

Rock

BY GLENN McDONALD

College Rock

Sympathy for the Devil?

Hey, Tipper! Hey, PMRC! Never mind these chuckle-head death metal bands. Slayer? Geeks. Morbid Angel? Gimps. Napalm Death? Pansies! College rock is the real enemy. These bands are polluting our children's minds. If, on some crisp winter day, you hear any of the below elements on the car radio — beware! You may be listening to the hedonistic, subversive strains of college rock.

Jangly, Byrds-ian guitar — This ringing, chiming guitar style is designed to echo in your cerebral cortex, weakening your resistance to dream-pop bands like the Church. Next thing you know, you're humming along to lyrics about clouds and liberal politics.

Lo-fi production — Droning, muddy sound mixing helps bands record subliminal messages about Satan and drugs. Listen carefully to Pavement's "Trigger Cut" and you'll hear this cryptic message — "Read the evil devil fax! Ooh! Nutmeg!"

Monosyllabic bands — Blur, Live, Bush, Sponge, Dig, Beck, Whale, Seam, Gene, Dish, Low. Make... you... talk... in... small... words... and... sound... dumb.

Semi-ironic anthems — "Kill Yr. Idols," "Teen Angst," "Youth Against Fascism." This is the kind of souped-up rock and roll that gets the kids all riled! Hormones and stuff, you know. Soon they'll be smoking "grass" and going to "discos."

Upstart females — PJ Harvey, Liz Phair, Alanis Morissette. These women curse frequently and sometimes even wear slacks. Beware! They are wicked succubi.

Weird MTV videos — Say what you want about Warrant and Winger — at least their videos had hard-rocking boys ogling semi-naked girls, which is natural and normal. These now-fangled college band videos have all manner of perversity. That Nirvana video — the boy's in a dress! What the hey?

U. Magazine's Magnificent Seven

The Top College Rock Albums Since the Dawn of Time*

FOR SOME REASON NO ONE UNDERSTANDS, THE MUSIC BUSINESS ALL BUT shuts down after Thanksgiving. Hardly any albums get released, and the ones that do tend to be of the *Boxcar Willie's Yodeling Jubilee* variety. So we've turned our gaze to the rosy, hazy past. Popular music wouldn't be where it is today without the influence of college radio, especially in the '80s. While Bon Jovi and Whitesnake were topping the charts, campus stations were quietly talking 'bout a revolution, nursing the bands and style that would conquer the planet in the post-Nirvana era.

Below are seven of the most important college rock albums of all time, in no particular order. These are recordings that probably would not have survived outside the fertile confines of left-of-the-dial radio, and whose relevance and influence can still be felt to this day. This list isn't by any means comprehensive, and in anticipation of the impending barrage of righteous criticism, we'd just like to say: Get off our backs, already! You wanna fight? All right, tough guy. Behind metal shop, after school. Be there.

R.E.M. Murmur/1983 I.R.S.



The archetype of the little college band that could, R.E.M. have risen from quirky art-rock combo to one of the most popular and important bands in rock history. Their full-length debut album contained the elemental seeds of what would later bloom into R.E.M.'s signature sound — folksy melodicism tempered by a solidly post-punk ethic. If you can hear the Velvet Underground in Peter Dinklage's guitar, you can also hear the Beach Boys in Mike Mills' harmonies. One thing you can't hear are the lyrics — singer Michael Stipe's enigmatic, abstract vocals prompted more than a few DJs to rename the LP *Mumble*. R.E.M. practically invented "college rock" as we know it with this record, and their success — depending on your point of view — either liberated the format or killed its spirit. Probably both.

Public Enemy It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back/1989 Def Jam

Although the development of hip-hop has ultimately very little to do with college radio, the two movements have occasionally met with profound synergy. When Long Island college radio DJ Carlton Ridenhour (Chuck D) formed Public Enemy in the late '80s, rap was still very much underground. With *Nation of Millions*, Chuck D's controversial (and incisive) political stance scared away all but the most courageous radio programmers (Chuck D's confrontational attitude toward black radio didn't help: "Radio/Suckas scared of me/Cuz I'm mad/Cuz I'm the enemy.") And so P.E. found its way to Middle America primarily through word of mouth and support from college radio hip-hop programming. *Nation of Millions* arguably remains rap's masterpiece, its dense production and lyrical intensity a landmark in music history.

The Replacements Let It Be/1984 Sire



The Replacements, when they hit their stride, were the classic American post-punk band. Their combination of sloppiness, heart and balls-out punk bravado is best documented on *Let It Be*, which moves from delicate confessionals ("Unsatisfied") to crude in-jokes ("Gary's Got a Boner") with the kind of woozy grace you can only find in the hardest-drinking band in show business. The Mats (as they came to be known) never fully broke out of their underground status, which somehow makes them all the more legendary. Watch for frontman Paul Westerberg to grow into a dignified elder statesman of rock.

Camper Van Beethoven Key Lime Pie/1990 Virgin



Seemingly the band for which the term "college radio darling" was created, Camper Van Beethoven released a series of critically praised, commercially ignored albums in the mid-to-late '80s. Camper best reflect the early spirit of nonformat college radio, gyrating wildly from countrified rave-ups to Middle Eastern music to garage-punk to psychedelia to ska — often within a single song. *Key Lime Pie* is the band's final release — a darker, calmer record that sounds like a bittersweet goodbye to the gilded cage of underground music. Frontman David Lowery would go on to form the significantly more straightforward band Cracker.

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Throwing Muses Throwing Muses/1986 4AD

Kristin Hersh's fragmented pop sensibilities would have been crushed anywhere outside of college radio (in fact, only the eccentric British label 4AD was initially willing to sign the band). With Throwing Muses, Hersh and stepsister Tanya Donnelly (Belly) made some of the most consistently interesting guitar pop of their time. In a sense, this record is somewhat emblematic of a larger scene of East Coast female-driven rock (Blake Babies, Kim Deal) that foreshadowed the early '90s boom of strong women performers (Liz Phair, PJ Harvey).

Hüsker Dü Warehouse: Songs and Stories/1985 Warner Bros.



Probably the most musically influential band to never break out of the college rock scene, Hüsker Dü took the primal and direct punk pop of the Buzzcocks and made it more primal, more direct — and more honest. Guitarist Bob Mould's jackhammer chording virtually created the sound practiced by the Pixies, Superchunk and even Nirvana. *Warehouse* is the band at its finest, with crisper production revealing both the austere sonics and graceful melodies the band was capable of.

Sonic Youth Daydream Nation/1988 Geffen

Sonic Youth's ground-breaking experimentation with song structure and guitar tonalities are best displayed on this sprawling double album. Generally regarded as the hippest band in the world, they've long fought the lonely battle for mainstream acceptance. But, you know, their hearts were never really in it, and it's probably better that way. Nowadays, it seems you can't trust anything labeled "alternative," but rest assured — Sonic Youth are your friends. This may be your last chance to hear a state-of-the-art underground rock band in its natural environment.

*Well, OK, not really the dawn of time. Just the '80s and '90s.

RADIO, RADIO

1. Sonic Youth, *Washing Machine*, DGC
2. Luna, *Penthouse*, Elektra
3. Superchunk, *Here's Where the Strings Come In*, Merge
4. Rocket from the Crypt, *Scream, Dracula, Scream!*, Interscope
5. That Dog, *Totally Crushed Out!*, DGC
6. Six Finger Satellite, *Severe Exposure*, Sub Pop
7. Palace Music, *Viva Last Blues*, Palace/Drag City
8. Kids Soundtrack, *Various Artists*, London
9. Dambuilders, *Ruby Red*, EastWest
10. Eve's Plum, *Cherry Alive*, Sony 550

Chart based solely on college radio airplay. Contributing radio stations: KTRU, Rice U., Texas; KRNU, U. of Nebraska; KUCB, U. of Colorado, Boulder; KUOM, U. of Minnesota; KWVA, U. of Oregon; WCBN, U. of Michigan; WFAL, Bowling Green State U., Ohio; WUTK, U. of Tennessee, Knoxville, and WVUU, West Virginia U.

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