

New wave genre description music essay



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The term " New Wave" was born around the mid to late 1970s initially as another term for Punk music. Punk had emerged as an antidote to the bloated, self-indulgent, machinations of the progressive rock supergroups with a relatively short, though spectacular, shelf life. Indeed in the USA, it was seen by many in the music industry as being simply a 'fashion' or 'fad'. As time moved on, " New Wave" was used to describe bands that were not punk but had some similarities to the punk ethos. Music historian Vernon Joynson suggested in his book (**) that New Wave had emerged in the UK in late 1976, when many bands began disassociating themselves with punk. New Wave developed into music that was more experimental, musical, lyrically complex and had a more professional or polished production.

Thus New Wave music evolved initially alongside punk. Punk rock had little to do with musical ability or ingenuity. People began to grow out of punk rock as it had served its purpose, distracting people from their lives and giving them a sense of anger and power. As punk rock rode off into the sunset, musicians and bands began slowly to create music that could be described once again as musical.

In some areas of the music, " New Wave" and " Punk Rock" can be very similar. Punk music featured basic instrumental and musical ability, where the most important issue was the attitude and the presence the band applied. New Wave on the other hand branched out from the constriction of the definition of Punk music and featured a lot more musicality in the songs. The idea behind New Wave music was the same as Punk, anyone can start a band. The one main difference between the two genres being, New Wave is more likely to be accepted into the mainstream.

New Wave began to grow in popularity as more and more bands were labelled as " New Wave". CBGB, an American music venue in Manhattan, one of the main pioneers of up and coming Punk acts, began to use the term to describe new Punk bands that arrived on the scene.

As Punk stalled, New Wave continued to grow, not only in musical complexity, but also artistically and culturally ranging from the music of the Buzzcocks through to the " artistic" music of the Talking Heads. In many ways New Wave must take the blame for the made up fashion followers better known as the " New Romantics".

The term " New Wave" nowadays is used to describe any style of music which includes synthesizer melodies or catchy lyrics. It has clearly evolved from the day when the term was interchangeable with " Punk".

Musical Timeline

New Wave first appeared in Britain around 1976, the term itself and the music it described was still a little cloudy and was not as distinguishable as it turned out to be as time went on. The term New Wave was used by Caroline

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Coon, a well known artist and journalist, in an article she wrote in Melody Maker around the end of 1976 when the term New Wave was used to describe music by bands no exactly punk, but related in part of the same musical scene. For the genre, it all kicked off when New Wave was established in the United States shortly thereafter. This change of geography sparked lots of new bands to rise to the top, bands that had before associated themselves with punk started to become a bit more experimental and mix different styles of music to create their own sound.

As New Wave hit America, it is interesting to note that those well known establishment journals of middle class America 'Time' and 'Newsweek' magazines both published front page stories about the " Punk/New Wave Movement." New Wave had arrived in the USA. Critics were unsure about this transition and therefore gave mixed reviews. This, amongst other things, caused music of this genre and the bands involved to move away from the limelight for a while. In this period of time, bands started small, playing small venues with a small following of fans in the hope of building themselves up, and inevitably the genre as well, to dominate the charts.

Across the end of 1978 and 1979, acts started to gather enough attention to place them on the Billboard Charts. Leading acts such as Blondie, Talking Heads, and The Cars charted higher than other bands due to a larger fan base.

In the UK, New Wave had now replaced Punk as the definition for new music. Artists that had started as Punk, such as the Buzzcocks, quickly moved on to

become known as New Wave with other artists joining them such as The Clash in addition to new artists ranging from the Police to Elvis Costello.

Principal Artists

There are many bands and even individuals who could be described as being major players or artists in New Wave music. As well as the individuals and bands mentioned above, most of the Post-Punk bands could easily be described as New Wave encompassing many various styles including Blondie, The Cure and Joy Division, not forgetting the afore mentioned Talking Heads. Indeed Talking Heads are a good example of how far New Wave had developed from its early connection with Punk as the band's song writing became more complex melodically, rhythmically and lyrically. Talking Heads were often described as being the more artistic face of New Wave. Although it is to be noted that Talking Heads disliked and dismissed this "arty" label. *** Accordingly, although there are many notable players in New Wave music, the question of who the principle artists were or indeed are is genuinely a matter of personal taste and choice. An example of this is the band The Knack.

One of the more prominent and important songs, not so much important artists, involved with New Wave is " My Sharona" by " The Knack." This song was Billboard Magazine's " Number 1 Single of 1979." This accomplishment by a, what was dubbed, a New Wave band aroused great interest in many record companies. A lot of these record companies hurried out to sign and promote " New Wave Artists." Whilst The Knack were not the greatest example of an enduring New Wave band, the song clearly propels them into that area of prominent artists.

On a personal note, the principal artists could perhaps be described as those artists who have developed New Wave from its early beginnings to become the major influence it carries with many of today's New Wave, Alternative or Indie bands. From my point of view you needend look much further than the aforementioned individual, Elvis Costello, and bands such as The Cure and of course the evergreen Talking Heads.

The key musical characteristics of New Wave were concisely described by music journalist Simon Reynolds, in his book " Rip It Up And Start Again", as follows:-

" The New Wave template consisted of choppy rhythm guitar (with hardly any lead playing), fast, ungroovy tempos and often keyboards."

He goes on to mention the vocals in New Wave songs which he says,

" tended to be high pitched, geeky and very 'white'".

A good example of a choppy rhythm guitar can be heard in " Psycho Killer" by Talking Heads - Audio Example 3 below. Similarly, an example of the geeky, white voice can be heard in Pete Shelley's vocal in Buzzcocks " Ever Fallen In Love" - Audio Example 2 below.

As the genre moved on, the term changed slightly to describe a quieter, synth-based pop sound. Bands such as The Cure, Joy Division, and Gang Of Four were described by the newly created genre, " Post-Punk." These bands were originally involved in New Wave but prompted the new genre as they are described as being more reflective and menacing.

Media

Although the media subsequently played a huge part in the rise and acceptance of New Wave as shown by its discovery by Time and Newsweek in America, initially, the media, in the USA at least, were against This new genre of music.

In 1980, Lee Abrams played a major role in New Wave's battle for radio airplay. Abrams was an established American media executive who is most famous for developing the " Album Oriented Rock" format which is still used by vast amounts of radio stations.

Abrams was a strong influence for many radio stations. Therefore how he played a large role in people's opinions on New Wave. He wrote in a memo that,

" with the exception of the Boomtown Rats, the Police and a few other bands, we're not going to be seeing many of the New Wave circuit acts happening very big over here (in America). As a movement, we don't expect it to have much influence."

This shows how he thought, as well as a large majority of his listeners and followers, that New Wave wasn't going to last, or indeed even get started properly.

So although the genre of New Wave had been clearly identified in the printed media some years before, it initially seemed that the broadcasting media would have the final say on the survival of New Wave.

To counter this bad spell for New Wave, the debut of MTV in 1981 played a huge part in the beginning of New Wave music becoming mainstream. MTV played and showed hundreds of New Wave acts as well New Wave related genres all the way up until 1987, when MTV changed its focus to Rock and Heavy Metal. Clearly the progression and development of the new media format of the music video played an important part in the progression and development as well as the establishment of the New Wave genre.

Eventually New Wave music reached the point where it had become widely recognized as so mainstream that the Hollywood "Brat Pack" films regularly used soundtracks which heavily featured, and in some cases, exclusively featured, what can only be described as New Wave music.

New Wave was definitely here to stay and stay it has, becoming highly influential in everything from the Post-Punk movement through to the development of today's Indie bands, many of whom regularly cite New Wave artists and albums as their main musical influence.

Audio Examples

The first audio example I have chosen is "My Sharona" by "The Knack". The reason I have chosen this is because it was the first song classified as New Wave to claim mainstream success as it was, as mentioned before, Billboard Magazine's "Number 1 Single of 1979". As you can hear the song has some clear similarities and influences from Punk. For a start the guitarist is using a distorted sound on his guitar, which was commonplace in Punk music. Along with that, the drums for the song are very simplistic and drive the song, this again was very common in Punk music. Although the song features some

similarities, it also features some differences that distinguish this as New Wave. First of all, the riff that the guitarist is playing is a broken rhythm, this creates an effect that was not used in Punk music. Another difference is that this song features a guitar solo, a feature more common to New Wave music than Punk music because although a guitar solo has appeared in a few songs that were classified as Punk, because of the limited technical ability involved in playing Punk music, a guitar solo was very unusual. Guitar solos and other instrumental passages became very characteristic in New Wave music.

The second audio example I have chosen is " Ever Fallen In Love (With Someone You Shouldn't)" by " Buzzcocks". I have chosen this song because it shows clear similarities and differences between Punk music and New Wave music, and therefore it is easy to see the change in the musicality as Punk changed to New Wave. To start with, the instrumental arrangement of the band is the same as a Punk band. The drums play a very simple yet powerful and fast beat, which is followed by the bass playing mainly 8th notes. The bass follows the same chord structure and progression as the guitar. These features are often found in Punk music. The main difference in this song between Punk and New Wave is that the vocals are sang in a completely different style. In Punk music, vocals tend to be very rough and very loud, with the singer shouting most of the lyrics. In New Wave music, as Simon Reynolds highlighted, the vocals sound more suburban, melodic and are usually higher in pitch. This is clearly heard in this audio example as it is easy to hear the Manchester accent through the vocals, as well as there being able to listen to a clear melody.

The third audio example I have chosen is " Psycho Killer" by " Talking Heads". I have chosen this as an audio example as Talking Heads were the epitome of New Wave music.