



# What Genres of Music Are Native to America?

By Sasha Frere-Jones



Street music groups Run-DMC and the Beastie Boys fused hip-hop and punk rock roots in their joint appearances. The bands toured together in 1987. ©AP Images

“... we will just call our first genre — and the last of the American century — Chart Pop.”

**B**efore answering the question, we need to take stock of the 20th century in America, then move backward in time. There were four innovations in mechanical reproduction that changed how people received, and learned about, music in the past century: the various formats of music as reproduced on vinyl; radio; television; and motion pictures.

None of these delivery systems kicked in seriously before 1900, and by 2000, the Internet was threatening to eclipse them all. Very neat, as historical periodicity goes.

By now, in all genres, home-grown fare usually outstrips any imports. Bollywood is a perfect example of a native film industry that keeps the foreign product at

bay (like Hollywood movies). And radio has long favored the local over the international — “This American Life” signifies only to Americans; print publications, by contrast, like *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*, resonate all over the world. People want to hear radio news in accents and voices familiar to them.



Television operates in roughly the same way, favoring regional dialects and faces, meaning that “Neighbours” can be enormous in Australia and unknown here (and the same goes, vice versa, for “All My Children”). American popular music is now much like films — German and Japanese charts will feature mostly native artists, with a peppering of Rihanna and Maroon 5, just as the Japanese weekend box office will be largely Japanese, save for a “Source Code” or “Contagion.”

The big difference is in formal language, though, and this is where American native music enters and triumphs — American pop is still the baseline code for international pop, in a way that is distinct from other forms. (Japanese movies have never looked much like American movies and still don’t.) A blend of dance rhythms, group harmonies that have changed little since the 1950s and an atmosphere of blind exuberance has been the foundation for chart pop since the late 1980s, and this has held consistent throughout the world. The form is American in source, though the European influence has gently eased it away from hip-hop and back to the 4/4 beat of disco after a decade-long shift toward hip-hop rhythms (which is now over). There is no single name agreed upon for this form, so we will just call our first genre — and the last of the American century — Chart Pop.

As we move backward, we hit the most American of forms: hip-hop. Begun in the early 1970s in New York’s South Bronx, the form actually could have started elsewhere. The tools were records the world had access to — James Brown, Mandrill, Aretha Franklin — and turntables (professional mixers came later, and were at first only jury-rigged contraptions). But the dancers danced in New York, and the form took shape there. Even the Japanese drum machines that later looped the vinyl mandalas DJs had been making with their hands for years were available to others — and yet nobody, aside

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Pianist Thelonious Monk, depicted here in 1949, is credited with pioneering jazz bebop. Today, the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, founded in 1986, helps train young musicians. ©AP Images

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from a few stray Englishmen, thought to turn these tools on their heads and make their auxiliary function (the ability to store small snippets of recorded audio) into their main purpose.

The ways of rapping itself have been bent all over the world, and the original styles from the early 1980s no longer obtain anywhere; so then hip-hop's legacy is an approach to rhythm and repetition, different to any of the entirely live forms before it. Those three forms are all part of a common language: the blues, jazz and rock 'n' roll. The only reason to exclude country music from this grouping is that so many of the antecedents of country can be found in the Scottish and English ballads of the first settlers that it comes across as a true hybrid; symbolically, maybe the most American of forms, but not genetically an entirely original form. The blues is almost in this category, too, drawing so heavily from the singing of the West African griots. But the blues was built on Western intonation, the 12-tone scale and the miracle of the six-string guitar, and the topics have generally stayed within the American experience. There is no 12-bar blues in Africa, though there are figures almost entirely like the blues man.

Jazz is where America makes its first indelible mark, taking the instruments originally built for European symphonies and marching bands and bending them — as turntables would later be bent — into vessels for improvisation. No existing score contains instructions that would explain the extemporaneous inventions made in New Orleans, and no existing account can tie jazz back to anything but itself. Before jazz, there was no template for extended improvisation inside the Western scale, coloring simultaneously inside and outside the lines.

And then, the big explosion, rock 'n' roll, which draws from almost every source imaginable, though it is first and foremost an extension of the

## 10 SONGS THAT DEFINE AMERICA

"Hellhound on My Trail"

*Robert Johnson*

"Smokestack Lightnin'"

*Howlin' Wolf*

"Ornithology"

*Charlie Parker*

"Well, You Needn't"

*Thelonious Monk*

"So What"

*Miles Davis*

"Crosstown Traffic"

*Jimi Hendrix*

"No Fun"

*The Stooges*

"Sucker MCs"

*Run-DMC*

"Follow The Leader"

*Eric B & Rakim*

"Nuthin' But A G Thang"

*Dr. Dre and Snoop Doggy Dogg*

## What Genres of Music Are Native to America?



Rappers Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg launched hip-hop from underground to pop status with the hit “Nuthin But A ‘G’ Thang” in 1993. Influential radio stations moved the “alternative” hip-hop sound into the realm of mainstream American music. ©AP Images



blues and country. Again, technology plays a role — this time, through amplification. After Elvis Presley and Little Richard, up through Jimi Hendrix and The Stooges, the blues is expanded and hammered and overturned until it no longer is anything but this loud, hedonistic, visceral form that has some of jazz’s looseness but an added addiction to volume and almost cartoon-like

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language that makes it America’s most lurid export ever.

Disco belongs on this list but is so immediately taken up and developed by Europeans that it is harder to pin down. The roots of the culture are undeniably American, and quite likely the first of New York’s major club music (before hip-hop), but it becomes a global lingua franca quickly and can’t be classed in the same way as these other forms, though it is technically native to the States.