

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

Simon Rushby

Introduction

By the end of the 1970s, pop music was a vastly commercial business, and its exponents often enjoyed immense riches and luxurious lifestyles, paid for by healthy record sales, airplay on radio or TV, and concerts held in giant venues.

However, due to various factors, pop music found itself at a kind of stylistic crossroads in the 1980s. In this resource, we'll discover how the innovative and the conservative sat side by side; how new artists set trends not only in their music but also in their styles and images, reflecting the changing fashions of the day; and also how pop music never forgot its roots, but had no fear of taking new directions, fuelled by ultra-fast changes and developments in technology.

This was the decade of MTV, of computer music, of extraordinary technological developments in the studio, and of the rise of new dance styles that transformed the club scene on both sides of the Atlantic. In fact, there was so much diversity that we're going to divide this resource into two parts.

As with all our 'developing wider listening' resources, the aim is to help students expand their listening experience and understanding of musical styles, so that they can place the music they study and play in context, and create or listen to music with understanding and confidence.

Musical style in the 1980s

Let's start with some comparison exercises to help students understand more about the fast-moving changes in 1980s pop.

The Queen of Pop



Madonna's True Blue album of 1986

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First, it would be good to see how the changing styles in 1980s pop music affected the output of one of the most significant artists from the decade. Madonna's career started in the early 1980s, and by the end of the decade, she was one of the leading pop stars of the age. To date, she has sold more records than any other female artist, and she's the most successful artist in the history of the Billboard Hot 100 chart. She is still recording and touring today, 40 years after her debut album.

'Like A Virgin' was Madonna's first number one single, and the song that propelled her to worldwide fame. She performed it at the first ever MTV Video Music Awards in 1984 and, together with its iconic video, it received universal praise from critics. The song was produced by music legend Nile Rodgers, a founder member of the band Chic who has been responsible for writing and producing numerous hits for artists as diverse as Diana Ross, Sister Sledge, David Bowie and Duran Duran.

Listening exercise: 'Like A Virgin'

Listen to the song from the beginning to 2:23 here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_rX_WL100.

Then answer the following questions:

- 1 The bassline and chord parts in the introduction are all played by the same kind of electronic instrument. What is it called?
- 2 Which of the following rhythms best fits the **chord part** heard in the introduction?

A

B

C

D

- 3 How many *different* chords are used in the verse, from the words 'I made it through the wilderness' to 'I was sad and blue'?
One two three four
- 4 Immediately after this verse, there's a short section starting with the words 'But you made me feel'. Describe **two** ways in which this section, called a **pre-chorus**, differs from the verse.
- 5 In the **chorus**, which starts with the words 'Like a virgin', what similarities can you hear with the verse?
- 6 Another verse, pre-chorus and chorus follow. Apart from the lyrics, can you hear any differences between these and the previous part of the song?
- 7 After the second chorus there is a new section, called a **bridge**. Describe how this music differs in terms of **melody** and how the **instruments** are used.

Guide answers for teachers:

- 1 Synthesizer ('keyboard' is usually accepted in exams)
- 2 D
- 3 Two
- 4 There are more/new chords; chords are **pushed** or **syncopated**, melodic phrases are shorter and more repetitive, minor chords are used, the bassline of the introduction and verse is not used.
- 5 Same chords, chord rhythm and bassline.
- 6 There's a repeating countermelody from a new synth part in the verse, Madonna sings 'hey' in a higher pitch in the chorus.
- 7 More sustained chord parts, **vocalised** instead of lyrics, repetitive melodic phrase, minor tonality, new chords, **pizzicato**-like instrumental part.

By 1989, Madonna had developed her persona and become a pop icon, and she was writing her own songs, retaining a large amount of control over her 'brand' and everything she was associated with. Feeling that she needed to address stronger, more adult issues, she released the single 'Like a Prayer' in this year, turning her attention to issues of racism and sexism as well as aspects of religious iconography. The song and video, which dealt with the topic of a woman devoting her life to a spiritual being, caused huge controversy and was boycotted by many groups. It was criticised by the Vatican and resulted in Madonna losing a lucrative deal with Pepsi.

You may prefer not to show the video – at any rate watch it first before showing it to students – so I provide an audio-only version of the song below, and the questions that follow relate entirely to the music rather than the lyrics or the associated context.

Comparison activity: 'Like a Prayer'

Ask students to compare (perhaps through discussion) the music of this entire song (www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_rk8yKDGI) with 'Like a Virgin', focusing on the following areas:

- 1 Madonna's singing style.
- 2 The structure of the song – particularly its changing tempo/rhythmic features.
- 3 The instrumentation.
- 4 The styles/genres of music that it is influenced by.

Guide answer for teachers:

'Like a Prayer' represents a significant advance in Madonna's style and scope. Her singing is more dramatic and emotive, and the structure of the song is more organic, taking influences from pop, rhythm & blues and gospel. It also moves from reflective minor modes to major ones, sounding more like 'Like a Virgin' in its later stages where synths play a bigger role. It is particularly sophisticated in the way that it combines the diverse styles of its first half into a pop/gospel classic – complete with choir – in the second. Unsurprisingly, 'Like a Prayer' is a favourite at Madonna concerts and is always performed with a colourful, highly theatrical presentation.

Different styles from 1986

To find out more about the diversity of styles in this decade, and particularly the contrast between authentic and modern, here are two short listening exercises and a practical activity based on two major chart hits from 1986.



Paul Simon in 2011

American singer-songwriter Paul Simon visited South Africa in 1985 to follow up his burgeoning interest in music from that country, and he spent two weeks in Johannesburg jamming and recording with local musicians. The result, released the following year, was his biggest-selling album of his career, *Graceland*.

'You Can Call Me Al' was the first single released from *Graceland*, and it was Simon's biggest UK hit. The questions below are based on this live performance of the song (www.youtube.com/watch?v=PS-sE9xCb-g), from a concert in Hyde Park, London, in 2012, where the 71-year-old Paul Simon and his talented band – which included some of the musicians from the *Graceland* album – put on quite a show.

Watch the entire song and discuss answers to the following questions, which are all to do with the **fusion** of South African music with Western pop music.

- 1 Which instruments take up the opening guitar **riff** later in the song? Which genre of music is the use of these instruments influenced by, do you think?
- 2 Focus on the use of drums, percussion and bass guitar in this song. What African influences can you hear in the music they play? How do their parts differ from what drums and bass 'normally' do in pop music? Students might be interested to research the bass solo and find out how it was developed – it's an interesting story!
- 3 What unusual instrument plays a solo in the middle of the song?
- 4 Paul Simon's singing style is quite unusual for pop music. Describe his approach to lyrics and phrasing, as best you can. What do you think the lyrics are about?

See *Music Teacher*, June 2021, for a full resource devoted to [Paul Simon's album *Graceland*](#).

Some teacher guidance to the above questions:

- 1 The **horn riffs** (trumpets, trombones and saxophones) come straight from soul music and R&B.
- 2 The drum patterns tend to follow a **four on the floor** steady beat, from kick drum, but lack the **backbeat** snare often heard in pop and rock. Instead, there are lots of **tom fills** that **syncopate** across the beat, and a steady **off-beat hi-hat**. At one point in the song, the percussionist has a solo **break**, using **timbales**. The bass is very melodic and plays repeating riffs based on **triads**, often off the beat. There are a lot of **slap** embellishments, and the iconic solo is one of these, originally developed in the studio by playing a short phrase and then reversing the tape to make a mirror image of it.
- 3 This is a **tin whistle**. It's normally associated with **Celtic** music, but since the 1950s a South African genre called **kwela** has featured it, locally called a **jive flute**. The South African genre of **mbaqanga** developed from kwela and it was this style of music that first interested Paul Simon.
- 4 Simon wrote the words in deliberately loose rhythm, telling a story with colourful language very much in the style of **speak-singing** – a technique that goes back hundreds of years and is often associated with folk ballads. The carefully crafted lines represent a self-obsessed person who suddenly becomes aware of his surroundings, and how much of a stranger he is to them. In many ways, they were reflective of Simon's feelings when he was in South Africa – given the political situation he attracted a lot of criticism, but the trip did him a lot of good at a time when he was experiencing many personal problems.

Austrian musician Johann Hölzel, better known by his stage name Falco, released the single 'Rock Me Amadeus' in late 1985 from his album *Falco 3*. It became the first German-language song to hit number 1 in both the US and UK charts in 1986, propelling the already nationally popular Austrian to international stardom. It is a song about Mozart, as students might guess, and the accompanying video, set in Vienna, features Falco appearing as himself and as Mozart, presented as a rock star in both 18th- and 20th-century contexts. Students can watch the whole video here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVikZ8Oe_XA

- 1 The song combines spoken verses in German with a sung chorus, and like 'You Can Call Me Al' it is **hook**-based. What other similarities does it have, in terms of musical features, with Paul Simon's track? How many different hooks can you hear?
- 2 All the instruments in 'Rock Me Amadeus' are electronic. Listen and describe, as best you can, the music played by the main parts:
 - ▶ percussion
 - ▶ bassline
 - ▶ chords
 - ▶ melody
- 3 Why do you think this song was so popular around the world? In what ways is it likely to have foreshadowed dance music that came after it?

Teacher guidance:

Despite the different style, there are a number of similarities with the Paul Simon track. The hooks are melodic, one of them instrumental and heard before any vocals. The second is the 'Amadeus, Amadeus' of the chorus, which is combined with the instrumental hook heard earlier. Percussion parts are as much provided by chord and bassline instruments as they are by electronic drum sounds. The song is texturally complex but harmonically simple, based on a repetitive chord sequence, and the melodic hook is based on just the first five notes of the minor scale.

A number of features would have contributed to this song's popularity in 1986. It's catchy, simple but also fresh sounding, with rapped verses reminiscent of some of the early hip-hop songs coming out of America. Falco's singing and rapping style is also original and the song is rhythmically exciting – it almost doesn't matter that the lyrics may not be understood by English-speaking listeners as they are so integral to the percussive nature of the track. Finally, the electronic timbres would have sounded new and exciting to listeners in the 1980s – Falco was using state-of-the-art technology to create the song.

Performing and composing ideas based on 'Rock Me Amadeus'

This song came out when **synth-pop** – pop music created entirely on synthesisers – was at its peak, and there's a section on this genre later in this part of the resource. Synth-pop songs are very simple in design, their appeal being the juxtaposition of repetitive hooks, riffs and chord patterns with a complex, modern-sounding approach to timbre and texture.

Synth-pop artists spent lots of time **programming** and **designing** sounds and beats, using new technology such as **waveform editing** and **arpeggiation** (where sounds are changed automatically according to a set of pre-programmed instructions).

'Rock Me Amadeus' has two important musical patterns:

1 A synth hook based on a simple descending pattern, based on the first five notes of the B flat minor scale (the song's **tonic** key). Can your students work this hook out and play it themselves?

2 A simple four-bar chord pattern:

Bbm | Gb | Ebm – Abm | Bbm

(This might be easier played as Bm | G | Em – A | Bm).

This **modal** pattern underpins the repeating hook, and also the chorus of the song.

Working in pairs, students can learn to play this hook over the chord pattern and come up with their own using 80s-sounding timbres on keyboards or using a DaW. Most software – like Garage Band, for example – has a selection of 'analogue' and 'digital' synth sounds that are perfect for this. Check out the textbox below for more information about the synthesizer in the 1980s.

Out of interest, you might like to show students this video of Falco performing the song live (www.youtube.com/watch?v=5PjsE2sEkZg), since it shows how effective such a simple hook-based song can be in a concert performance.

Video promoted the pop star



The rise of MTV in the 1980s ensured that visual image was one of the most important considerations if you wanted to be a pop star. This undoubtedly had an effect on the kind of music made in the decade. Everything was overstated and colourful – particularly the idea of affluence and wealth, as seen in many of the videos of the time.

MTV (short for Music Television) was one of the flagship channels of Cable TV, which was effectively the first type of premium TV service for which users paid a subscription. Launched in 1981, the channel exclusively showed music videos, and as its popularity increased it became crucial for artists to create inventive, almost movie-like videos to accompany their songs, sometimes employing big-name directors.

Appropriately, the first video shown on MTV was the song ‘Video Killed the Radio Star’ by UK group the Buggles (www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8r-tXRLazs). The brainchild of UK singer/bass player Trevor Horn and keyboardist Geoff Downes, who had both been members of the prog rock band Yes, the Buggles had a hit with the song in 1979 and the video features a young Hans Zimmer (the movie composer) – also on keyboards – at the end. Watch the video, and discuss why MTV chose it as their launch song.

Here are some further examples of artists who really embraced the video as a vehicle to promote their song on MTV:

- ▶ Duran Duran: ‘Rio’ (1982): www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTizYn3-QNo
- ▶ Michael Jackson: ‘Thriller’ (1984): www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOnqjkJTMaA
- ▶ A-ha: ‘Take On Me’ (1985): www.youtube.com/watch?v=djV11Xbc914. Directed by Steve Barron, this very cleverly constructed video won numerous awards at MTV’s VMAs in 1986. In 2020 it became only the fifth music video from the 20th century to reach one billion YouTube views.
- ▶ Peter Gabriel: ‘Sledgehammer’ (1986): www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJWJEox7T4Q. One of the animation studios behind this video – Aardman – went on to create the ‘Wallace and Gromit’ series and much more.

Synth pop

Pop and dance music created entirely by synthesizers became hugely popular in the 1980s, thanks in no small part to the trailblazing work by German synth band Kraftwerk, who we met in the [resource on 1970s music](#). As the synthesizer became more versatile and affordable, artists and bands began to exploit it as an instrument in its own right, able to recreate sounds that went some way to replace acoustic instruments but also to generate completely new timbres. Synthesizers could replace drummers and percussionists, orchestral players and acoustic pianos, and even imitated guitars and provided basslines. As a result, many bands consisting entirely of keyboard players became popular in this decade.

The synthesizer

Electronic engineers had been creating ‘instruments’ that could generate sounds – typically by taking waveforms and altering them in different ways – since the 1950s, and composers including Varèse and Messiaen had been interested in electronically generated music as far back as the 1930s.

It was in 1964 that Robert Moog first sold his pioneering **Moog** synthesizer, and the more affordable and user-friendly **Minimoog** followed in 1970. The **Prophet 5**, which came out in 1978, was the first to use microprocessors to store sounds, and in 1982 a standardised way of connecting and synchronising synthesizers with each other and with computers was introduced, called **MIDI** (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) and still very much in use today. This meant that synthesizers could be played ‘live’ using keyboards, but could also be pre-programmed, using computers.



A major new player in the world of synths came in 1983 in the shape of the **Yamaha DX7**, a mass-produced digital instrument as opposed to the earlier ‘analogue’ ones. The **Fairlight** – released in 1979 – was one of the first **samplers**.

This torrent of new technology was bound to influence pop artists searching for new sounds, and along with more portable **multi-track** devices it facilitated much cheaper and easier high-quality recording, meaning that chart-ready material could be created without requiring thousands of pounds of record company money to fund it.

Students interested in finding out more about these early synths could check out the following link: <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/instrument-history-the-synthesizer-philharmonie-de-paris/NAWhuXju46u1pg?hl=en>

For more on the Fairlight synthesizer and sampler, see the resource on [Kate Bush's *Hounds of Love*, Music Teacher, November 2021](#).

Here is a selection of hit songs from the 1980s that used almost entirely synthesizers. You could pick a couple and get students to compare them with 'Rock Me Amadeus', in terms of:

- ▶ their use of hooks/melodic riffs.
- ▶ their use of drum patterns.
- ▶ their reliance on electronic imitations of sounds (eg strings, brass).
- ▶ their use of 'new' electronic sounds.

- 1 Gary Numan: 'Cars' (1979): www.youtube.com/watch?v=lm3JzxlAtUs
- 2 OMD: 'Enola Gay' (1980): www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5XJ2GiR6Bo
- 3 Soft Cell: 'Tainted Love' (1981): www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZVpR3Pk-r8
- 4 The Human League: 'Don't You Want Me' (1981): www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPudE8nDogo
- 5 Depeche Mode: 'Just Can't Get Enough' (1981): www.youtube.com/watch?v=_6FBfAQ-NDE
- 6 Eurythmics: 'Sweet Dreams' (1983): www.youtube.com/watch?v=qeMFqkcPYcg
- 7 Pet Shop Boys: 'West End Girls' (1984): www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3j2NYZ8FKs
- 8 New Order: 'True Faith' (1987): www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfl1SoPKJR8

The 1983 release of the Yamaha DX7 spawned a number of **power ballads** that used its famed electric piano sound, including Whitney Houston's 'Saving All My Love For You' (1985): www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewxmvztyeRs.

Listening Exercise: ‘Smalltown Boy’

We’ll finish part one of our look at the music of the 1980s with a listening exercise based on synth pop classic ‘Smalltown Boy’, which was released in 1984 by Bronski Beat. You can find the official video for the song here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=88sARuFu-tc

‘Smalltown Boy’ was Bronski Beat’s first single and became a huge hit for them. The pioneering video addressed LGBTQ themes head-on in a decade when they were too frequently misrepresented and misunderstood. Bronski Beat’s lead singer Jimmy Somerville brought a sensitive, warm **falsetto** singing style to a story-based song that resonated with many young people, and he himself played the bullied ‘smalltown boy’ in the video, who runs away from a homophobic gang and an unsupportive father to start a new life in London.

Listen to first two minutes of the track here (www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjizWa7daDA) and answer the following questions:

- 1 How many chords are used in the repeating **chord progression** that underpins the whole of the excerpt?
- 2 Before the electronic drums come in there are four repetitions of this progression:
 - (a) The first starts with simple triads and a bassline consisting of two notes played at what interval apart?
 - (b) Describe the part that enters in the second repetition in as much detail as possible.
 - (c) Describe the similarities and differences between the vocal parts of the third and fourth repetitions.
- 3 When the drums enter there are four more repetitions of this chord sequence. Place ticks in the table below to show which parts appear in which repetition.

	Rep 1 (0:29)	Rep 2 (0:36)	Rep 3 (0:44)	Rep 4 (0:51)
Bassline				
Held triads				
Melodic hook				
Vocal				

- 4 When the verse starts, at 0:58, what happens to the instrumental parts?
Why do you think this happens?
- 5 What happens structurally from 1:20?
- 6 What would be the best way to describe the section of the song that begins at 1:40?
- 7 Compare this new section to the music that came before it. How is it similar, and how is it different?
- 8 For discussion: why do you think this song was such a big hit in 1984?

Suggested answers:

1 Four

2 (a) An octave apart.

(b) It is a melodic hook, or ostinato, using repetitive pairs of oscillating notes in a syncopated rhythm.

(c) Both parts are vocalised (not using lyrics); the first repetition is significantly lower in pitch and dynamics than the second.

3

	Rep 1 (0:29)	Rep 2 (0:36)	Rep 3 (0:44)	Rep 4 (0:51)
Bassline	✓	✓	✓	✓
Held triads				✓
Melodic hook			✓	✓
Vocal	✓	✓		

4 All parts stop except for the bassline and some scant percussion (mainly tambourine sounds).

This is likely to have been to emphasise the beginning of the lyrics, and perhaps to convey a feeling of desolation to go with them.

5 A second verse, but with slightly different, more rhythmical vocal part.

6 Chorus or refrain.

7 Same chords, with the same bass, triads and melodic hook. Repetitive three-note vocal idea with backing vocals (“run away, turn away”).

8 Ideas might include relation to subject matter, topical lyrics, authentic and original vocal style, dance features including complex, upbeat rhythms, repetitive chorus and melodic hooks, build in texture and excitement as the song progresses.

To be continued...

Part two of this resource will continue our look at the music of the 1980s with further listening and creative ideas. It will explore how some artists and bands reacted to the **punk** genre of the 1970s with new styles, what happened to **rock** and the rise of **hip hop** and **dance** music. We'll also see what happened to a number of prominent individuals – some of whom fronted bands in the 1970s or early 1980s – who became major icons of the age, and we'll witness pop's reaction to a humanitarian tragedy.