


# AMERICANWAY

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**TOGETHER AGAIN** » The Police's reunion tour makes one fan's ticket-stub collection complete

**THE MOST INFLUENTIAL BANDS EVER** » From Elvis to Nirvana, these musicians defined their decades — according to us. But what do you think?



## Voices of a Generation

**They revolutionized music as we know it, changed the way society thinks, and filled many a generation gap. These are the most revered, most significant, and most influential acts in music history. (A bold statement, we know. But we're standing by it.)**  
By Kevin Raub. Illustration by Scott Laumann.

It goes without saying, of course, that my decision to accept an assignment to definitively chronicle the single most important musical act of each decade since the 1950s was preposterous: Music is entirely subjective, album sales and chart accomplishments can be completely incongruent with quality, and, frankly, who am I to judge? But here we are. So, with a little trepidation and armed with a résumé referencing some 10 years of music journalism, I offer the following: a valiant attempt to present the single most important act of the decade (the easy part) and to suggest a few tracks worth checking out from some of that decade's underdogs, which you might have missed the first time around (highly debatable). Please direct counterarguments to AmericanWayMag.com (click the "voices of a Generation" button). I'm going into hiding.

### 1950s: Elvis Presley

It's hard to believe that before the 1950s, rock and roll as we know it today was not a part of the national psyche — nor was the concept of a rock star. Even harder to believe is that it was a hip-shaking, good ol' boy from Tupelo, Mississippi, with a hymnal-inspired swagger in his voice and a blues-laced guitar strum in his fingers, who introduced it to the masses: Elvis Aaron Presley.

When Elvis walked into the Memphis Recording Service (part of the now-legendary Sun Studio) in 1954, he was little more than a truck driver for an electric company. When he walked out that July, with a \$4 ten-inch acetate carrying the songs "I Love You Because," "Blue Moon of Kentucky," and "That's All Right" in hand, he was days from becoming the world's first true rock-and-roll star — and its biggest, to this day.

Though rock and roll had begun to take shape in the beginning of the decade, it lacked sex appeal and soul. Bill Haley & His Comets are actually the ones most often credited with charting the first rock-and-roll song, "Rock Around the Clock," in 1955, but it wasn't exactly rough around the edges or sexy. In walked Elvis. His dapper looks didn't hurt, and when the world saw him shake his hips — the first blatant sexual gyrating to be seen on American televisions — women of all ages fainted and censors of all ages nearly died of shock. Below-the-waist shots of him were eventually banned from TV, lest he cause apocalyptic pandemonium and the general decline of civilization.

It's estimated that Elvis has sold more than a billion records worldwide, though no SoundScan figures nor any other reliable counting methods were available then. If anything, he's probably sold more than that. There is unequivocally no part of rock and roll today that doesn't somewhere, somehow lead back to Elvis. His songs touch our hearts to this day. They inspire everything from sweat-soaked evenings on low-slung Southern porches to gospel revivals in third world countries. There will never be anyone quite like him again. Though he died an untimely death in an unsavory manner in 1977, his rock-and-roll wake will shimmy and shake forever.

**Our Signature Track: Heartbreak Hotel**

### The Underdogs

(Translation: You may or may not have heard of them; either way, they weren't as famous [or as rich] as the guy above. But they were just as cool.)

**Carl Perkins**, Blue Suede Shoes  
**Bill Haley & His Comets**, Crazy Man, Crazy  
**Howlin' Wolf**, Wang Dang Doodle

### 1960s: The Beatles

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unfamiliar scenario when it comes to unsigned bands, but it's certainly the biggest A&R blunder in musical history. After countless slammed doors, producer George Martin decided to give these four mop-haired boys from Liverpool a chance, birthing a rock-and-roll hysteria known as Beatlemania in the process.

Why the Beatles gripped first the British, then the Americans, and then the entire globe with such a manic stronghold was first and foremost because of their music. The band's intricate harmonies, memorable melodies, and complex arrangements — all self-written and self-performed — established the prototype for the four-piece band. Rather than repeat the recipe of past pop successes (as most bands in the 1950s and early '60s were inclined to do), they maintained a stalwart antiformalistic approach to their music, becoming fierce innovators along the way. Once the catchy hooks were combined with their photogenic good looks, media-friendly personalities, endearing confidence, and endlessly exciting lifestyles, Beatlemania was born, ushering in the first and biggest British musical invasion in history.

Though the Beatles' contribution to music is incalculable, one thing is for sure: They wouldn't consistently reverberate in iPods today if their ability to evolve and adapt their music over the years — in an undisputed artistic progression — was missing from their résumé. What started out as radio-friendly, borderline-cheesy pop in the early '60s ("Love Me Do," "I Want to Hold Your Hand") became avant-garde, psychedelic rock-and-roll epics by the time the decade ended ("Strawberry Fields Forever," "Tomorrow Never Knows"). No band in history has ever done that so effortlessly and so effectively.

**Our Signature Track: Hey Jude**

### The Underdogs

(Translation: You may or may not have heard of them; either way, they weren't as famous [or as rich] as the group above. But they were just as cool.)

**Dick Dale and His Del-Tones**, Let's Go Trippin'

**The Turtles**, Outside Chance

**Gerry & the Pacemakers**, How Do You Do It?

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### 1970s: Led Zeppelin

If Jimi Hendrix was the first guitar god, the members of Led Zeppelin were the first rock gods. The English band lambasted the blues, turning them inside out with a bone-crushing rhythm section that recoiled in a thunderous roar that shook the entire world's definition of rock. Jimmy Page's hammering guitar, John Paul Jones's haunting arrangements, John Bonham's fierce battering of the drums, and Robert Plant's eerie howl on vocals combined to form the world's first (and since unequalled) heavy-metal band.

Led Zeppelin set the bar for rock-and-roll excess, both sonically and in its treatment of hotel rooms. Unlike the Beatles, whose clean-cut image helped fuel their success, Led Zeppelin relied on delinquency, overindulgence, and unadulterated hedonism offstage, redirecting the world's intemperance after the '60s free-love comedown. From every riff to every rumor, everything about the band was massive. It would have all seemed a bit over the top had the music not been so equally unforgettable. The band's most famous epic, "Stairway to Heaven," became the most played song in the history of album-oriented radio.

But not everything about the band was so "in your face." It was shrouded in mystery, playing off of mysticism and mythology in its lyrics and on its album covers, and granting little access to press and fans — all of which only fed the group's mass appeal and controversial nature. Led Zeppelin was also the first band to consider an entire album as a whole, conceptualizing album-oriented rock from the starting gate (Led Zeppelin I) and choosing to let its deafening music do most of the talking. Our collective ears are still ringing in the new millennium.

**Our Signature Track: Stairway to Heaven**

### The Underdogs

(Translation: You may or may not have heard of them; either way, they weren't as famous [or as rich] as the group above. But they were just as cool.)

**The Buzzcocks**, Ever Fallen in Love? (With Someone You Shouldn't've)

**The Clash**, London Calling

**Deep Purple**, Smoke on the Water

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### 1980s: U2

Born out of the postpunk hangover but packing tsunami-size riffs as well as seizing hooks and a vocal tenderness unknown to that genre, U2 borrowed its foundation from the Clash and from the Sex Pistols and built an alternative rock-and-roll empire on top of it. Playing a musical card that isn't afraid to be spiritual and that's oftentimes fragile and introspective — so long as it's set to a monster echoing riff — Bono, the Edge, Adam Clayton, and Larry Mullen Jr. remain as important in 2007 as they were in 1987, when their seminal album, *The Joshua Tree*, catapulted them from semiunderground critical darlings to the biggest band in the world.

U2's success is partly due to the band's fortunate rise: Rather than being built up in an overnight media frenzy as the greatest thing since color television (only to be ripped out of the wall and tossed out of a hotel room a few years later by those same scribes), the band's ascent was slow and methodical. Despite producing a catalog of albums in the '80s, of which any band would have been pleased to have recorded a mere one (*Boy*, *War*, *The Unforgettable Fire*), U2 didn't become a household name until its fifth studio album. Switch the decade to our current decade, and U2 never would have gotten a chance to make *The Joshua Tree*; the band would have been dropped long before its debut made it to the bargain bin.

Citing both world affairs (the cold war, for example) and more homegrown concerns like the troubles in Northern Ireland in his lyrics, Bono used the microphone as a pulpit from which to further a rock crusade laced with roaring political battle cries and whispering calls to arms. Furthermore, the '80s are best known for two musical genres (new wave and hair metal) that are undeniably fun but not particularly well respected in the general evolution of music (they're more like bouts of narcoleptic outbursts along the way), and the fact that U2 was able to stay its polemical postpunk course in their wake is both astonishing and, perhaps sadly, a thing of the past.

U2 is a musical powerhouse even today, and that can be attributed to many reasons — not least among them, an uncanny ability to craft a perfect pop song — but it is indisputable that the days of a band maintaining 30 years of relevant longevity are over. In an era of ADD tastes from both fans and record labels, and with the Internet, which will

probably kill off the album concept altogether, U2 is the last band standing.

**Our Signature Track: Pride (In the Name of Love)**

## The Underdogs

(Translation: You may or may not have heard of them; either way, they weren't as famous [or as rich] as the group above. But they were just as cool.)

**Joy Division**, *Love Will Tear Us Apart*

**The Alarm**, *Rain in the Summertime*

**Melvins**, *Raise a Paw*

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## 1990s: Nirvana

Challenge any music lover to recall the first time they heard Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit," and you'll find that they can retell the tale in vivid detail. It was such a pivotal moment in music that it's unlikely to ever be matched again. The reaction? Jaw-dropping shock and awe — and a widespread lack of certainty on how to react. The trio lasted only long enough to produce two studio albums, but in that time, they chewed up and spit out the course of musical history, ushering in an entirely new genre — and fashion statement (grunge) — and completely ignoring nearly every documented musical rule in the process.

With the exception of Guns N' Roses, the '80s had generated little of substance in the genres of hard rock and heavy metal, instead producing a fad led by bands like Poison and Warrant that relied more on hair and makeup artists than on a producer. But hair metal's heyday was crashing hard by 1990, and Nirvana was its deathblow. The band's meteoric rise was quick and relentless, striking at the heart and ears with a shockingly creative combination that turned metal, indie rock, and postpunk sludge into a novel musical Molotov cocktail. The world was ready for a new sound, a new fashion, and a new movement, and grunge, led by Nirvana and its band of brothers (Soundgarden, Pearl Jam, and Alice in Chains), delivered — and with a shell-shocking thud.

Kurt Cobain took a misguided and punk-rock-ridden adolescence and turned it into a musical war cry rife with disgruntled angst and introspective pain and suffering and let it loose through a microphone and a guitar. While the band's distorted mix of genres past melted the minds of the musical cognoscenti from the moment "Smells Like Teen Spirit" debuted on MTV, Cobain found himself in the uncomfortable position of being the most notorious antirock star the world had ever seen. In 1994, a combination of antihero syndrome, drug addiction, and gun collecting proved to be his demise. It's a safe bet that any music lover remembers that day with crushing clarity as well.

**Our Signature Track: Smells Like Teen Spirit**

## The Underdogs

(Translation: You may or may not have heard of them; either way, they weren't as famous [or as rich] as the group above. But they were just as cool.)

**Idlewild**, *A Film for the Future*

**Catherine Wheel**, *Phantom of the American Mother*

**Mercury Rev**, *Opus 40*

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## 2000s: TBD

You don't think I would be so presumptuous as to assume that the best of our current decade has already emerged, do you? Well, I wouldn't be. We have three years left to pray for greatness. And pray hard we'd better, because never again are we likely to see a band sustain the kind of multialbum, multidecade career that the previously mentioned have enjoyed. It's an Internet-driven world now, where technology feeds our need for new and now — as in, right-this-moment now.

That's not to say that someone somewhere won't come crashing through our speakers with a previously unidentifiable noise that makes us shut up and say "Ahhh ..." — just don't count on said future music hero (or heroes) to hold our collective attention for long. Noting this, and though none of them are as musically altering as Nirvana or Elvis, there are some contenders — the Killers, Arctic Monkeys, Hope of the States, Bright Eyes, Bloc Party — and there is one leader: Coldplay. It's somehow painful to say that, though, since Coldplay just doesn't seem tough enough nor extraordinary enough. But the fact of the matter is that this era hasn't seen any band step up as consistently and successfully. But, then again, what's so tough about "Love Me Do"?



## Underrated Albums of the 1980s

**Ah, the 1980s: the cool era of leg warmers, saturated colors, and big hair. Despite its reputation for pop-culture ephemera, the decade of decadence offered us rich musical surprises that extended beyond MTV glitz and party-hearty excess. Here are a few nuggets worth chasing down.**  
**By Bryan Reesman**

### Tori Amos, *Y Kant Tori Read* (1988)

Amos's long-lost debut is a footnote in her fantastic career — it hit the bargain bins really fast — but it presents her in a more traditional (and fun) pop setting, featuring the spunky "Pirates"; funky pop-rock "The Big Picture"; and delicate, piano-driven "Etienne Trilogy." Members of Cheap Trick and Guns N' Roses also surface. The album is out of print, but check eBay and secondhand stores.

### Black Sabbath, *The Eternal Idol* (1987)

It's a decidedly unpopular opinion, but Sabbath worked best when neither Ozzy Osbourne nor Ronnie James Dio was fronting the band. With a revamped lineup spotlighting founding guitarist Tony Iommi as well as the powerful pipes of new vocalist Tony Martin, this gripping gothic-metal album is ripe with snarling riffs and a deliciously dark atmosphere. And it's

as catchy as anything Sabbath's ever done.

**Harold Budd, *Lovely Thunder* (1986)**

A peer to Brian Eno, Budd, with his seductive slow-motion swirl of piano, keyboards, and — on the eerie 20-minute epic "Gypsy Violin" — a stirring synth violin slicing through the ether, is a master of ambient minimalism. Turn off the lights, don your headphones, and intoxicate yourself with *Lovely Thunder's* surreal, otherworldly power.

**Kate Bush, *The Sensual World* (1989)**

This sensuous, delicate singer who paved the way for Tori Amos has always created magical, mystical music that bears her own distinct stamp. She reached her peak with this highly personal, musically eclectic, and groove-oriented pop album, which integrates Irish instrumentation and Bulgarian singing and includes the stirring "Love and Anger."

**Cocteau Twins, *Blue Bell Knoll* (1988)**

Before it made waves in the early 1990s, the Scottish trio gave us this heavenly album, in which dreamy guitars and synths, accompanied by a gently propulsive rhythm section, embrace the exquisite, if nonsensical, vox of Elizabeth Fraser. A sweet, syrupy sonic cocktail that's endlessly addicting, this is pop music made for the Garden of Eden.

**Marillion, *Misplaced Childhood* (1985)**

A stunning, emotionally rich masterpiece of progressive music, this interconnected, genre-crossing album, espousing vintage Pink Floyd and Genesis influences, tells the compelling story of a man who's coping with relationship and identity woes and with his struggle to redefine himself and renew his life.

**Sarah McLachlan, *Touch* (1989)**

If you're longing for the days of Solace and Fumbling Towards Ecstasy, when moody chanteuse McLachlan had more fire, grab her solid debut, *Touch*. There's still plenty of poetic soul-searching going on, but the songs are folkier and perkier than her recent work and are dominated by her angelic singing, piano, strings, and acoustic guitar.

**Roxy Music, *Avalon* (1982)**

Simply put, this is the most romantic pop album of all time. Bryan Ferry's elegant crooning glides over gorgeous, shimmering pop landscapes, where the open spaces are as important as the notes themselves. Produced by former Roxy Music member and U2 sound sculptor Brian Eno, *Avalon* blends melancholia and romanticism into luscious, timeless tunes.

**Kevin Raub** is a Los Angeles-based travel and entertainment journalist. His work has appeared in *Travel + Leisure*, *Town & Country Travel*, and *Rolling Stone*, among other publications. He was still in hiding at press time.

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