

# Alternative Rock

MUSC-21600: The Art of Rock Music

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# Rock in the 90's

- New generation of rockers
  - Influenced by punk and classic rock
  - MTV causes rift in between artists
  - Contradiction: anti-establishment + mainstream success?
    - How was mainstream alt. rock achieved?
- Home Recording
  - Home studios opened recording possibilities for alt. artists
  - Reflects anti establishment by not buying into recording studios
  - 2 effects
    - Allowed alt. rockers to avoid paying bills to huge corporations
    - Made mediocre home sound quality sign of artistic integrity
- Huge range of Alternative subcategories
  - Alt. Dance to Alt. Country to Alt. Hip-hop
  - What made all of these artists Alternative artists?

# What is Alternative?



- **“Teen Age Riot” (Sonic Youth, 1988)**
  - Billboard Rock Chart #20
  - Verse Chorus (not typical for band)
  - Riotous and anti-establishment lyrics consistent with song title and Alt. movt.
- **Music that challenges the status quo**
  - Homemade vs. mass-produced, genuine vs. artificial
  - “Alternative” also denotes consumer choice via
    - Radio, record stores, TV and Internet
- **Nirvana**
  - Alternative rock goes mainstream!!
  - 2 multi platinum albums; *Nevermind* (1991) and *In Eutero* (1993)
  - Forerunner of *grunge rock*
  - Frontman Kurt Cobain considered Martyr of Alt. Rock and symbolized pressures of being an alternative artist culminating in his early suicide

# Nirvana and Grunge Rock

- “Smells like Teen Spirit” (Nirvana, 1991)
  - Crossover hit-#6 on pop charts (first alt. rock song to reach Top 10)
  - Considered by many one of the greatest/ most influential songs of all time
  - Combines heavy metal instrumentations with pop songwriting techniques
  - Lyrics present a teen revolution anthem
  - <https://youtu.be/MuICbyZjNKE>
- “Man in the Box” (Alice in Chains, 1991)
  - Seattle Sound (localized grunge sound of Pacific Northwest)
  - Represent more underground, somber/reflective side of *grunge*
  - Influenced by heavy metal especially in recognizable guitar riff
  - Depressing/sad lyrics enhanced with Lane Staley’s powerful, filthy vocals
  - <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/aliceinchains/maninthebox.html>



# Alternative Domination in the 90's

- Following Nirvana's lead, many Alternative artists began to takeover the rock charts
  - le) Green Day, Red Hot Chili Peppers and Pearl Jam
  - Beatles songwriting meets punk and metal ferocity
- "Jeremy" (Pearl Jam, 1991)
  - *Ten* (91') ended up out selling *Nevermind*
  - Eddie Vedder's songwriting combines tragic story of teenage suicide and personal experience
  - Music follows progression of stress in songs lyrics
  - Brooding tone influenced by musical texture and simple structure (simple chords, verse/chorus)



# Musical Diversity and Chart Success of the 1990's

- Alternative artists with different styles and backgrounds influence popular music industry
  - Red Hot Chili Peppers, Hootie and the Blowfish, R.E.M and Alanis Morissette all charted impressively
  - Morissette's *Jagged Little Pill* (1995) helped start a women's movement within alternative rock
  - "Rebel Girl" (Bikini Kill, 1993)
  - Riot Grrrl movement
  - Exemplifies women's ability to address similar issues and sentiments of the male anti-establishment and revolution w/ feminist twist
  - Kathleen Hanna's punk delivery of vocals with simple but aggressive instrumentation create effective anthem for Riot Grrrl movement
- Return of jam bands in alternative scene
  - *le) Phish*: influenced by Grateful Dead
  - Sold out stadiums based solely off of performance, not record sales
  - Ode to music of the Baby Boomers
  - Alternative rock a lasting and influential impact on modern music industry



# “Rebel Girl” (Bikini Kill, 1993)

- Connection of 90s alternative rock to 80s hardcore punk scene
  - Musical style, DIY attitude, political engagement, geography, zines
  - See p. 288
- Riot grrrl
  - Feminist punk musicians on the West Coast who published zines and made politically charged music
- Third-wave feminism
  - Emphasis on inclusivity, acceptance of diversity
- “Rebel Girl” (Bikini Kill, 1993)
  - Emblematic of riot grrl movement
  - Kathleen Hanna and girlie feminism
  - Lyrics reflect third-wave feminism, non-traditional gender identities
    - This change is not only a shift from platonic to sexual, but a shift from heteronormative expected relationships between women to an overtly lesbian relationship.
  - Punk style and attitude, through and through