered topics they knew: Athens, friends, and Southern folklore. With each album, Stipe became a more confident vocalist and songwriter and Buck became a better guitarist; their sound tightened and their songs began to address politics and environmentalism. This new

sound began to attract a wider audience, and they became one of the key bands to bridge the gap between the American music underground and mainstream radio. In 1987, they scored their first top-ten hit with “The One I Love” and by 1989 they were playing to arena-sized crowds. R.E.M. pioneered a sound that became a standard in the mid-’90s. Listen to the post-Nirvana “alternative” bands and you will often hear the jangly guitar of R.E.M. combined with the more raw sound of Hüsker Dü and the Replacements.

Recommended albums:

***Murmur* (1983; IRS, CD 70014)**

R.E.M.’s first full-length album is their best. It may not have been the first time the world heard Byrds-inspired pop, but it was the combination of the Stipe’s lyrics, the melodious rhythm section, and the group’s personality that struck a chord with critics and listeners. Opening with a cleaned up version of their first single, “Radio Free Europe,” *Murmur* rose to the top of critic’s lists. Sung in Stipe’s distinctive mumbling style, *Murmur* set the tone for the genre known as college rock. Other notable songs include “Pilgrimage,” “Perfect Circle,” and “Talk About the Passion,” which contains the memorable line “Not everyone can carry the weight of the world.” *Murmur* is still the benchmark to which all R.E.M. albums are compared.

***Life’s Rich Pageant* (1986; IRS, 0777 7 13201 25)**

Life’s Rich Pageant is the record where REM begins to move to a more traditional radio pop-song sound and when their songs became more political. “Fall on Me,” “Cuyahoga,” and “The Flowers of Guatemala” touch on environmentalism and Central America. With

this record, R.E.M. came into its own by combining a sound that was more accessible to the average radio listener, politics, and understandable lyrics.

***Document* (1987; IRS, IRSD-42059)**

An angry album that has hits and misses lyrically and musically, *Document* is R.E.M.'s breakthrough album. The often-misunderstood "The One I Love," which went to number 9 on the charts and "It's the End of the World as We Know it (And I Feel Fine)" were the songs that introduced a new generation to REM. *Document* was their most political album, featuring songs like "Finest Worksong" ("The time to rise has been engaged") and "Exhuming McCarthy" ("Enemy cited / Enemy met / I'm addressing the realpolitik").

Document is one of the albums that pulled the underground kicking and screaming into the mainstream.

Sonic Youth

Despite being one of the most self-consciously arty bands of the period, Sonic Youth can also flat out rock. Maybe you can't dance to it, but their music packs a visceral punch. Armed with volume, non-standard tunings, and personal backgrounds in avant-garde composition and visual art, Sonic Youth made an almost immediate splash upon their appearance in 1981. Drawing on the work of Glenn Branca, Television, and the Velvet Underground, guitarists Thurston Moore and Lee Ranaldo, bass player Kim Gordon, and drummer Steve Shelley (who joined in 1985) developed a layered, dissonant sound which no band has been able to reproduce. After a series of well-received albums—including the classic trio of *EVOL*, *Sister*, and *Daydream Nation*—for

independent labels, Sonic Youth signed with a major label in 1989. More than any other band of the era to make that leap, Sonic Youth demonstrated how one could achieve both critical and commercial success without compromising artistic vision. Over the years, they became the arbiters of taste within the indie scene and powerful advocates for their favorite bands. For example, it was through Sonic Youth's efforts that Nirvana was signed to the major label DGC. While perhaps not as fiery as their first albums, Sonic Youth's recent work is no less intricate or innovative.

Recommended albums:

***Sister* (1987; DGC, DGCD-24514)**

Sister is the sound of Sonic Youth approaching the height of their powers. Here listeners find the always-experimental band trying out pop melodies for the first time. With its strongest songs—"Catholic Block," "Schizophrenia," "Tuff Gnarl," "Kotton Krown"—ranking among the band's best, *Sister* is a worthwhile addition.

***Daydream Nation* (1988; DGC, DGCD-24515)**

A sprawling double album, *Daydream Nation* remains the standard by which all other Sonic Youth albums are judged. From the opening "Teen Age Riot" through "Eric's Trip," "Candle," and "Kissability" to the closing "Trilogy," Sonic Youth create the best music of their long career. *Daydream Nation* is an essential purchase.

Big Black

Few bands were as thoroughly and aggressively ugly as Big Black. Led by the corrosive Steve Albini and driven by an abused drum machine nicknamed Roland, Big Black fused hardcore's rage and noise with jackhammer beats, a formula later used to great success by bands like Nine Inch Nails and Ministry. Albini and Santiago Durango's guitars buzz and howl like industrial machinery. Dave Riley's thick, clotted bass and the drum machine's inhuman attack provide the songs with all the impact of a kick to the gut. Big Black's goal seems to have been to alienate anyone and everyone and, to a large part, they succeeded. Albini had a strong opinion—usually negative—on nearly every topic or band imaginable. Where many other post-punk bands directed their rage inward, Big Black spewed bile at targets near and far. With songs about arson, child molestation, murder, rape, and general bad behavior, Big Black “acknowledged no taboos.”⁹ They also fiercely defended their independent principles, signing no contracts, touring on the cheap, and doing everything their own way. Albini regularly hung up on major label representatives without saying a word.¹⁰ Big Black's musical and philosophical influence far exceeds their small recorded output, only two albums and a handful of EPs and singles.

Recommended albums:

The Rich Man's Eight Track Tape (1987; Touch & Go, TG94CD)

This CD combines Big Black's first full-length album, *Atomizer*, with a few tracks from shorter releases. The highlight is undoubtedly “Kerosene,” the nearest thing to an anthem Big Black ever wrote. Of course, not many other anthems have lyrics like “Nothing to do / Sit around at home / Sit around at home / Stare at the walls / Stare at each other and wait

till we die.” Big Black, because of its lyrical concerns, may not be suitable for all libraries. For the brave, however, this is the place to start.

Songs About Fucking (1987; Touch & Go, T&GLP#24CD)

If it’s possible, Big Black’s second album is even more violent-sounding than their first. Each track is more brutal than the last. Even so, it is a compelling listen. Again, the content may be offensive to some listeners.

Beat Happening

Beat Happening started in Olympia, Washington, in 1982. Consisting of Calvin Johnson (vocals), Heather Lewis (guitar), and Bret Lunsford (drums), Beat Happening was the center of the twee pop movement (“twee” is British English for “dainty”). Twee pop combined the innocence of ‘50s girl bands, the sensitivity of the Smiths, and the hyperactivity of the Ramones.¹¹ Johnson and the Olympia scene in general thrived on ‘50s kitsch and can be credited with introducing “geek chic” to the punk scene. Their simplistic sound was a contrast to the grunge coming out of Seattle at the same time. Beat Happening carried on the tradition of many D.I.Y. bands: If we can start a band, so can you. While Johnson sang with “off-key cadence of five year old,” many of Beat Happening’s songs had adult themes (meaning sex) barely hidden below the surface.¹² Beat Happening were not like the rest of the indie scene—the kitschy look, the rudimentary, minimalist sound, the fey-naiveté of their lyrics, and their almost-Straight-Edge lifestyle, but they were D.I.Y. to the core and that is what made them part of the scene. They also showed that rebellion could be rebellion against rock and roll (and more

specifically punk rock) instead of just rebellion against society. They angered some punks who felt they were being mocked. Beat Happening embodied the indie spirit by doing it themselves and keeping it simple. But was the naiveté and minimalism for real or was it manipulation? That's for the listener to decide. Johnson also founded key indie label K. K began by recording Olympia artists but spread out to include other twee pop artists like the Japanese girl band Shonen Knife. Beat Happening and K Records sponsored the first and only International Pop Underground (IPU) in 1991. Held from August 20-25, the IPU was all about the music. Musicians ran the booths, no press passes were given. If you wanted to attend you had to buy a ticket. Fifty-plus bands played over the five-day festival.

Recommended Albums

***Jamboree* (1988; K, klp 002)**

Jamboree, Beat Happening's second album, is their best. More confident than on their first record, Johnson, Lewis, and Lunford combine the minimalist sound and naive-yet-grown-up lyrics to create one of the most sexually-charged albums of the era.¹³ The song "Indian Summer" is an example of the innocent yet risqué Beat Happening sound. Seemingly simple lyrics like "What is that cheerful sound? / Rain fallin' on the ground" are combined with "Breakfast in cemetery / Boy tastin' wild cherry / Touch girl, apple blossom / Just a boy playin' possum." These lyrics may not scream sex, but they certainly whisper it.

***You Turn Me On* (1992; K, klp 007)**

Tighter and longer, *You Turn Me On* is Beat Happening's most put-together album, so much so it almost sounds planned. Losing some of the minimalist spontaneity of their earlier work, *You Turn Me On* shows a band that grew up both lyrically and musically. Love and sex are still common themes, but the sound is deeper and more complex than previous albums. *You Turn me On* is Beat Happenings final album and it is a shining example of how far they evolved in ten years. They almost sound like a real band with actual musical ability.

***Crashing Through* Box Set (2002; K, klp 115)**

The *Crashing Through* box set includes Beat Happening's five full-length albums: *Beat Happening*, *Jamboree*, *Black Candy*, *Dreamy*, and *You Turn Me On*. Also included are a booklet with information on the recording of each album and a disc showing Beat Happening's unique performance style and Johnson's dancing (if you want to call it that). It is a pricey set, but if you want to feature the music of one of the '80s indie pioneers it is well worth the cost.

Camper Van Beethoven

Camper Van Beethoven started in 1983 in Santa Cruz, California, home of UC-Santa Cruz and the its mascot Banana Slugs. Jello Biafra of the Dead Kennedys lasted a semester at this same university before dropping out to start his band. Describing Camper to a new listener is almost impossible. They are part folk, part world music, part country, part ska, part everything-in-between combined with punk rock attitude and sarcasm. As Richard von Bussack states in the liner note to the Camper box set, *Cigarettes and Carrot*

Juice, “[t]hey took punk’s low-fi attitude to campfire songs, blues, and minor-key Slavic dance music.”¹⁴ Comprised of six main members; David Lowery, Jonathan Segel, Chris Molla, Victor Krummenacher, Greg Lisher, and Chris Pederson, Camper also had a rotating line of visiting members. The intelligence and absurdity in each song—the wit, the sound—was amazing. Camper was an original and has yet to be imitated or topped, but they never gained the popularity or notoriety of their peers. They are one of those groups that influenced other bands without the other bands knowing it. Part of the early ‘80s D.I.Y. movement, they toured on their own, booked their own shows, and played for anyone who would listen. They laid the groundwork for other absurdist bands like Apples in Stereo, Neutral Milk Hotel, and the Olivia Tremor Control. After jumping to a major label (Virgin) in 1988, Camper imploded while on tour in Europe. Lowery went on to form Cracker and achieved moderate success. Among those who have cycled through Cracker’s revolving rhythm section are ex-Pixie David Lovering and Camper’s Victor Krummenacher. Camper reformed in 2002.

Recommended albums:

***Telephone Free Landslide Victory* (1985; Cooking Vinyl, COOK CD287).**

Telephone Free Landslide Victory is Camper’s watershed album. It is a masterpiece. Its mix of songs include instrumental Slavic-inspired dance songs (“Balalaika Gap”) and biting satire (“Opi Rides Again-Club Med Sucks”). Other songs include the (in)famous “Take the Skinheads Bowling” and “Where the Hell is Bill.” *Telephone* also features one of the most creative songs titles in the history of rock and roll: “Mao Reminisces About the Days in Southern China.”

***Camper Van Beethoven* (1986; Cooking Vinyl, COOK CD289)**

Camper's third album, *Camper Van Beethoven* features songs like "Joe Stalin's Cadillac" and "We Saw Jerry's Daughter." The album showcases Camper's biting humor.

Musically, the album shows the band moving to more straight forward college rock but they still retain their quirky sound by mixing reggae, ska, country, and Pink Floyd-esque psychedelic rock.

***Cigarettes and Carrot Juice: The Santa-Cruz Years* (2002; Cooking Vinyl, COOK CD247)**

This box set features Campers first three full-length albums (*Telephone Free Landslide Victory, II&III, Camper Van Beethoven*) and two additional discs (*Camper Vantiquities*, a collection of B-sides and oddities, and *Greatest Hits Played Faster*, a set of live recordings). The packaging, however, may not work for all library collections. Each CD is in a cardboard sleeve, not a plastic jewel case.

Throwing Muses

"It has been suggested that I was insane during the Muses early days, something I have vehemently denied in my effort to prove that this stuff could come out of our girlfriends, our sisters, and our mothers. Listening now, I wonder if I was all there, but maybe that was the point. Our girlfriends, sisters and mothers have been known to go elsewhere at times, too."¹⁵ This is how singer/guitarist Kristin Hersh sums up Throwing Muses and their place in the larger scheme of things. Formed in 1983, the Muses spun

spiderwebs of guitar arpeggios generated by stepsisters Kristin Hersh and Tanya Donnelly, David Narcizo's martial drums, and Leslie Langston's thick, melodic bass into a potent and thoroughly feminine whole. They were the first American band signed to prestigious British label 4AD, paving the way for fellow New Englanders the Pixies. Their songs often included wild shifts of dynamics, style, and tempo. Hersh's voice veers between choked fury and aching high notes, often in the same word. Lyrics like "I throw my head through a window / crash ... like poetry" ("Delicate Cutters"), "I have a fish nailed to a cross on my apartment wall / It sings to me with glassy eyes and quotes from Kafka" ("Fish"), and "I don't have legs no more and I know it" ("Rabbits Dying") give rise to tales of Hersh's mental illness. Later albums featured a more conventional sound, but were no less challenging. Donnelly left in 1992 to play with the Breeders (with ex-Pixie Kim Deal) and Belly. Hersh continues to tour and record as a solo artist and with the band 50 Foot Wave.

Recommended albums:

***The Real Ramona* (1991; Sire/Warner Bros., W2 26489)**

Easily the most accessible of Throwing Muses' records, *The Real Ramona* contains the strangest and strongest pop songs committed to record in the early '90s. "Counting Backwards" is surely a hit in a parallel dimension, while "Red Shoes," "Golden Thing," and "Ellen West" are typically brilliant entries from Hersh. Donnelly's two contributions, "Not Too Soon" and "Honeychain" are especially strong as well. Even so, the most interesting track may be the harrowing, defiant "Say Goodbye."

***In a Doghouse* (1998; Rykodisc, RCdD 10377/78)**

This collection of Throwing Muses' long out-of-print releases with some previously unreleased tracks sums up the mercurial nature of this band better than review or discussion could. The ten songs from the band's untitled debut album, which had been out of print domestically for a decade before this reissue, have an even more revelatory impact today. Bolstered by Gil Norton's big production and leaning heavily on the tough rhythm section of Langston and Narcizo, it's easily the original Muses' most powerful sounding record. Hersh's quivery voice had a strength and her guitar playing an aggressiveness she did not revisit until the formation of 50 Foot Wave. The violent mood swings of songs like "Hate My Way" and "Soul Soldier" give a listener reason to wonder about Hersh's sanity, as does her naked wailing on "Delicate Cutters." The remainder of the two-disc set covers in the shadow of the debut album. The four song follow-up EP, *Chains Changed*, is calmer and more controlled and, like the debut, only available in this set. The second disc features demo versions of many of the songs that surfaced on the first album. Among them are two of the best Muses' songs, the hallucinatory "Fish" and "And a She-Wolf After the War." The set is capped by four of the group's earliest songs, recorded for the first time for inclusion here.¹⁶

Pixies

The Pixies may be *the* band from the late-80s/early-90s that was more popular and influential after they broke up. Formed in 1983, the Pixies were Frank Black (Charles Thompson) on vocals and guitar, Kim Deal on bass, Joey Santiago on guitar, and David Lovering on drums. The people that listened to them in the '80s passed copies of their

Pixies albums on to their younger (and sometimes older) siblings who then passed them on to their friends. This was the band whose albums were passed from dorm room to dorm room. Pixies chopped up classic rock, mixed it with Iggy Pop, the Violent Femmes, and Hüsker Dü. The Pixies sounded like something you had heard before or at least should have heard. They were teetering on a plane of near-insanity that drew in many people from many different areas of music. The Pixies were known for the “quiet-loud-quiet” dynamics that many would later associate with Nirvana. Frank Black screamed in an almost girlish voice; Deal’s lower voice contrasted with his. The tension and dynamic between their voices, especially when at live shows, was jarring. The Pixies’ influence cannot be denied. Both Chris Noveselic and Kurt Cobain of Nirvana heard the Pixies influence in “Smells Like Teen Spirit” and were positive someone was going to call them on it.¹⁷ Thom Yorke of Radiohead said that the Pixies and R.E.M. changed his life.¹⁸ The Pixies were the second non-British bands to sign to the label 4AD. Because of this they developed a larger following in Great Britain than they did in the United States. It took several years of them playing and touring in England before they began to have an impact in the U.S. But when they did, it was fast and furious. They had hits on MTV and college radio began to play their songs. Tension between the band members, specifically Black and Deal, would eventually lead to the break-up of the band. In 2004, the Pixies announced they were reforming for a tour. They played small shows across the U.S. and Canada before playing at the Coachella festival in California. They followed this by an extensive cross-country tour. While some fans criticized them for reforming just for the money (something the band never denied), it was a chance for several generations of punk and indie fans to see one of the best bands of the 1980s.

Recommended albums:

***Surfer Rosa* (1988; 4AD/Elektra, 9 60856-2)**

Released in 1988, *Surfer Rosa* was the Pixies first full-length album, and it is the album that defined their sound of chaos and control. Steve Albini, ex-Big Black frontman and producer extraordinaire, was able to make the Pixies sound manic, masculine, and menacing on *Surfer Rosa*. He was able to make their sound more extreme by reining it in. Songs like “Bone Machine” showcase Black’s nonsensical lyrics and screeching. “Tony’s Theme” demonstrates their surf band tendencies. “Gigantic,” the first single off the album, was written and sung by Deal. It almost overshadows the entire album—its success began the creative tensions that would eventually break up the band.

***Doolittle* (1989; 4AD/Elektra, 9 61295-2)**

In a 2004 interview with Spin magazine, Santiago recalled listening to *Doolittle* in the studio and how he said, “[w]e’re going to be those people that people are going to emulate and use as a stepping stone.”¹⁹ He could not have been more correct. Seventeen years later the track listing reads like a list of number one hits: “This Monkey’s Gone to Heaven,” “Here Comes Your Man,” “Wave of Mutilation,” and “La La Love You.” They all feature the Pixies intensity and insane sound heard on *Surfer Rosa* but in a more stylized and accessible fashion. *Doolittle* shows the Pixies at their best.

Melvins

The Melvins have reveled in the slow-motion guitar riffs of Black Sabbath like few other post-punk bands. They inspired and served as a pole star for a generation of musicians from the Pacific Northwest. Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, Mudhoney, and Nirvana (whose Kurt Cobain actually tried out for the Melvins) all owe a debt to the metal mashers. Capable of sub-two-minute punk rave-ups or sludgy ten-minute monstrosities, the Melvins laid the foundations for grunge. Guitarist/vocalist “King Buzzo” Osborne has the history of metal and punk at his fingertips and his wailing, Ozzy Osborne-inspired vocals are a perfect counterpoint. Bass player Lori Black provides plenty of low-end crunch. Drummer Dale Crover is the group’s secret weapon: He never places a beat or a fill wrong. Early records featured brief songs which seemed to end just as their slow-motion riffing began to gain momentum. Later albums allowed individual songs more time to sprawl, peaking with the self-titled 1992 release on which a single track occupies all thirty minutes of the album. A major label deal in 1993, brought about through Kurt Cobain's support, did little to mellow the group’s punishing sound. As the years have passed, the Melvins have become more and more experimental, pushing their sound into new and strange territory. Their most recent recordings are a pair of collaborations with former Dead Kennedys frontman Jello Biafra.

Recommended albums:

***Bullhead* (1991; Boner, BR25-2)**

With *Bullhead*, the Melvins finally allow their huge riffs to develop fully. There are no more two-minute-long, half-formed song ideas. The eight-minute throb of “Boris,” which

opens the record, serves notice of this new direction. Heavy as an anvil, and with a similar physical impact, *Bullhead* is a standout.

***Houdini* (1993; Atlantic, 7 852532-2)**

The Melvins first major label record may be the most accessible of their career. All this means little more than the songs are the closest to conventional the band gets. This is your chance to hear the band that created the “Seattle sound” at their best

Galaxie 500

While many post-punk bands incorporated at least the volume of hardcore before taking off in new directions, Galaxie 500 focused on the quieter side of rock music. With Dean Wareham’s high, wobbly tenor and elegant guitar leading the way and buoyed by the strong rhythm section of Naomi Yang on bass and Damon Krukowski on drums, they created a minimalist sound that relied on neither volume nor speed to maintain interest. Most of their songs unfold slowly and majestically, often taking surprising twists and turns along the way. Many also featured extended instrumental interludes and broke the five-minute mark, also an indie rock rarity. Galaxie 500 lasted only five years and recorded just three albums. Still, they inspired the slowcore genre. Bands such as Low, Red House Painters, and Bedhead owe much of their sound to the Boston trio.

Recommended albums:

***On Fire* (1989; Rykodisc, RCD 10357)**

Galaxie 500 lets its pop instincts show through on this, their second album. Perhaps its two most straight-forward pop songs, “Strange” and “When Will You Come Home,” are among the highlights, along with the blissful “Blue Thunder” and the sax-tinged “Decomposing Trees.” The Rykodisc reissue adds three tracks: “Victory Garden,” “Cold Night,” and a cover of New Order’s “Ceremony.”

***This Is Our Music* (1990; Rykodisc, RCD 10358)**

Galaxie 500’s swan song finds the band at their most polished and confident. These expansive songs set the bar for later slowcore bands. In the album’s most surprising track, Galaxie 500 turns a little known Yoko Ono tune, “Listen, the Snow Is Falling,” into a delicately beautiful ballad sung by Yang. *This Is Our Music* is a beautiful, haunting record. The Rykodisc reissue adds a cover of the Velvet Underground’s “Here She Comes Now”.

Uncle Tupelo

Jay Farrar, Jeff Tweedy, and Mike Heidorn formed Uncle Tupelo in 1987 in Belleville, Illinois, in southern Illinois. Their sound owed as much to the Replacements and the Minutemen as it did to country legends like George Jones and Hank Williams. By infusing traditional country sounds—twangy guitars and harmonies, mandolins, banjos, fiddles, and the distinctive county swing—with punk aggression, Uncle Tupelo provided inspiration for many of the leading lights of the alt country genre. Artists like the Old 97s, Neko Case, the Jayhawks, and the Wallflowers learned many of their tricks from this trio. Even an alternate name for the genre, “No Depression”—now also the name of a

magazine covering this type of music—owes itself to Uncle Tupelo’s cover of the Carter Family song of that title. Farrar’s gravelly, Johnny Cash-inflected vocals contrasted sharply with Tweedy’s quiet tenor, adding further depth to the group’s recordings. Over time, the country elements of the band’s sound became more pronounced, with punky rave-ups like “Graveyard Shift” giving way to gentle country-pop songs like “New Madrid” from the first album to the final. After years of hard touring and limited commercial success, Uncle Tupelo broke up in 1994. Farrar has gone on to lead Son Volt, while Tweedy has earned considerable success with Wilco.

Recommended Albums:

***Still Feel Gone* (1991; Columbia/Legacy, CK 86428)**

Lacking the desperate edge of *No Depression*, Uncle Tupelo’s first album, *Still Feel Gone* shows the band becoming comfortable with its sound and with the studio. As a result, the record is more consistent and the band sounds more powerful in its relative restraint. The opening “Gun,” with its hard rock introduction, serves notice that the band, while adding more rootsy flourishes, did not abandoned its punk roots. Other standout tracks include “Looking for a Way Out,” “True to Life,” and “If That’s Alright.” While not one of the album’s best tracks, “D. Boon” provides a tribute to one of Uncle Tupelo’s heroes and inspirations.

***Anodyne* (1993; Rhino/Sire, R2 73832)**

Uncle Tupelo’s final album finds the group fully integrating the country side of their sound. “Acuff-Rose” sounds like a traditional country song and is a tribute to the

legendary country song-writing team. Even so, the influence of Paul Westerberg is still apparent, as on “Give Back the Key to My Heart,” which could be an outtake from *Tim*. A solid and consistently excellent record, *Anodyne* set the standard and drew the blueprint for the alt country albums that followed.

Fugazi

Four years after the end of Minor Threat, Ian MacKaye, Joe Lally, and Brandon Canty formed Fugazi with Guy Picciotto officially joining the band a year later. Just as Minor Threat was one of the definitive American hardcore bands, Fugazi was one of the definitive post-hardcore band. Fugazi was punk all grown up. The members of Fugazi took the indie lifestyle, combined it with Straight Edge philosophy and struck out to create some of the most experimental and influential music of the post-punk era. They are “a knuckle sandwich made with nine-grain bread, building strong minds and bodies with rattling guitar power.”²⁰ Unfortunately, some of their ethics have overshadowed their music: no merchandise sold at shows, no interviews in magazines they don’t read, very little advertising, and set prices for live shows and albums. Some feel the band was preachy and that their lyrics are too accusatory of the listener. Fugazi never tells anyone how to live their lives; they just ask that people think about their decisions. MacKaye is known to call people out for violence during shows. If those causing problems do not stop, they are escorted out of the building (and given a refund). Fugazi has sold millions of records and have an incredibly loyal following—and they have done it all on their own. Fugazi plays without a setlist; every member has to be ready to play any of their songs at any time. One could almost call them a post-punk jam band, as they will often

get into back and forth musical tug of wars on stage. Their most recent album was released in 2001. They have not broken up but are on hiatus. They will go back into the studio when they feel the need to record.

Recommended Albums:

***Repeater* (1990; Dischord, DIS 45)**

On *Repeater*, Fugazi's first full-length album, the band found their style. Rapid-fire bass, dueling guitars, and the lyrics spoken/sung/yelled by MacKaye and Picciotto, they explore different sounds from classic rock to the Clash to Run DMC to reggae. Songs like "Repeater" emphasized Fugazi's think-for-yourself ideals with lyrics like "I had a name and now I'm a number." They address commercialism with the song "Merchandise": "You are not what you own." After *Repeater* Fugazi was approached by major labels. They turned them all down.

***The Argument* (2001; Dischord, DIS 103cd)**

If *Repeater* is where Fugazi established their sound then *The Argument* is where they shattered it. *The Argument* (and the previous album *End Hits*) is a departure from their previous sound: more melodic and layered. They used strings and female backing vocals. *The Argument* proves Fugazi's unwillingness to be boxed in by one specific sound and their willingness to explore. This album shows the band has the musical maturity that can only be achieved through time and practice. While the music may be quieter, the song subjects are still directed at the underserved in society. "Cashout" addresses gentrification and development of neighborhoods: "On the morning of the first eviction / They carried

out the wishes of the landlord and his son / Furniture's out on the sidewalk next to the family.”

Honorable Mention

***Instrument* (1999; Dischord, DIS 80)**

This documentary film directed by Jem Cohen follows Fugazi over a ten-year period showing them touring, recording, and giving interviews. The documentary is not your parents' documentary—it jumps around and is out of order—it is punk rock on film.

Bikini Kill

Bikini Kill started a movement in indie rock, not so much because of a unique sound, but because of a unique message and stance. Stridently political, defiantly feminist, aggressively sexual, and wildly profane, Bikini Kill ignited the Riot Grrrl movement, which had its base in their hometown of Olympia, Washington. With their call for “Revolution Girl-style Now,” Bikini Kill helped inspire other women to take up guitars and rock. The music is mostly standard three-chord punk thrash, but Kathleen Hanna's vocals, which fly between saccharine sweet, anguished howling, and rage-filled shrieks, take it to a different place. It was in concert that Bikini Kill may have had the greatest impact. They would often call the women in the audience to stand in front of the stage, shunting the usual punk rock mosh pits to the fringes. They would also allow women from the crowd to take the microphone and discuss issues like sexual abuse and discrimination. By creating a safe place for women, both on stage and in the crowd, and

an example of how it could be done, Bikini Kill empowered a generation of female-led bands, like Sleater-Kinney, Sarge, the Gossip, and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs.

Recommended albums:

***Pussy Whipped* (1994; Kill Rock Stars, KRS 218)**

Bikini Kill's first album is a ragged, glorious statement of purpose. Only one of the twelve songs breaks the three-minute mark, but each is a manifesto of the Riot Grrrl movement.

***The Singles* (1998; Kill Rock Stars, KRS 298)**

Probably the best-sounding record in Bikini Kill's repertoire, thanks to the trio of songs produced by Joan Jett. The nine songs here provide a concise overview of the band's sound and politics, along with the best of three versions of their defining anthem, "Rebel Girl."

Sleater-Kinney

Sleater-Kinney, composed of Corin Tucker, Carrier Brownstein, and Janet Weiss, is one of the few Riot Grrrl bands to survive. Some would even argue that they weren't a Riot Grrrl band—they formed in 1994 just as the movement was imploding. Tucker and Brownstein were both part of the Olympia scene and part of Heavens to Betsy and Excuse 17, respectively. Tucker and Brownstein were influenced by early Riot Grrrl bands like Bikini Kill and Bratmobile. Weiss joined the band after they went through several different drummers. Weiss' drumming was exactly what they were looking for.

The three of them combined have created a unique sound. Tucker and Brownstein's vocals play off each other as well as on top of each other. They wind their vocal together, sometimes in shrieking harmony and sometimes in a call-and-response mode. Their guitars do the same. Brownstein's guitar work is especially impressive. She is perhaps the first guitar goddess produced by indie rock. The energy and danceable beats from Weiss carry the songs. Sleater-Kinney may have outlasted the Riot Grrrl movement but they are its legacy. The subjects of their songs have changed and matured as they have, but they are still covering topics many male bands won't touch: self-discovery, freedom, feminism, sex, love, birth, and death. In the summer of 2006, Sleater-Kinney announced they were going on indefinite hiatus with no future plans to tour or record. Their summer tour, including a stop at the Lollapalooza Festival and two shows in Portland, Oregon, was their last.

Recommended albums:

***Call the Doctor* (1996; Chainsaw, CHSW 13)**

Sleater-Kinney's second full-length album is their mainstream coming-out party. Their self-titled debut had been a success within the indie crowd but *Call the Doctor* made others take notice. Coming out in 1996 after the so-called "year of the woman," Sleater-Kinney proved that girls can indeed rock. Songs like "Stay Where You Are" feature their trademark dueling guitars and vocals while Lora McFarlane's drums drive right through the song. The song addresses the contradictions of being a woman in modern society. Brownstein sings, "She's dead if you want and that's me if you want / Stuffed in the corner, little girl lost / And I claw and I scratch and I beg and I scream / I just need you to

save me one last time.” It sounds as though she is waiting for someone to rescue her. She is, but that someone is herself. “I Wanna Be Your Joey Ramone” has become a punk classic and name-checks punk icons Joey Ramone of the Ramones and Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth.

***One Beat* (2002; Kill Rock Stars, KRS 387)**

One Beat combines the Sleater-Kinney guitar and drum sound with horns and synthesizers. With this album, the women of Sleater-Kinney completed their evolution from Riot Grrrl band to rock and roll band. Sleater-Kinney had always been a band that shied away from overtly political songs—this all changed with *One Beat*. Two songs, “Far Away” and “Combat Rock,” address current political issues. With “Far Away” Corin Tucker takes on the events of September 11, 2001. With lyrics like “Turn on the TV / Watch the world explode into space” and “And the hardest hit are innocent and far away / But it feels so close” express the helplessness many felt on that day. There are a few slight jabs at the current Bush administration in “Far Away,” but nothing overt—they saved that for “Combat Rock.” The song gets directly to the point by opening with “They tell us there are only two sides to be on / If you are on our side you’re right if not you’re wrong.” The most powerful and personal song on the album, “Sympathy,” finds Tucker desperately praying for the life of her premature son. Sleater-Kinney carried this more mature sound on to their final album *The Woods* (Sub Pop, 2005).

Conclusion

Younger music fans listening to these bands may think they sound ordinary, that they sound like much of what is being played on the radio today, but what they do not realize is just how revolutionary they were. When they were playing for small audiences in tiny basement clubs they were changing the musical landscape. The times have simply caught up with them, sometimes more than twenty years after the bands' demises. Listening to these albums now resembles a trip back up an evolutionary path. From these records, a listener can discover where today's bands learned their trade.

Despite these obvious links to the present, most of the groups discussed here are absent from current discussions on popular music and from the majority of library collections. We hope that this essay is a first step toward inclusion for these artists, whose worth has been proven by the generations of musicians they have inspired.

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