

Developing wider listening: pop music of the 1990s

KS4/5

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Introduction

The last five resources in the *Developing Wider Listening* series – which has now been running for over two years – have taken us on a journey through a huge diversity of popular musical styles, which in themselves have helped to shape the culture and society of the Western world since the Second World War. We've discovered that in a myriad of ways, societal, historical and cultural events have in turn shaped the music that has filled the radio airwaves, appeared on TV and, increasingly, taken over every facet of our digital lives.

In this resource, we arrive in the 1990s, a decade that began over 30 years ago, but in which foundations laid in the 1980s were reinforced and juxtaposed with a healthy respect for the preservation of older styles. This was a very interesting decade in pop music, where an explosion in computer-aided and dance-influenced music sat uneasily alongside a revival of guitar-led rock music in a kind of parallel with the disco and punk relationship of the late 1970s.

Now that wider listening is such a key part of the exam boards' music specifications, students taking GCSE and A level music need to have a broad understanding of a range of musical styles in addition to any set works they are studying. Even more importantly, an appreciation of a wide range of musical context increases their enjoyment as they make links between music they do and don't know, and helps them to find parallels across genres, cultures, traditions and time periods.

Our journey through the 1990s will take us through four very broad genres: rock, pop, electronic music and rap. These four genres dominated the music scene of the decade, and within them several sub-genres such as grunge, Britpop and hip hop grew in popularity. We will take a whistle-stop tour through the music of some of the leading artists in these genres, and undoubtedly will omit many that deserve to be included. Along the way there will be a variety of activities that you can do with your GCSE and A level students.

The golden age of rap and hip hop

In part two of our resource on the 1980s (*Music Teacher, April 2023*) we looked at the way that rap, a fledgling genre in the late 1970s, gathered momentum and developed into a self-contained art form. Rap and hip hop dominated popular culture in the 1990s, and many sub-genres of the forms popped up, often related to geographical areas such as the East and West coasts of the US. Rappers were innovative and original in their styles, and many made very successful crossovers into the mainstream. Hip hop rivalries were also very strong, and in some cases spilled over into gang culture, with some tragic events occurring that tarnished the genre.

Teacher note: one common feature of hip hop is a tendency for profanity, sex/drug references and anti-establishment sentiment within the lyrics and videos. I've taken care in picking relatively universal examples, but please be sure that you're happy that songs and videos are appropriate before showing them to your classes.

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The Spice Girls in 1997

Analysis exercise: early 90s hip hop style

Get your students to listen to the first minute or so of this 1990s hit by LL Cool J, 'Mama Said Knock You Out': www.youtube.com/watch?v=vimZj8HWoKg

They can use the following questions to build up a picture, through discussion, of the key features of early 90s hip hop:

- ▶ LL Cool J opens with the classic line 'Don't call it a comeback, I've been here for years'. How does he use words, rhythms and the tone of his voice to get his message across?
- ▶ **Sampling** is a common feature in hip hop, where audio snippets from other recordings are used. What examples of sampling can you hear in this song?
- ▶ How are certain words emphasised (for example, 'boom' in the first verse)?
- ▶ What new sounds or techniques can you hear in the chorus? How do you know that this section is the chorus?
- ▶ How would you describe the percussion and bass parts in the song?

Key people in 1990s hip hop



Sean 'Puff Daddy' Combs in 2006

A quick round-up of the most successful artists in 1990s hip hop must start with the rivalry between the USA's East and West Coast rappers. On the East was the New York record label Bad Boy Records, run by rapper/producers The Notorious B.I.G. (also known as Biggie Smalls, real name Christopher Wallace) and Puff Daddy (real name Sean Combs). On the West Coast there was the Los Angeles label Death Row Records, run by Marlon 'Suge' Knight in the LA suburb of Compton and boasting artists such as Dr Dre, Snoop Dogg and Biggie's New York-born friend turned arch rival, Tupac Shakur.

This rivalry spilled over into violence on several occasions. In late 1994, on a trip to New York to appear in court, Tupac was shot five times in the lobby of a recording studio. He survived but strongly asserted that Wallace and Combs were behind the shooting. Tupac went to prison following the court case but was released on appeal.

The antagonism intensified at various award events in 1995 and a close friend of Knight's

was fatally shot at a party in Atlanta. Records with direct taunts aimed back and forth continued to be released, and following his release from jail there were rumours that Tupac was in a relationship with Biggie's estranged wife, Faith Evans, explicitly corroborated by lines in some of Tupac's releases in 1996.

In September 1996, Tupac Shakur was shot and killed in a drive-by shooting in Las Vegas. Six months later, Notorious B.I.G. was killed, also in a drive-by, in Los Angeles. One of Puff Daddy's biggest hits, 'I'll Be Missing You' (1997) (www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKMtZm2YuBE) was a tribute to Biggie and sampled the 1980s Police hit 'Every Breath You Take', with Faith Evans taking the vocal lead.

Suge Knight is currently serving a sentence for manslaughter and has often been considered a suspect in Biggie's murder, though this has never been proved and the identity of Tupac's killer is also unknown.

Hip hop listening

It's hard to see past the infamous violence and gangland associations in Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac's careers, but there is no doubt that the two artists were supremely talented and left an indelible mark on music history, selling over 100 million records between them. Here's a selection of music from these and other key 1990s hip hop artists:

- ▶ Public Enemy – 'Fight the Power' (1989): www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmo3HFazvjg
Along with Run DMC, Public Enemy were a major rap act in the late 1980s and continued their dominance in the 90s. This song was made for the Spike Lee movie *Do the Right Thing*. The history and message behind 'Fight the Power', and its journey from an idea in band member Chuck D's head, are worth following here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fight_the_Power_\(Public_Enemy_song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fight_the_Power_(Public_Enemy_song))
- ▶ 2Pac feat. Dr Dre – 'California Love' (1995): www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqKEQu8JWbY This was Tupac's first single since signing for Death Row and it topped the US charts.
- ▶ The Notorious B.I.G. – 'Hypnotize' (1997): www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUEhQ48sCqU Taken from his album *Life After Death*, released two weeks after his murder, this classic song samples Herb Alpert's 1979 song 'Rise' and was produced by Puff Daddy.
- ▶ Puff Daddy (feat. Faith Evans and 112) – 'I'll Be Missing You' (1997): www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKMtZm2YuBE A heartfelt and poignant tribute to Notorious B.I.G. from his closest friends, based on the 1983 Police song 'Every Breath You Take'.
- ▶ Missy Elliott – 'Get Ur Freak On' (2001): www.youtube.com/watch?v=FpoKiGQzbsSQ Though Elliott was a major artist in the 1990s, this slightly later hit is worth mentioning. It was a big success and it borrows heavily from Punjabi **bhangra** elements.

Hip hop in the mainstream

A lot of the music produced by artists like Notorious and Tupac was unsuitable for mainstream radio, but producers like Puff Daddy experimented with mixing rap with more mainstream styles, such as soul and R&B. Artists from these genres, such as Mary J Blige, Faith Evans, Montell Jordan and Boyz II Men, released commercial songs that included hip hop characteristics.

Listening exercise: hip hop fusion

This is based on the Montell Jordan hit, 'This Is How We Do It' from 1995: www.youtube.com/watch?v=3lsPNR-boqM

This R&B/hip hop hybrid spent seven weeks at No.1. As they listen, students can make lists in two columns, headed **Hip hop features** and **R&B features**. They might like to look back at some of the R&B and soul music we've explored in resources on previous decades to refresh their memories.

Some teacher guidance: hip hop features include the repeating 'this is how we do it' riff; the heavy beats; a tendency for verses to be instrumentally light in places; the focus on the bassline; a repetitive two-chord progression; rhythmical words; lyric references to partying, money and home neighbourhoods; and a central rap section. R&B features include Jordan's vocal tone and style; vocal riffing; a wide vocal range; and use of piano and brass. The song is all about reclaiming the 'old school' R&B style and combining it with cutting-edge styles.

Electronic dance music (EDM)

Part 2 of our resource on the 1980s looked at the developing popularity of electronic dance music, thanks to the rise of **MIDI** and the increasing availability and development of synthesisers and computer-based music systems, otherwise known as digital audio workstations (**DAWs**). This grew together with a burgeoning club culture in both the US and the UK, and the increase in popular clubbing holiday destinations such as the Spanish island of Ibiza.

The genres of **house music** and **techno** were already established at the start of the 1990s and became the music of choice for **raves** – often illegal underground parties hosted by DJs in warehouses and other large venues. These grew into more mainstream gatherings including festivals and clubs specialising in EDM genres, such as **trance**, **big beat**, **breakbeat** and **drum and bass**.

By the middle of the decade, thanks in no small part to hundreds of dedicated and often unlicensed (or ‘pirate’) radio stations, EDM had become a European and British phenomenon, and many of the key artists had mainstream chart hits and are still producing hits now. The textbox below examines the music of some of these artists in a little more detail, and there is a composing activity afterwards.



Keith Flint of The Prodigy in 2017

EDM movers and shakers

Here’s a selection of music from some of the most commercially successful EDM artists of the 1990s, to help students build a picture of the main features of this genre:

- ▶ Daft Punk – ‘Around the World’ (1997): www.youtube.com/watch?v=KoHSD_izDvA One of the most repetitive dance songs ever released, this Daft Punk debut was a major club hit. The French duo, who always appear in public dressed as robots, have had a lengthy, successful career – your students are likely to know their 2013 collaboration with Pharrell Williams, ‘Get Lucky’ (www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NV6Rdv1a3I).
- ▶ The Prodigy – ‘Firestarter’ (1997): www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmin5WkOuPw A sample-laden, heavy-techno track (even the ‘heys’ are sampled from a 1984 Art of Noise song), this was the British band’s first number one single. Its video was filmed in an abandoned London Underground tunnel and is memorable for frontman Keith Flint’s high-energy performance.
- ▶ The Chemical Brothers – ‘Hey Boy Hey Girl’ (1999): www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpKCqpgCALQ Formed in 1989, English duo the Chemical Brothers have been at the forefront of bringing big beat music to the mainstream.
- ▶ Fatboy Slim feat. Bootsy Collins – ‘Weapon Of Choice’ (2000): www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCDIYvFmgW8 Aka Norman Cook, this ex-member of 1980s indie-rock band the Housemartins did much to popularise the big beat genre with several huge mainstream hits, as well as producing and remixing for a multitude of other artists. The iconic video features Hollywood star Christopher Walken and – like many iconic music videos of the 1990s – was directed by Spike Jonze.

Comparison activity: Grunge

Here are three seminal songs in the grunge style:

- ▶ Pearl Jam – ‘Alive’ (1991): www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MutXUvS37k
- ▶ Nirvana – ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’ (1991): www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTWKbfoikeg
- ▶ Soundgarden – ‘Black Hole Sun’ (1994): www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6Kz6aXsBSs

As students listen, they can consider the following questions:

- ▶ What features of late 1970s punk can you hear in these songs?
- ▶ What features of 1970s and 1980s heavy rock can you hear?
- ▶ What features in these songs make them different to other rock genres?
- ▶ What similarities are there between these three songs, that might be considered features of grunge?

And here’s Chris Cornell’s Band theme, ‘You Know My Name’ (2006), for interest: www.youtube.com/watch?v=YnzgdBAKyJo

Indie rock

Several 90s rock bands fell under the umbrella terms ‘college rock’, ‘alternative rock’ or ‘indie rock’, reflecting their popularity among students and 20-somethings. Ironically, considering the indie name, many of the bands that fell into this category became highly successful mainstream artists. Here is a selection of songs for your students to explore:

- ▶ REM – ‘Losing My Religion’ (1991): www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwtdhWltSig Formed as far back as 1980, REM were considered pioneers by other 1990s bands, including Nirvana.
- ▶ Red Hot Chili Peppers – ‘Under The Bridge’ (1991): www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLvohMXgcBo Also formed in the early 80s and hugely popular throughout the 1990s, this band was known for fusing rock with funk and soul styles.
- ▶ Beck – ‘Loser’ (1993): www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgSPaXgAdzE American Beck Hansen was a highly successful experimental musician, whose unique style mixed hip hop, funk, folk and rock.
- ▶ Green Day – ‘Basket Case’ (1994): www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUTGr5t3MoY Punk-pop band Green Day had a hugely successful third album, *Dookie*, from which this song is taken, and enjoyed a revival in the 2000s spearheaded by the success of ‘American Idiot’ (2006).
- ▶ Radiohead – ‘No Surprises’ (1998): www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5CvsCnxyXg Oxford-based indie band Radiohead’s first three albums were unparalleled successes. This single comes from their third album, *OK Computer*.

Britpop

The mid 1990s saw an explosion in the UK of guitar-based bands, and strong rivalries between them reminded the music press of the similar ‘chart battles’ of the 1960s between bands like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. Manchester band Oasis styled themselves very much on the Beatles, while their rivals, London band Blur, were more middle-class, arty and alternative in their style.

The battle of Britpop

Increased antagonism between the bands, spurred on by the media, resulted in the release of ‘Roll With It’ by Oasis and ‘Country House’ by Blur on the same day in the summer of 1995. Newspapers jumped on the notion of North/South and class divisions and the bands enjoyed getting involved in the banter. Blur ‘won’ that scuffle, ‘Country House’ making it to number one in August 1995, and their bass player Alex James rubbed it in by wearing an Oasis t-shirt on *Top of the Pops*.

- ▶ Blur – ‘Country House’ (1995): www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITK-tin8bLM
- ▶ Oasis – ‘Roll With It’ (1995): www.youtube.com/watch?v=DrARloddz-o
- ▶ Pulp – ‘Disco 2000’ (1995): www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJS3xnD7Mus
- ▶ Noel Gallagher (of Oasis) reminisces: www.youtube.com/watch?v=gvZ6tgcfPrM

Commercial pop

The UK pop charts of the late 1980s were dominated in part by the work of producing trio Mike Stock, Matt Aitken and Pete Waterman, who wrote and recorded songs with some of the leading soap stars and up-and-coming singers of the time, such as Kylie Minogue, Rick Astley, Jason Donovan and Mel & Kim. Stock, Aitken and Waterman's work inspired many aspiring producers, songwriters and artist managers of the 1990s to put together singing groups in order to take on the charts.

The music released by these artists was highly commercialised, over-produced and aimed at a much younger market than the music we have looked at so far in this resource. Boy bands and girl bands like Take That, All Saints and the Spice Girls in the UK, and Backstreet Boys, NSYNC and Destiny's Child in the US all saw huge success.

Not to be outdone, many female solo singers also had their heyday in this decade. These include 80s divas such as Madonna and Janet Jackson, and new artists like Mariah Carey, Celine Dion, Shania Twain, Gloria Estefan and Toni Braxton. These artists combined their commercial sound with tried and tested genres like R&B and dance music, and their style was characterised by visual features such as costume and choreography. Some, like Britney Spears, Justin Timberlake (of NSYNC) and Christina Aguilera, began their careers as children, appearing on programmes on the Disney cable channel.

A listening, comparison and analysis exercise

Here's a multi-part listening exercise based on the commercial pop music of the 1990s, which could easily take up a significant part of a lesson and provide opportunities for performing, composing or further listening work. It draws on a selection of music from some of the leading pop artists of the decade, all of whom continued their careers well into the 21st century.

Boy and girl band comparison

Listen to the first minute and a half or so of each of these UK chart hits. They both came from bands that were put together at audition by UK music managers keen on replicating the success of US late-80s boy bands such as New Kids on the Block. Take That were managed by Nigel Martin-Smith, and the Spice Girls first by Chris Herbert and then Simon Fuller.

- ▶ Take That – 'It Only Takes A Minute' (1992): www.youtube.com/watch?v=7J3U4KeoSCY (a cover of a 1975 song by US R&B band Tavares).
- ▶ The Spice Girls – 'Who Do You Think You Are' (1997): www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YriinrRGug

Discuss the similarities and differences between the two songs in terms of:

- ▶ Rhythm, beat and tempo
- ▶ Use of repetition
- ▶ Use of other timbres, such as brass sounds
- ▶ The style of the music and the visual style of the video
- ▶ The use of voices
- ▶ The lyrics

A diva listening test

Listen to the first two minutes of Mariah Carey's 1993 hit 'Hero': www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAl4PTwvHcg

Take as many 'listens' as you need to answer the following questions:

- 1 Describe the instrumentation of the introduction. Make three points.
- 2 Describe the tonality and metre of the song.
- 3 Compare the phrase structure and harmony of the first verse (0:30) with that of the chorus (1:04).
- 4 How does the second verse (1:42) differ from the first?
- 5 Describe Mariah Carey's vocal style. How does she make the song her own?

Answer guidance:

- 1 Mainly piano, based on the melody of the chorus. The texture is filled by orchestral sounds such as oboe and horn (though these are probably synthesised). Carey adds a few **vocalisations** of her own, low in the pitch range.
- 2 Major, four beats in a bar (with a strong, medium tempo beat, typical of this kind of **ballad**).
- 3 The verse has two long four-bar phrases, the second more melodically and harmonically colourful than the first. The chorus has a descending bassline and is constructed of shorter, two-bar phrases, each with the same rhythm but altered (and becoming steadily higher) in pitch.
- 4 Full drums (which are more prominent), more improvised vocalisations by Carey, growing string texture in the second half.
- 5 Carey is known for her tonal and melodic control. She is able to balance 'respect' for the melody with her trademark decorations, which show off her vocal ability and her melodic awareness.

Fifty years of rock and pop music

Mariah Carey's 'Hero' brings us to the end of a 50-year journey that started with Patti Page's 1950 song 'All My Love'. At the start of that first resource, we looked at the rise of two significantly 20th-century phenomena that shaped the second half of that century – youth culture and technology. By the year 2000, with the fast development of the internet and just a few years before of the emergence of the first social media platforms, it was clear that popular culture was going to continue to dominate the lives of not only young people but everyone, and music remained very much at its heart.