



THE DREAMY,
REVERB-HEAVY
SOUNDSCAPES THAT
BLEND NOISE, MELODY
AND EMOTION

STEVE O'BRIEN

Shoegaze

What is it?

We all remember the dance, if you can call it that. Almost an antitoxin to the blissed out hand waving of acid house dancing, the obligatory movement to a shoegazing number was exactly that, stare at your shoes – which must remain fixed to the ground, natch – with the most passionless face you can muster as you sway your body, putting as little effort into the whole thing as possible. If acid house, then, was the sound of chemically-assisted exuberance, shoegaze was its shyer, more introverted cousin. Characterised by distorted guitars, droning riffs and woozy vocals, this was The Velvet Underground meets Phil Spector's Wall of Sound. Its frontline artists, from Ride to My Bloody Valentine to Slowdive, weren't exactly known for their elaborate stagecraft – it was de rigueur for this music that its practitioners would glare intensely at their feet – or sometimes their effects pedals – while playing, hence the genre's pejorative music critic-coined name.

Shoegazing's time in the sun was short-lived, however – grunge and Britpop would sideline it in the second half of the 90s and its headline acts would either split (Chapterhouse called it a day in 1994, Slowdive in '95, Ride in '96, My Bloody Valentine in '97) or adapt to the changing times (Lush, who had started out shoegaze, discovered melody with their second album). Those pining for its distorted, feedback-fuelled sounds, however, can rest assured that Ride, Slowdive and My Bloody Valentine have since reformed and are very much keeping the shoegazing flame alive.

My Bloody Valentine signed to Creation Records in 1988, and their second studio album, 1991's *Loveless*, is now heralded as a shoegaze masterpiece



What they say

"This music is, above all else, a place to explore the outer limits of guitar texture. And emotionally, shoegaze turns its focus inward. The extreme noise eliminates the possibility of socialising while the music is playing, leaving each member of the audience alone with their thoughts. It's music for dreaming." **PITCHFORK**

"Shoegaze – named for its players' tendency to stare down at complex warrens of effects pedals, or stompboxes – was born out of a young British population so numbed by successive Conservative governments that it turned to sonic immolation."

NEW YORK TIMES

Essential Bands

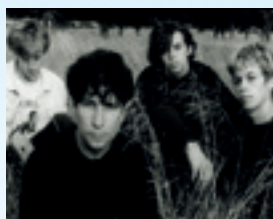


▲ CHAPTERHOUSE

Hailing from Reading and inspired by a mutual love of The Jesus And Mary Chain and Cocteau Twins, Chapterhouse were formed in 1987 by teenagers Andrew Sherriff, Jon Curtis, Stephen Patman, Simon Rowe, and Ashley Bates. Though feted by the music press, they never quite achieved the commercial success of their shoegazing peers – debut LP *Whirlpool* peaked at No.23, while lead single *Pearl* (featuring vocals from Slowdive's Rachel Goswell) only made UK No.67. Sophomore album *Blood Music* (1993) saw the group move away from their shoegazing roots, before they split in '94. The band reformed briefly in the Noughties, and guitarist Rowe released a solo record, featuring many of his former bandmates, in 2023.

▲ MY BLOODY VALENTINE

Kevin Shields' band were the group most shoegazers confessed a debt to. Formed in 1983 in Ireland, they signed to Creation (where else?) in 1988, putting out their first LP *Isn't Anything* in the November. Tracks like *Feed Me With Your Kiss* (its sole single) and opener *Soft As Snow (But Warm Inside)* married ferocious distortion with delicate melodies, creating a sound that was both abrasive and angelic. Shields' obsessive studio perfectionism – layering guitars to the point of near-collapse – made second album *Loveless* a landmark of the genre. The record remains a touchstone, influencing everyone from Radiohead to US shoegaze revivalists Beach House. ■



▲ RIDE

One of Creation Records' signature bands, Ride were among shoegazing's most commercially successful outfits and regulars on *Top Of The Pops*. Marrying murky sonics with a deft pop sensibility, they hit big with debut long-player *Nowhere* (UK No.11) and followed it with a run of Top 5 albums. Splitting after their fourth LP *Tarantula*, guitarist Andy Bell formed Hurricane #1 before replacing Guigsy in Oasis, while rhythm guitarist Mark Gardener and drummer Loz Colbert joined the short-lived Animalhouse with Supergrass producer Sam Williams. Ride would reform in 2014 and have since released three LPs, the most recent being last year's *Interplay*, which *Classic Pop* described as "another great example of Ride's vibrant second act."

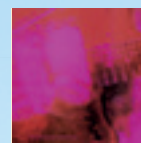


▲ SLOWDIVE

Formed, like Chapterhouse, in Reading, Slowdive walked the dream-pop/shoegaze divide with their muzzy, ethereal soundscapes. In 2017, *The Guardian* wrote of the band: "There were melodies in there, but they were elusive and unshowy." Richey Edwards' famous quote that "We [meaning Manic Street Preachers] will always hate Slowdive more than Hitler" hung around the group, and they were often dismissed by the critics – *Melody Maker* called their debut album "a major fucking letdown", while the same paper wrote of their follow-up, "I would rather drown choking in a bath full of porridge than ever listen to it again." Still, they had a loyal following and those early albums have been reassessed more favourably in recent years.

Essential LPs

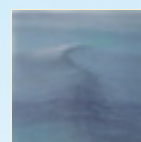
MY BLOODY VALENTINE LOVELESS (1991)



Recorded over the space of two years, taking in 19 studios and around 45 engineers, you could write a book about the making of My Bloody Valentine's second

album. The effort, however, was clearly worth it. Tracks like *Only Shallow* and *Soon* showcase the band's textured sound where distorted guitars swirl around Bilinda Butcher's ethereal vocals. It was feted on its release, even by the normally agnostic American press, with *Rolling Stone* raving that "Loveless oozes a sonic balm that first embraces and then softly pulverizes the frantic stress of life."

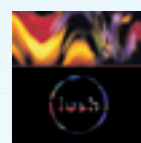
RIDE NOWHERE (1990)



Released in October 1990, Ride's debut offering was shoegaze at its most commercial. Through lead single *Vapour Trail* and opener

Seagull, it was clear that the band were deft at marrying melodic hooks with textured noise, and there's as much jangle-pop in here as there is Sonic Youth. It came out to ecstatic reviews and in 2005 made it into rock writer Robert Dimery's list of the *1001 Albums You Must Hear Before You Die*.

LUSH GALA (1990)



Produced by 4AD as an introduction to Lush for the American and Japanese markets, this must-have compilation was a collection

of the group's earliest releases as well as two additional tracks. Though chiefly remembered for their Britpop-era hits (*Ladykillers* is still a doozy), it's worth remembering how brilliant they were in their shoegaze days. *Sweetness And Light* is as lush as the band's name, while *Hey Hey Helen* gives ABBA an unexpected indie pop makeover.

Essential Songs

- Slowdive – *When The Sun Hits*
- My Bloody Valentine – *Feed Me With Your Kiss*
- The Boo Radleys – *Skyscraper*
- Ride – *Leave Them All Behind*
- Chapterhouse – *Mesmerise*

Further Watching



- *Beautiful Noise* (2014 film), directed by Eric Green