80s Essentials, Industrial Revolution

Because the decade was a formative time for so much more than just our beloved heavy metal, today we’re pleased to present you with a look at fifteen essential industrial albums from the 1980s.

I’m neither historian nor sociologist enough to speak to the politico-economic milieu that shaped industrial music’s formative clatterings, but a few general observations may suffice. The advanced industrial world was hardly being ground in the same way as by the ravenous gears of the late-eighteenth/early-nineteenth century Industrial Revolution (cf. Friedrich Engels on The Condition of the Working Class in England), but the 1970s and ‘80s saw an increasingly aggressive attack on the social welfare state that had so flourished in the three or four decades since the end of World War II.

The elections of Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and Helmut Kohl (in Britain, the U.S., and West Germany, respectively) ushered in an era of neoliberal government retrenchment that would largely define the domestic political debate in the years to follow, while throwing the (often uneasy) balance between capital and labor into disrepair throughout the rich world. Reagan’s tough-talking rhetoric meant that many of the signs of rapprochement and detente that had offered brief glimmers of, if not hope, then perhaps bleakly muted optimism in the 1970s gave way to a renewed era of Cold War stridency and military hand-wringing.

In many ways, then, the same social, political, economic, and cultural context that led to the development of punk’s disaffected worldview and heavy metal’s increasingly doom-saying weightiness would also provide grist for the eternally wending mill of nascent musical experimentalism that gradually coalesced into industrial music. Certainly buttressed by the fertile expansions of any number of avant-garde artistic movements, the dawn of the 1980s found industrial’s soon-to-be vanguard with a handful of clear visionary artists off of whose legacy and/or continuing influence to build.
Particularly notable were Suicide, Public Image Limited, and Throbbing Gristle. Even so, to write it that way suggests that industrial music once had a unified goal or solidified musical template, which, as you’ll see when scanning through the artists featured below, is an obviously daft simplification. Even as industrial music developed throughout the course of the 1980s, it was just as likely to dovetail off with sympathetic or marginally related movements, from post-punk and krautrock to ambient and neofolk to EBM and synthpop to goth and metal and Lord only knows whatever else.

Here’s the point: Industrial has always been a hideous mongrel coalition of artists and individuals with vastly different philosophies, musical styles, aesthetic intentions, points of influence, desires for acceptance, pointed agendas, and absolutely no agendas at all. What - if anything - unites such wildness under anything approaching a central banner? Mechanization. The fear of - and equally potent desire for - submission and oppression. The lockstep pounding of goose-stepping fascists. The inexorable pull and dark allure of history’s bleakest chapters. A love of subversion and moral ambiguity. Lust and hate, shame and order. The sense that humanity is becoming indelibly fused with machines that neither recognize our inputs nor rank-order their outputs in any order other than cold, unfeeling efficiency. Utilitarianism as a self-executing directive. And also, I suppose, the frail, fleshy meat-boxes that still subsist somewhere beneath the machines’ unyielding perfection, frightened and in love and still, against all odds, alive.

Fifteen albums; fifteen chances to plug in to the soul of a new machine, or howl in mute impotence against the eternal march of progress. A teleology of synapse and sinew, rendered in silicone; a boot stamping on a human face, forever - except the face is printed on dot matrix, and we built the boot ourselves, stitch after mirthless stitch.

Enjoy. Destroy.

D.A.F. - ALLES IST GUT
Full disclosure- I have no fucking clue what these guys are talking about. They could be talking about burning cats. They could be talking about petting cats. What I do know is that ‘Alles ist Gut’ translates to ‘Everything is Fine’, and that’s fine by me. This is what should be playing in the background any time any character in any movie walks into a goth club and kids are swaying back and forth with their long, green hair is hiding their pain-filled eyes from the horrible light of day. It is pretty funky, though. And I guess a shitload of Germans bought it way back when, so you should too.

[Chris Redar]

D.A.F – *Alles Ist Gut*
Released: March 1981
Virgin Records
Killing cut: "*Der Mussolini*

**EINSTÜRZENDE NEUBAUTEN - KOLLAPS**
Before the platinum-selling Hollywood Hill’s angst of Nine Inch Nails and ilk arose, there was a time when industrial music was recognised as just that--industrial. The ear-splitting projects of the genre’s subversive sound pioneers found machinery grinding modernity to dust, and the scrap metal noise on German avant-garde legends Einstürzende Neubauten’s debut, 1981’s *Kollaps*, represents some of the gnarliest, most dehumanizing, and amplified chaos, you’ll ever hear.

Founded by vocalist/guitarist Blixa Bargeld in 1980, Einstürzende Neubauten’s early art/music communiques featured power tools drilling into (and pounding against) building site and wasteland materials, all combined with unstructured instrumentation and percussive battering from all corners. *Kollaps* hammers that aesthetic home, repeatedly. White-noise, sheet-metal screeches, and the clanging of wrenches and hammers all appear, with vocals and guitar buried in atonal, death knell cacophonies.

Tracks off *Kollaps*, like “Steh Auf Berlin” and “Sado-Masodub” are self-sabotaged salvos; Cold War bombardments, where in their pandemonium metallic forms are deconstructed and reconstructed. Elsewhere, the abstract turmoil and reverberating echoes of “Abstieg & Zertall” and “Negativ Nein” see ‘music’ distorted, drowned, and beaten, and throughout Kollaps, moments of rhythmic clarity are shattered by skin-piercing splinters and eviscerating shards of noise. *Kollaps* is what industrial music is supposed to sound like--challenging, provocative, and apocalyptic. Einstürzende Neubauten have made some great albums since, but Kollaps is as relevant
and powerful today as it ever was.

[Craig Hayes]

**Einstürzende Neubauten** - *Kollaps*
Released: 5 October 1981
ZickZack
Killing cut: "Steh auf Berlin"

**CABARET VOLTAIRE - THE CRACKDOWN**

**Cabaret Voltaire** put out the kind of ‘industrial’ that would appeal to fans of less abrasive synthesized musical fare such as **Joy Division**. 1983’s *The Crackdown* sounds much, much less like predecessor 2x45 in that it seems to focus on obsession rather than detached paranoia. Some of the old leanings still existed at this point ("24-24"'s off-tune key lines and heavily distorted vocals), but the shift to a musical unit as opposed to an experimental project is evident in the radio-ready (for the time) "Just Fascination" and the waiting-on-a-movie-to-be-written-around-it title track. That’s not to say any of it is bad- far from it. *The Crackdown* is one dense groove after another without the pressure of being ‘mood music’. And, for some reason, I want to watch Short Circuit after I listen to it. Good luck
figuring that out.

[Chris Redar]

**Cabaret Voltaire** - *The Crackdown*
Released: August 1983
Some Bizarre/Virgin Records
Killing cut: "Why Kill Time (When You Can Kill Yourself)"

**SPK - AUTO-DA-FÉ**

As would become the case with many of the pioneering industrial bands, the music of the Australian band **SPK** presented a more or less ever-shifting target, from the hellishly intense pure noise of their 1980 debut, *Information Overload*, to the poppy, mainstream-adjacent electro synth of 1985’s *Machine Age Voodoo*, to the bewitching fusion of **Dead Can Dance**-leaning ambient world music/soundtrack immersion of 1986’s *Zamia Lehmanni*, and beyond. The most potent distillation of the band’s otherworldly power, however, is the 1983 compilation *Auto-da-Fé*, which collected numerous singles and other assorted songs from as early as 1979. The fact that *Auto-da-Fé* is a compilation spanning several years is apparent, though not in a bad way - the variety of stylistic explosions is in many ways
emblematic of the absurdly rapid progression and expansion of industrial’s fevered tentacles throughout the decade.

“Kontakt” visits **Crass** via **Killing Joke** while hurtling down **Kraftwerk**’s *Autobahn*, before the whole procession is assaulted by a dentist’s malfunctioning drill, while “Germanik” is as close a doppelganger for **Neubauten** ca. 1980-81 as you’re likely to find. Throughout the majority of **Auto-da-Fé**, **SPK** isn’t particularly focused on electro beats or synths, but rather sounds like various forms of mutant rock and roll in the process of being overtaken from within by malignant technology, and as such, much of it actually sounds considerably less dated than a lot of the EBM-leaning industrial from later in the decade. The true crux of the whole matter, however, is the show-stoppingly brilliant “Slogun,” which is a breathtakingly intense barrage of noise for 1980. In fact, such ear-hating malcontents as **Venetian Snares** and **Atari Teenage Riot** could (and most likely did) learn plenty from the sheer anarchic noise of the track, and its irrepressible militaristic bark: “SPK! SPK! SPK! SPK!” That SPK isn’t more of a household name for the casual industrial listener is certainly a shame, but you may not like to confront the crumbling edifice of all civilization that they so aptly reproduced.

*[Dan Obstkrieg]*
Ever feel like walking through a slaughterhouse with a T-800 hanging off of every meathook? No? This might not be the record for you, then. These pounding rhythms can be hypnotic, but for the most part, this is very combative music. Flourishes of traditional instrumentation hide underneath violent percussion and samples repeated to the point of frustration (and then repeated a few more times). Echoes are used to great effect to create a sense of endlessness throughout the duration. Vocals are generally kept to a minimum (with the exception of opener "The Fall From Light," which is a terrifying way to introduce an album). Don’t do drugs, but if you do, don’t do them and then listen to this.

[Chris Redar]

**Test Dept. – Beating the Retreat**
Released: 1984
Some Bizarre Records
Killing cut: "Kick to Kill"

**COIL - HORSE ROTORVATOR**
The second full-length from England’s **Coil**, 1986 effort *Horse Rotorvator* is, in simplest terms, a museum exhibit curated by Satan. Utilizing a blend of typical industrial elements and somewhat eclectic sprinklings of techno and classical instrumentation, Coil’s creations weren’t particularly innovative, but they were unique to the point of being unmistakable as anything but theirs. Shifts in direction from the profane and oppressive ("The Anal Staircase") to the beautifully morose ("Ostia (The Death of Pasolini)") were hallmarks of the now defunct band’s style. In hindsight, these tunes aren’t as confusing or impenetrable as these ears once thought (to be honest, I kind of couldn’t stand this album when I first heard it, but I was grind-or-die back in ’02 or so). *Horse Rotorvator* is actually a rather complete piece with everything falling into place in the perfect order for a night of suicidal thoughts and nightmares.

* [Chris Redar]
Arguably the second most well-known entity on the list, ze Germans known as KMFDM weren’t the furious guitar-driven band "Juke Joint Jezebel"-era fans know them as on their second full-length. This more restrained/less restrictive approach keeps What Do You Know, Deutschland? oozing from every pore with a lack of fulfillment. Not on the listener’s end, mind you-this album is almost uncomfortable to experience. With its driving pulses making its descriptions of emotionless sex, overwrought night life, and dissatisfaction with the state of the world as it was at the time seem hollow and inhuman, KMFDM managed to make what should be considered a staple ‘industrial’ album on their second swing.

[Chris Redar]
Like many industrial trailblazers, UK band Nitzer Ebb were heavily influenced by German electro-punk and Neue Deutsche Welle band D.A.F, while the band also found fame thanks to joining the esteemed roster of Mute Records. Nitzer Ebb’s debut, 1987’s That Total Age, is probably best remembered for the six-minute "Join in the Chant," which provided a much-copied style of belligerent, proto-Balearic pummel tied to dancefloor slogan shouting, and Teutonic beats.

It would be a lie to say that That Total Age was a wholly original album, but what Nitzer Ebb did exceptionally well, was take the hostility of a band like Killing Joke, and meld that to minimalist compositions that amplified Nitzer Ebb’s own abrasive, "International Funk Aggression." Heavy on the percussive punch, tracks off That Total Age, like "Murderous," "Violent Playground" and "Smear Body," meshed bare-boned sequencer rhythms with electro-pop hooks, making for almost totalitarian EBM marches. In doing so, Nitzer Ebb left a mark on acid house and techno innovators.
galore, as well as plenty of warmongering industrial and metal warriors, and that's what is it best appreciated in That Total Age’s austere beats--its lingering presence. While Nitzer Ebb’s subsequent releases would be far less hard-hitting, That Total Age stands as a superbly confrontational opening statement.

[Craig Hayes]

Nitzer Ebb – That Total Age
Released: 11 May 1987
Mute Records
Killing cut: "Join in the Chant"

Laibach formed in 1980, as the musical arm of then Yugoslavia-based (now Slovenia) art collective, Neue Slowenische Kunst. The avant-garde troupe are known for their sense of inverted fascism; mocking power through use of Wagnerian bomb-blasts and martial, industrial, and neo-classical orchestrations. Released via Mute Records, in 1987, Opus Dei is the album that brought Laibach out from the underground, featuring two of the band’s famed covers. "Geburt einer Nation" (a reworking of Queen’s “One
“Vision”) turns that song into a militaristic epic, and "Leben heißt Leben" and "Opus Dei," are Laibach’s dual reimaginings of Austrian band Opus' hit single "Live Is Life."

*Opus Dei* stands as a perfect example of Laibach’s linking the ridiculousness of rock ‘n’ roll’s slavish excess and assemblies with dubious political rallies; a theme obviously taken up by arena-headliners such as *Rammstein*. *Opus Dei* also marks out Laibach’s acute sense of perversely twisting previously recorded songs into darker and more ominous works, something the band would follow-up on releases such as *Let it Be* and the unstoppable triumph of *Sympathy for the Devil*. Obviously, in a sense, Laibach is a joke on us all; although the band are deadly serious in its execution. The band ridicules rock’s own propaganda tactics with the use of those very same tools. However, that’s not a joke that has ever grown old or stale, especially in a musical world where promotion, marketing, and hype have eclipsed what Laibach probably imagined in their black-humored hearts. *Opus Dei* might well provide a few hearty laughs at rock’s expense, but it makes its point well--leaving a serious and wonderfully sour tang.

[Craig Hayes]

**Laibach – Opus Dei**
Released: 23 March 1987
Mute Records
Killing cut: "Geburt einer Nation"

**FOETUS - THAW**
J.G. Thirlwell, the one-man gang responsible for all incarnations of Foetus, did something special with 1988’s Thaw: he made an album about deviant sexual behavior, blatant racism, and drug abuse danceable. This may actually be the least abrasive/most accessible album underneath the Foetus moniker. "Don’t Hide It Provide It" has the kind of cock-rock swagger that had our moms’ asses shaking at the tavern when they met our dads. It’s basically biker music for at-risk youth. And by his own account, Thirlwell is going out of his way to be offensive with "Hauss-On-Fah," which sucks, because musically it’s the tilt-o-whirl with no line on dollar corn dog day at the fair. Just ignore every lyric on the album, and it’s a total blast. You Burzum apologists know how that goes.

[Chris Redar]

Foetus – Thaw
Released: September 1988
Some Bizarre
Killing cut: "English Faggot"

SKINNY PUPPY - VIVISECTVI
VIVISPectVI is not a friendly album. That much should be evident, I suppose, from such cuddly song titles as “Dogshit,” “Human Disease (S.K.U.M.M.),” “VX Gas Attack,” et al, but the point still bears repeating. On the Canadian band’s fourth album, Skinny Puppy crafted a perfect summation of industrial music’s invention, aggression, claustrophobia, and sloganeering potential. The nine songs of the original release (ratcheted up to an even more exhausting thirteen songs on the vital CD reissue) are outrageously robust collages of rich beats, manipulated samples, cut-and-paste disorientation, buried synths, almost danceable basslines, and Ogre’s viciously corrosive vocal effects. VIVIsectVI is an album that, once you allow yourself to dive deeply in its pools, does not easily permit you to emerge unscathed.

The classic “VX Gas Attack” makes vividly upsetting use of news coverage of the chemical weapons attacks carried out during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, while “Who’s Laughing Now” allows the tiniest bit of relief from the density of the other productions, only to damn your sanity with unexpected fits and hisses of noise. Ultimately, part of what makes VIVIsectVI such a disturbing experience is the seemingly random vocal and lyrical approach. The lyrics are like tablet after stone tablet thrown down from some hidden parapet to shatter in pieces and later be recombined, like this fragment from album opener “Dogshit”: “Hell piss fuck head rest pure acid hell filthy word mutation laughing hound hereafter stupid clown you asshole.” While the written effect is occasionally juvenile - like e.e. cummings by way of
The Joker - in its self-assured and utterly necessary delivery, an album full of horrifying words forces its way into your subconscious, carried on the back of chewed and mangled art-dead industrial dance chaos. The panicked conclusion of “State Aide” summarizes the appeal of prime-era Skinny Puppy well: “THANK YOU FUCK YOU THANK YOU FUCK YOU.”

[Dan Obstkrieg]

**Skinny Puppy – VIVISectVI**  
Released: 12 September 1988  
Nettwerk  
Killing cut: "VX Gas Attack"

**MINISTRY - THE LAND OF RAPE AND HONEY**

*The Land Of Rape And Honey* sits at a transitional point for Ministry, coming out of their earlier synth-pop-ish days and moving towards the industro-metallic masterpiece of *Psalm 69*. Opening cut "Stigmata" is one of the band's finest moments, machine rhythm and metal riff in mechanized lockstep. "Golden Dawn" rides a beat in the mode of Depeche, only here there's menace instead of mere melodramatic mope, synthetic drumming and biting bass beneath samples of Aleister Crowley chanting. From here,
Ministry would get heavier, darker, immersed in Jourgenson's demons, briefly for the better. *Rape* stands as their first industrial grade classic.

[Andrew Edmunds]

**Ministry** – *The Land of Rape and Honey*
Released: 11 October 1988
Sire Records
Killing cut: "Stigmata"

**FRONT 242 - FRONT BY FRONT**

Back in the early ‘90s, when industrial music’s manufactory electronics were enjoying their time in the spotlight, the one good thing about that mainstream(ish) attention was that some pioneering bands were finally given due credit for their influential creations. Take Belgian collective **Front 242**. The band’s early ‘80s EBM was hugely influential on industrial music’s subsequent chart success stories (especially once Front 242 joined the Wax Trax! crew), and while the band flirted with the charts in the early ‘90s with their *Tyranny (For You)* album, it’s Front 242’s preceding release, 1988’s *Front by Front*, that truly highlights just how important the band are.
*Front by Front* is, unquestionably, an industrial music classic. But that’s not because the album’s hit track “Headhunter” is a exemplary example of avant-garde electronics meeting dancefloor appeal, or that *Front by Front* was one of Wax Trax!’s strongest selling albums ever. Instead, what stands out about *Front by Front* is that it’s an entirely seamless album. It’s a definite example of fine-tuned, visionary mechanics, and from opener “Until Death (Us Do Part)” to closer "Welcome to Paradise", *Front by Front* perfectly marries stripped-down, percussive dance music with gothic futurism and the noise of technology. Front 242's legacy has clearly inspired industrial music’s chart toppers, but more crucial than that, is the fact that the band helped bring together disparate music scenes, revealing connections previously unseen. *Front by Front* is that fact, writ large.

[Craig Hayes]

**Front 242** – *Front by Front*
Released: 1988
Wax Trax!
Killing cut: "Headhunter v3.0"

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**FRONT LINE ASSEMBLY - GASHED SENSES & CROSSFIRE**
Front Line Assembly was born from the crucible of fellow Canadian titan of electronic industrialism Skinny Puppy. Bill Leeb, questing under the pseudonym Wilhelm Schroeder in Skinny Puppy’s ranks, left the band in the mid-80s, and joined by Michael Balch, and eventually noted producer Rhys Fulber, Front Line Assembly released five recordings before issuing their breakthrough album, 1989's *Gashed Senses & Crossfire*. Each release had incrementally increased the band's blending of their early electronic and industrial influences with steelier techno-based pursuits, but it's on *Gashed Senses & Crossfire* where that multifaceted combination finally, and most confidently, coalesced.

Like a lot of late ‘80s industrial bands, a wave of crossover creativity and fine use of new technologies marks *Gashed Senses & Crossfire*—and unfortunately, like a lot of bands from that era, Front Line Assembly’s inventiveness was often obscured by commercial success stories, like Nine Inch Nails. Still, although *Gashed Senses & Crossfire* wasn’t exactly a multi-platinum smash, it certainly exposed Front Line Assembly to a much larger audience, and album tracks like "Digital Tension Dementia", "Shutdown", “No Limit” and "Antisocial" highlighted the full potential of smashing metallic motifs into astringent dance beats. Following *Gashed Senses & Crossfire*’s release, Balch would exit the band, and Leeb and Fulber took Front Line Assembly on further impressive tours of synthesized damnation with great releases like *Caustic Grip* and *Tactical Neural Implant*. However, it’s *Gashed Senses & Crossfire* that allowed Leeb to step out from the shadow of Skinny Puppy, marking out Front Line Assembly’s own distinctive flavor of abrasive electronics, menacing samples, and crooked vocals.

[Craig Hayes]
For all that genre purists, underground happiness-botherers, and elitists of all stripes might thrash and moan, there’s really no way to discuss industrial in the ‘80s without mentioning its undisputedly biggest success story. The dirtbag backstory of its genesis - stitched together piece by piece while Trent Reznor worked the night shift as a janitor at the studio in Cleveland, Ohio where the album was recorded - is only part of the irresistible pull of *Pretty Hate Machine*. And no, of course *Nine Inch Nails* was not then (nor has ever really been) pure industrial music in the same way as many of the truly insurrectionist pioneers may have envisioned the style; in particular on *Pretty Hate Machine*, but also on everything that Reznor has put his name to since, the dominant mode is inerrantly keen pop songcraft, whether getting down in it or marching with the pigs. So yes, of course *Pretty Hate Machine* sounds more like *Depeche Mode* on a bit of a grumpy tangent than it does like the blast furnace-fueled clanking of great machines breeding dehumanization through regimented bodily
More so than even **Ministry**, Reznor’s Nine Inch Nails brought industrial to the mainstream. Whether you thank him or curse him for that is your own business, but none of it will change the album’s long shadow (even if it’s almost undeniably the case that the apotheosis of Reznor’s solipsistic genius would come later in his career). *Pretty Hate Machine* still ripples and thumps, gleams and twinkles with impossibly catchy bits of pop-jacketed dimestore nihilism. Certainly the goofy white-boy rap and “na-na-na” of “Down In It” has aged atrociously - as have the late ‘80s hip-hop/club beats of “Kinda I Want To” - but songs like “Sanctified,” “Terrible Lie,” “Ringfinger,” and yes, even the omnipresent “Head Like a Hole” still sound nearly as sharp and vital as ever. So whether Reznor well and truly drove the final nail in the heart of industrial by watering it down to court mainstream accessibility, or whether he wrought a minor masterstroke of a debut album by latticing together disparate elements of a fundamentally malleable musical movement, *Pretty Hate Machine* is a perfect storm of an album - upbeat and danceable enough for club kids, but detailed and downcast enough for your average home-listening introvert. And that, frankly, is something most of us can never have.

[Dan Obstkrieg]

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**Nine Inch Nails – Pretty Hate Machine**

Released: 20 October 1989

TVT Records

Killing cut: "**Terrible Lie**"