

# The 100 Greatest Alternative Singles of the '90s - Part 2 (80 - 61)

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by **Chris Gerard**

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The [second part](#) of our examination of the 100 Greatest Alternative Singles of the '90s includes Pavement, Suzanne Vega, Morrissey, Dinosaur Jr., and more.

## 80. Sisters of Mercy - “More” (1990)

Jim Steinman, famed writer and producer of wonderfully overblown theatrical rock like Meat Loaf’s *Bat Out of Hell*, Bonnie Tyler’s “Total Eclipse of the Heart” and Celine Dion’s “It’s All Coming Back to Me Now”, was a natural fit to produce the electronic goth-dance epic “More” by Sisters of Mercy. They are, after all, a band never afraid to go way, way over the top, which is just where Jim Steinman likes it. “More” is the soundtrack to a vampire nightclub, played deep in the night while black-garbed ghouls flit gracefully about the shadowy dance-floor, lightning flickering overhead.



The album version stretches for over eight minutes, but the single mix really delivers all that you need. Starting with bracing jolts of synth, “More” builds slowly from a piano base with half-whispered vocals before exploding with the chorus “I want more!” and seemingly incongruously soulful vamping that somehow works despite belonging to another sonic dimension. Andrew Eldritch’s mordant growl is a tense counterpoint to the soaring backing vocals. Electronic strings and treated piano help to build a darkly atmospheric backdrop while Eldritch half-whispers the verses with as much drama as he can muster.

The merger of Bauhaus-era goth with modern industrial-flavored electronic beats—and Jim Steinman’s audacious arrangement—proved hugely popular with fans, and rightfully so. It’s a thrilling exhibition of rock at its most unapologetically theatrical and melodramatic. It’s brilliant symphonic electro-goth. “More” spent five weeks at #1 on the *Billboard Modern Rock Chart* as 1990 rolled into 1991.

## 79. Dig - “Believe” (1993)

As the lead single from Dig’s self-titled debut album, “Believe” was the band’s only significant hit, reaching #19 on the *Billboard Modern Rock Chart*. Opening with an ominous rumble of bass, “Believe” is a torrid rocker with furnace blasts of guitar and a terrific on-edge vocal by Steve Hackworth.



The song is a piercing indictment of self-righteous ‘believers’ who spend most their time and energy imposing their notion of what God is on others while blithely ignoring the tenets of the religion they proclaim to follow. Written over 20 years ago, “Believe” couldn’t be more apt today. Hackworth sneers lines like, “They will deny there is separation now”, and of course many evangelicals believe that our government should basically be a theocracy. But Hackworth isn’t having it—“We won’t buy in their deception now,” he proclaims.

The chorus is a call for turning religious beliefs inward and actually thinking about your own obligations and stop worrying about what others are doing: “Why don’t you believe, believe in your own god?” Left unsaid is “and leave us the fuck alone”, although that sentiment comes across pretty clearly in the sharply rebellious tone of the track.

It’s unfortunate that Dig never gained much traction beyond this one song, because as solid as their debut album is, their second album *Defenders of the Universe* (1996) is even better. Check out “Song for Liars” if you get a chance—a hit that should have been. Unfortunately, their sophomore album sank without a trace and Dig was left to rust at the bottom of the ocean floor along with other promising ‘90s castaways. The music survives, though, waiting to be discovered, and bands like Dig should take solace in that.

## 78. Dinosaur Jr. - “Feel the Pain” (1994)

J. Mascis has been unleashing his distinct fuzz-toned pop buried in distortion with Dinosaur Jr. since their 1985 debut album *Dinosaur*. “Feel the Pain”, the primary single from the band’s *Without a Sound* album, is one of Mascis’ best and most successful tracks—it reached #4 on the *Billboard Modern Rock Chart*.



Mascis’ distinctly mangled vocal, sung at two octaves so he can self-harmonize, somehow manages to latch onto a melody with arresting authenticity. Mascis plays nearly all the instruments himself, and he proves a pretty damn fine drummer. “Feel the Pain” seems to have a laid back vibe, and then without warning manic eruptions of molten guitar flare between the verses, before easing us back into the song’s main groove. At the very end the eruption escalates into an ear-piercing guitar solo that wraps up the song with a massive jolt. The arrangement is unorthodox with multiple time-signatures—“Feel the Pain” is a hard-rocking mini-suite of sorts that sounds like it was stitched together by a mad scientist in a secret basement laboratory. Perhaps it was.

Lyrically the song deals with a man who is rendered numb by all the pain and struggles experienced by those around him. He becomes jaded and loses his empathy. There may be more internal significance to the song. It was written around the time that Mascis’ father died, which Mascis has acknowledged had a big impact on his songwriting for *Without a Sound*. Perhaps it’s the old ‘heart of stone’ trick, in which you build up a solid barricade around your emotions to protect yourself from hurt. An all too human defense mechanism.

## 77. Lush - “Ladykillers” (1996)

London-based Lush released several excellent albums in the early ‘90s before shuttering following the 1996 suicide of drummer Chris Acland. The tragedy occurred only six months after the appearance of their last album, *Lovelife*, just as the band were at their commercial and artistic peak. Although they are often mentioned as part of the “shoegaze” movement, that label more comfortably fits their earlier work. By the time of *Lovelife*, the band had swerved into a fiery and energetic pop-influenced direction.



“Ladykillers” is their most immediate and potent single, a blistering rocker spiky with attitude. Vocalist Miki Berenyi, sporting fierce pink hair in the song’s video, boldly delivers a recitation of cutting one-liners, making it very clear she will take no bullshit, while the band thrashes madly behind her. Deft touches of ‘60s pop like the ooh-la-la-la backing vocals and hand claps add a hint of a retro vibe. “Ladykillers” is loaded with badass attitude and derision in lines like: “I’m as human as the next girl / I like a bit of flattery / but I don’t need your practiced lines / your school of charm mentality / so save your breath for someone else / and credit me with something more / when it comes to men like you I know the score / I’ve heard it all before.” No doubt she has.

“Ladykillers” reached #18 on the *Billboard Modern Rock Chart*, and will surely be a prominent fixture in the band’s set when they reunite later this year for their first live performances in 20 years. (And don’t forget to clap along during the “Blondie was with me for a summer” verse!)



## 76. Pavement - "Cut Your Hair" (1994)

Pavement's "Cut Your Hair" is deceptively sunny slacker-rock, ragged and laid back with the same indolence as the classic hippie anthem "Signs" by the Five Man Electrical Band. This time, instead of trying to get a job at a store, the disdain for long hair comes from the music industry, which Pavement skewers with a defiant smile and a snarl. It's especially relevant given the platoons of long-haired, slovenly dressed bands that emerged on the alternative rock scene after the ascension of Nirvana and Pearl Jam. Even lack of an image can become a very distinct image, often by accident.



"Cut Your Hair" is a shambolic rocker in the style of much of Pavement's work. They've never been the tightest in the word, but their loose, easy-going groove has its own undeniable appeal. Led by vocalist and primary songwriter Stephen Malkmus, Pavement was expert at frayed indie-rock with clever lyrics and strong melodies. The main melodic hook on "Cut Your Hair" comes from the "do do doo doo" lines sung in quavery falsetto during the instrumental breaks.

Although they never really became more than a cult band, Pavement's '90s work is now widely respected by many critics as some of the decade's best. "Cut Your Hair", from the band's acclaimed second album *Crooked Rain, Crooked Rain*, became by far their biggest hit, reaching #10 on the *Billboard Modern Rock Chart*.

Chris Gerard is a lifelong music fanatic, an avid vinyl record collector and a former D.J. He's originally from Morgantown, WV and is a graduate of West Virginia University. He is based in Northern Virginia and has written extensively about music for NBC-Washington, Metro Weekly, and The Washington Blade. He is currently a writer and Contributing Editor for PopMatters. His Facebook page devoted to his writing can be followed here: [www.facebook.com/ChristianGerardMW](http://www.facebook.com/ChristianGerardMW), and his Twitter feed is @banditFFX.

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