

Developing wider listening: pop music of the 1980s, part two

Simon Rushby

Introduction

The pop scene in the 1980s was a hugely diverse, technology-driven hotbed of high fashion, music videos and ultra-fast stylistic changes. In part one of this resource ([Music Teacher](#), February 2023) we explored these changing styles through activities based on the music of Madonna, Paul Simon, Falco and Bronski Beat. We also looked at the rise of the **music video** and its cable platform, **MTV**, and explored the huge genre of electronic **synth pop** that dominated the decade.

This month, we'll continue our look at the 1980s with more lesson ideas based on other styles from the time, including some impressive reinventions from acts who had been prominent for some time and who needed to react to changing tastes. We'll also find out how new bands reacted to the **punk** styles of the late 1970s and how **rap** and **dance music** got a strong hold on the charts in the final years of the decade.

As ever, our aim with these *developing wider listening* resources is to help students expand their understanding of musical style through increasing their listening experience, so that they can place the music they study and play in context, and enjoy making and hearing music with understanding and confidence.

Simon Rushby is a freelance musician, writer and education consultant, and was a director of music and senior leader in secondary schools for more than 25 years. He is author of a number of books and resources for music teachers and students, an ABRSM examiner, a composer and a performer.



Pop stars reinvent themselves

Several artists who had been members of 1960s or 1970s pop groups and bands forged very successful careers as solo artists in the 1980s.

Lionel Richie (the Commodores) and Diana Ross (the Supremes) released 'Endless Love' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Bww07ctG10), a duet linked to a film of the same name that hit the top spot in 1981, and both had numerous top ten singles and albums in the ensuing years.

John Lennon was tragically murdered in December 1980, but his singles 'Imagine' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugrAo8wEPil) and 'Woman' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhfWiU8wGCc) topped the charts the following year. Fellow Beatle Paul McCartney teamed up with both Michael Jackson and Stevie Wonder and had further hits as a solo artist (www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXAlfh6QKQs).

Cher and Tina Turner, who had both been part of duos in the 1960s and 1970s, forged successful solo careers, and Genesis drummer and vocalist Phil Collins developed a highly successful solo act alongside his work with the band. Major 1970s artists like David Bowie, Billy Joel, Elton John, Queen and Bruce Springsteen made a successful transition into the 1980s by ensuring that their sound remained fresh and relevant.



Phil Collins in 1981

Comparison activity: moving with the times

Here's a selection of music by the artists mentioned above. For each artist, I've suggested an older song for students to compare with one of their 1980s hits, so that they can discuss how the artists have adapted or changed their styles to keep themselves popular in the new decade.

Pick one or two artists from the list below and get students to consider these and other questions as they listen:

- ▶ What features from other 1980s music you've heard can you hear in these artists' 1980s songs?
- ▶ How have these artists changed their musical style? Consider **instrumentation** (including use of modern sounds), **lyrics**, **melody**, **harmony**, and **rhythm**.
- ▶ How have these artists changed their visual image and/or performing style?

Diana Ross:

'Ain't No Mountain High Enough' (1970): www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEgNPwEeqVA

'Upside Down' (1980): www.youtube.com/watch?v=F1ehMxQdCtQ

The Commodores/Lionel Richie:

'Brick House' (1977): www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5EmnQp3V48

'All Night Long' (1983): www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqAvFx3NxUM

Sonny and Cher/Cher

'I Got You Babe' (1965): www.youtube.com/watch?v=BERd61bDY7k

'If I Could Turn Back Time' (1989): www.youtube.com/watch?v=oD46Z-Xsf94

Genesis/Phil Collins:

'Follow You, Follow Me' (1978): www.youtube.com/watch?v=DyDRXbP1MaY

'In the Air Tonight' (1981): www.youtube.com/watch?v=YkADjoTPrJA

Ike and Tina Turner/Tina Turner:

'River Deep, Mountain High' (1966): www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9Lehkou2Do

'What's Love Got To Do With It?' (1984): www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGpFcHTxjZs

Billy Joel:

'Just The Way You Are' (1977): www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkuJJsApAcC

'Uptown Girl' (1983): www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCuMWrfXG4E

Elton John:

'Tiny Dancer' (1971): www.youtube.com/watch?v=UroApoVbKno

'I'm Still Standing' (1983): www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHWVBirQD2s

Queen:

'Bohemian Rhapsody' (1975): www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJ9rUzIMcZQ

'Radio Ga Ga' (1984): www.youtube.com/watch?v=azdwsXLmrHE

David Bowie:

'Starman' (1972): www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOKWF3IHuol

'Let's Dance' (1983): www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbD_kBJc_gI

Listening exercise: ‘Let’s Dance’

This was the title track of David Bowie’s most successful album. In a move to become more acceptable to mainstream pop audiences, Bowie recruited Nile Rodgers to produce the album, hoping that the producer of songs like ‘Le Freak’ and ‘We are Family’ would bring a little **disco** magic to the songs. The idea worked, and the success of the album, its singles and the subsequent tour made Bowie an even greater star.

Listen to ‘Let’s Dance’ (www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbD_kBJc_gl) from the beginning to 1:36 and answer the questions below.

- 1 Describe the opening four bars of the song (0:00–0:10), making at least **three** points. You could mention use of instruments, voices, harmony or rhythm.
- 2 The main **bass riff** of the song begins in the fifth bar, at 0:10. Which of the following patterns does the bass part play?



- 3 Each line of the verse begins with the **two-note phrase** ‘Let’s dance’ (or ‘Let’s sway’). What is the **melodic interval** between these two notes?
- 4 Compare the rhythm of the instruments and backing vocals to that of Bowie’s vocal line in the verse.
- 5 At 1:01 there is a **bridge**. How does the **tonality** change at this point?
- 6 At 1:24 we hear the words ‘If you should fall into my arms, and tremble like a flower’. Describe the music played by the instruments and backing vocals during this section.

Suggested answers/guidance for teachers:

- 1 The opening is a **dominant 7th chord** built up note by note by vocalised ‘Ah’ sounds, in the style of rock ‘n’ roll songs like the Beatles’ ‘Twist and Shout’ (<https://youtu.be/2RicaUqd9Hg?t=82>). Drums play repeated **quavers**, along with the bass.
- 2 B
- 3 Perfect 5th (descending)
- 4 The instrumental and vocal ‘backing’ is highly precise and rhythmic, with a strong **pulse** and **backbeat**, and tight **syncopations**. By comparison, Bowie’s lead vocal is looser and follows **speech rhythms**.
- 5 It moves from **minor** to **major**.
- 6 It is exactly the same as the opening four bars of the song.

Kings and queens of pop

The rise of MTV, covered in [part one](#) of this resource, ensured that there was a stronger focus on visual image. On the back of this, the 1980s became the decade of the pop superstar, with certain artists experiencing a level of renown not seen since Elvis or the Beatles. These **icons** of pop were hugely influential, not just on musical style but also on fashion and dance, filling their videos and live shows with visual effects, dancers, and high production ideals more suited to movies or musical theatre.

These artists were supremely multi-talented as singers, songwriters, dancers and performers, and set the standard by which even music today is often measured. They rode on the back of an increasing public desire to see inside 'celebrity world', fuelled by TV and magazines like *Hello* and *OK*, and their music benefited from more hi-tech ways to record and listen to music, for example with the quality of the **compact disc** and the portability of cassettes and the **Walkman**. It also helped that they often lived headline-grabbing lifestyles.

One of these icons, Madonna, was the subject of a comparison activity in part one. Two other artists of this calibre are discussed in a little more detail below.

Michael Jackson



Michael Jackson in 1985

Few artists had a bigger influence on pop than Michael Jackson, the child star who fronted his brothers' band in the 1970s and reached astronomical heights of fame in the 1980s. His three albums of this decade – *Off the Wall* (1979), *Thriller* (1982) and *Bad* (1987) – and his associated live shows and videos redefined the pop genre as well as addressing racial and social inequalities and coining new artistic ways of presenting songs, helped by Jackson's talent as a dancer as well as a singer.

Jackson continued his stellar career through the 1990s and, after some time away from the spotlight, was preparing for a comeback tour at the time of his tragic death at the age of just 50 in 2009. He was also never far away from controversy and frequently dominated the tabloid newspapers.

These three songs, one from each of the albums mentioned above, and their accompanying videos give students an insight into how Jackson's musical and visual style changed through the 1980s.

'Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough' (1979): www.youtube.com/watch?v=yURRmWtbTbo

'Billie Jean' (1983): www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zi_XLOBDo_Y

'Smooth Criminal' (1987): www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_D3Vffhvs4

Whitney Houston



Whitney Houston in 1991

With more than 200 million records sold, few artists come close to the success of Whitney Houston, daughter of gospel singer Cissy Houston and cousin of legendary artist Dionne Warwick. Houston was known for her powerful, **gospel**-influenced voice, and her first two albums are among the top-selling albums of all time. She also appeared in a number of films, most famously opposite Kevin Costner in *The Bodyguard* (1992). Houston's later career was affected by drug and alcohol abuse, and she tragically died in 2012, at the age of 48.

Houston's immense vocal talent in many ways defined the concept of the **power ballad**. Students could compare her vocal delivery with any of the other examples listed below, all by artists who have stated that they were influenced by Houston.

Whitney Houston:

'Saving All My Love for You' (1985): www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewxmv2tyeRs

'I Will Always Love You' (1992): www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JWtaaS7LdU

Mariah Carey:

'Hero' (1993): www.youtube.com/watch?v=olA3ZvCkRkQ

Celine Dion:

'My Heart Will Go On' (1997): www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2RnxZnubCM

Jennifer Hudson:

'Spotlight' (2008): www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9qtRcHJV18

Lady Gaga:

'Always Remember Us This Way' (2018): www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vheNbQ!syU

Other pop royals

The British singer **George Michael** was propelled to fame in 1982 as one half of the band Wham! before embarking on a hugely successful solo career that lasted until his untimely death on Christmas Day 2016. He was a talented singer, songwriter and instrumentalist. **Paula Abdul** came to prominence as a singer in the late 1980s after a successful dance career. Her first album, *Forever Your Girl* (1988), was one of the most successful debut albums of all time, yielding four number one singles, and she became one of the original judges on *American Idol*. **Prince** was not only a unique artist with a powerful image but a hugely talented guitarist, producer and writer, winning an Oscar for his 1984 song 'Purple Rain' and electrifying audiences with his shows. He also died tragically young in 2016.

Here's a selection of key songs by each of these artists:

George Michael:

'Careless Whisper' (1984): www.youtube.com/watch?v=izGwDsrQ1eQ

'Faith' (1987): www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Cs3PvmmvoE

Paula Abdul:

'Straight Up' (1988): www.youtube.com/watch?v=El1kgCqD7Xk

'Opposites Attract' (1989): www.youtube.com/watch?v=xweiQukBM_k

Prince:

'1999' (1982): www.youtube.com/watch?v=rblt2EtFfC4

'Purple Rain' (1984): www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmo3wqLY3Nc

Listening activity: juxtaposition of styles

At this point, with quite a lot of 1980s music now covered, a useful activity for students would be to work together in small groups to identify some of the key features of selected songs by the artists we've met so far. They could present their findings in several ways, but perhaps underpinning the work could be the following questions:

- ▶ What examples of influences from earlier pop styles (e.g., **rock 'n' roll**, **Motown**, **soul**, **disco**) can be heard in your selected 1980s songs?
 - ▶ Students might, for example, mention the soulful saxophone in 'Careless Whisper', the rock-style guitar solo in 'Purple Rain', the **funk**-influenced rhythms of 'Smooth Criminal', the rock 'n' roll style of 'Faith', the Latin sounds of 'All Night Long' or the 1960s doo-wop style of 'Uptown Girl'.
- ▶ What aspects of your selected 1980s songs could be considered typical of the decade?
 - ▶ Examples of this could include the use of keyboard riffs in '1999', the Yamaha DX7 electric piano in 'Saving All My Love for You', or the vast number of ballads written at the time.
- ▶ What can you hear in your selected 1980s songs that could be seen as forward-looking, perhaps laying foundations for music of subsequent years?
 - ▶ Paula Abdul's inclusion of **rapping** in 'Opposites Attract' or the reliance on **studio effects** in 'Radio Ga Ga' and 'In the Air Tonight' could be examples of this.

New Wave

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, as dance music (initially in the form of disco) and club culture took hold on both sides of the Atlantic, an ‘artier’ style of music emerged, influenced by the success of punk rock. The term **New Wave** was coined to describe a wide range of artists and bands that were popular in the first half of the 1980s, whose sound combined pop, synth pop, punk rock and a revival of **ska**, a pre-reggae form of music initially popular in the 1960s.

Listening activity: characteristics of New Wave

Get your students to watch these two videos of songs by bands considered part of the New Wave style. As they watch, they can discuss and note down what they consider to be the key characteristics – both musical and visual – and think about older styles that have influenced these bands. One is American, and one British.

Talking Heads ‘Once in a Lifetime’ (1980): www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGofH9RDEA

ABC ‘Poison Arrow’(1982): www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7oyJwgQtzo

New Wave wasn’t so much a genre as an umbrella term for a lot of the pop music around the late 1970s and early 1980s that wasn’t disco or rock. It began as an underground movement, not particularly favoured by radio stations, and American bands like Talking Heads and Blondie, strongly influenced by punk, were at the forefront. Their influence was telling in the early 1980s on a wide range of British bands, who combined the arty image of Talking Heads with synth pop and, in many cases, threw in African and Caribbean influences. Leading artists in Britain included Duran Duran, The Police (who incorporated ska and reggae into their music), ABC, Spandau Ballet and Adam and the Ants (who incorporated African beats).

Here are a few examples of New Wave songs from the turn of the decade.

- ▶ Adam and the Ants ‘Stand and Deliver’ (1981): www.youtube.com/watch?v=toxhb6m4vKo. Adam and the Ants’ use of two drummers highlighted their interest in African-style beats, along with catchy melodies, chants and simple chord patterns played by distorted rock-style guitar sounds. Their costumes combined Native-American and pirate themes, and their image became known as **New Romantic** – flamboyant, eccentric, punk-like and with use of stage make-up, influenced by 1970s artists like David Bowie.
- ▶ The Police ‘Walking on the Moon’ (1979): www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPwMdZOIPo8. The three accomplished musicians who made up the Police – bassist/singer Sting, guitarist Andy Summers and drummer Stewart Copeland – had a very unusual, fresh sound influenced by reggae, ska, Latin, jazz, punk and rock. Their approach to playing their instruments was also fresh and they quickly became known for their signature sound.
- ▶ Blondie ‘Heart of Glass’ (1979): www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGU_4-5RaxU. American New Wave pioneers Blondie combined dance styles – particularly disco – with punk rock and catchy melodies.

Listening exercise: ‘Save a Prayer’

Like the Police, British band Duran Duran were highly accomplished musicians who combined a variety of popular styles of the time into their own, highly identifiable sound. Coupled with their New Romantic image and highly polished visual style, the Birmingham band enjoyed huge success throughout the decade. Singer Simon Le Bon’s vocal style was influenced by New Wave artists, keyboardist Nick Rhodes embraced ultra-modern technology to shape the band’s sound, and guitarist Andy Taylor, bassist John Taylor and drummer Roger Taylor (none of whom were related!) were all technically gifted musicians.

Listen to the Duran Duran song ‘Save a Prayer’ (taken from their hugely successful 1982 album ‘Rio’) (www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Uxc9eFcZyM) from the beginning to 1:34 and tick the appropriate boxes below to indicate what you hear.

	0:00-0:09	0:09-0:26	0:26-0:43	0:44-1:00	1:01-1:17	1:17-1:34
	Introduction		Verse		Chorus	Link
Lead vocal						
Backing vocals						
Syncopated bass						
Arpeggiated keyboard riff						
Keyboard pipe sound						
Keyboard string sound						
Minor key						
Major key						
Four-chord progression						
Ornamented melody						

Rock

Pop's obsession with image in the 1980s played beautifully into the hands of the heavy rock bands who had enjoyed such success in the 1970s. Rock's highly theatrical style fitted perfectly into the MTV decade, and many new bands, fuelled by a desire to react against keyboard-driven pop and dance styles, rose to prominence in this decade.

Acts such as Bon Jovi, Aerosmith, Def Leppard and Guns N' Roses were known as **hair metal** bands and had mainstream chart hits with catchy party-rock songs and power ballads. Band members had big hair and wore makeup and spandex clothing. They usually had a highly flamboyant lead singer and enjoyed party lifestyles.

Analysis exercise: hair metal

Here are three sample songs from the 1980s hair metal genre:

Bon Jovi 'Living on a Prayer' (1986): www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDK9Qqlzhwk

Def Leppard: 'Photograph' (1983): www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4dHr8evt6k

Guns N' Roses: 'Sweet Child o' Mine' (1987): www.youtube.com/watch?v=1w7OgIMMRc4

Ask students to discuss the key musical features of these songs, focusing on:

- ▶ use of instruments – particularly voices and guitars.
- ▶ use of guitar riffs.
- ▶ features of melody and harmony (particularly chord progressions).
- ▶ use of repetition.

Read more about rock musicians from the 1960s and 1970s in the [Rock classics](#) resource, *Music Teacher*, March 2020.

Famine

In previous resources, we've explored how world events shaped music, resulting in songs being written about – for example – the Vietnam War. Pop artists had long been using their status as a platform to comment on political and social issues, but something that had never been seen before in pop happened in 1984.

Along with much of the UK, Bob Geldof, lead singer of pop-punk band the Boomtown Rats, was upset by reports on BBC News from Ethiopia documenting the devastating famine that occurred there in 1983 and 1984. He decided to use his contacts to raise money, and with Ultravox band member Midge Ure he wrote a song and persuaded many popular British artists of the time to sing on it.

The result, Band Aid's 'Do They Know It's Christmas?' was Christmas number one in 1984, becoming the fastest-selling single of all time in the UK. Spurred on by this success, Geldof organised a concert held simultaneously in London and Philadelphia in the summer of 1985, called Live Aid, and a similar large group of American artists released a song called 'We are the World', written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie.

Students can watch the two videos below and play 'name the artist!' I've also included part of Queen's legendary performance at Live Aid, which students may well have seen documented in the film *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

Band Aid 'Do They Know It's Christmas?' (1984): www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3fSknbR7Y4

USA for Africa 'We are the World' (1985): www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AjkUyXorVw

Queen at Live Aid (1985): www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbvyNnw8Qjg

Hip hop



LL Cool J performing in 2008

We made passing reference in the [resource](#) on 1970s pop to the increase in popularity of spoken-word rhythmic music and the pioneering work of artists like Kurtis Blow and the Sugarhill Gang, who sampled hits from dance music to underpin their rapping. **Hip hop** (the name was first heard in mainstream music in the lyrics of Sugarhill Gang's 1979 hit 'Rapper's Delight') had developed in **block parties**, which were popular among New York's young African American community in areas such as the Bronx. Generally, **DJs** would mix beats from popular dance songs using two turntables and techniques such as **scratching**, **MCs** would rap over these beats, and people would hold **breakdancing** contests.

It took a while for hip hop to break out of these relatively underprivileged districts into the music mainstream, but in the 1980s the genre really began to take off, especially as black artists began to get more coverage on channels like MTV. Artists such as Run DMC and LL Cool J commercialised the hip hop genre, incorporating key elements such as **sampling**, **beatboxing** and **studio effects** to underpin their rapping. By the end of the decade, MTV had dedicated programmes for hip hop, and the genre was enjoying worldwide notoriety, with Run DMC famously combining with rock legends Aerosmith in a reworking of the latter's song 'Walk This Way'.

Grandmaster Melle Mel 'White Lines (Don't Do It)' (1983):

www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwRXI-y6M9o

Run DMC featuring Aerosmith 'Walk This Way' (1986): www.youtube.com/watch?v=4B_UYYPb-Gk

Salt-N-Pepa 'Push It' (1986): www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCadcBR95oU

LL Cool J 'Going Back To Cali' (1988): www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdizL4on-Rc

Playing and composing ideas: ‘Push It’

The bass and melody riffs in Salt-N-Pepa’s hit ‘Push It’, both played on synths, are easy to pick up. Can your students work out the significance of the square brackets on the excerpts below?



Using these or similar riffs, students can build percussive tracks in the style of ‘Push It’ to create their own 1980s hip-hop track.

The dance craze

Finally, a look at the 1980s would not be complete without mentioning the developing popularity of electronic dance music, which was to take the world by storm in the 1990s. The increasing use of electronic instruments in pop, supported by fast-moving developments in synthesisers and the rise of MIDI (see part one of this resource) brought computers and instruments together in a way that changed dance music for ever.

Hip hop played a big part in 1980s club culture, and DJs like Grandmaster Flash were trailblazers in their ability to mix together hits of the day for clubbers to dance to – you can hear a great example of this from 1981 here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXNzMVLqIHg

Another US hip-hop artist, Afrika Bambaataa, used pioneering Roland drum and bass synths machines (the TR-808 and TB-303) on tracks like 1982’s ‘Planet Rock’ (www.youtube.com/watch?v=9J3lwZjHenA) and certain clubs in the US started to ‘cultivate’ DJs who played certain styles of music using this technology. In New York, DJs such as Frankie Knuckles and Larry Levan had a big impact in the development of **house music**, named after the Warehouse club in New York, where they worked, and in Detroit clubs another style, known as **techno**, was becoming popular. UK clubs like Manchester’s Hacienda and party holiday destinations like the Spanish island of Ibiza contributed hugely to the development of these genres in the 1980s. We’ll meet them in more detail in our resource on the 1990s.