

CLASSIC ROCK ALMOSTS

From the mid-1960s to the early '80s, classic rock ruled the FM radio dial. This was a storied time in music history, but if not for a few twists of fate, some of those stories could have gone much differently. It's high time to take a long, strange trip back to what might have been.



Eric Clapton almost replaced George Harrison in the Beatles.

Story: Clapton was only 18 years old and already one of England's best guitarists when he met the Fab Four in 1964. He was adored by all four Beatles and soon became close friends with lead guitarist George Harrison. Clapton played the solo on Harrison's "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" for 1968's *The White Album* and Harrison co-wrote "Badge" with Clapton for the 1969 Cream album *Goodbye*.

But by then, the Beatles could barely stand each other. John Lennon was spending most of his time with his wife Yoko Ono, Paul McCartney was butting heads with his bandmates over the business side of things, Ringo Starr quit and then reluctantly returned, and Harrison was frustrated because he was allowed to contribute only a few songs per album.

Then came the 1970 *Let It Be* sessions, which were being filmed for a documentary. At one point, off camera, Harrison and Lennon got into a fistfight. Later, during rehearsals (and on camera), McCartney was patronizingly directing Harrison, who barked back, "I'll play whatever you want me to play, or I won't play at all." At lunch, Harrison announced, "Put an ad in, and get a few people in. See you 'round the clubs." Then he quit the Beatles.

"Let's get Eric," Lennon said a bit later. "He's just as good and not such a headache." That afternoon, the remaining Beatles "jammed violently" (as Starr later described it). Ono sat on Harrison's abandoned cushion and screamed into his microphone. "I think if George doesn't come back by Monday or Tuesday," Lennon reiterated, "we ask Eric to play."

Clapton's latest band, Blind Faith, had called it quits a few months earlier, so he was available. He was aware of what Lennon had proposed, but he was never formally offered a spot in the Beatles. It didn't matter, because ten days later, Harrison returned.

Why It Didn't Happen: As far as McCartney was concerned, it was John, Paul, George, and Ringo...or nothing. As for Clapton, "I don't think I could have been brought in because I was too much a mate of George's." But that's not the only reason he stayed away: "There were times when [the Beatles] was like the closest-knit family you've ever seen," recalled Clapton, "but the cruelty and the viciousness was unparalleled."

Harrison barked back, "I'll play whatever you want me to play, or I won't play at all."

Aftermath: In April 1970—just a few months after Harrison returned—McCartney released a solo album, and announced that the Beatles had broken up for good. A year later, Lennon wrote Clapton a letter practically begging him to...re-form the Beatles? “Eric, I know I can bring out something great, in fact greater in you than has been so far evident in your music. I hope to bring out the same kind of greatness in all of us, which I know will happen if/when we get together.”

But Clapton didn’t need the Beatles. He went on to form Derek and the Dominos before embarking on a very successful solo career. He remained friends with Harrison, even after running off with Harrison’s wife Pattie Boyd in one of rock ’n’ roll’s most sordid love triangles (but that’s another story).



Paul McCartney almost appeared on Pink Floyd’s *The Dark Side of the Moon.*

Story: Released in 1973, Pink Floyd’s breakout album introduced FM radio mainstays “Time,” “Money,” and “Brain Damage/Eclipse.” Along with its distinctive triangle-and-prism cover, *Dark Side* is known for its extensive use of sound effects (like the cash register at the beginning of “Money”) and its spoken word parts (like a line at the end of that song, “That geezer was cruising for a bruising”). For the spoken parts, lyricist and bass player Roger Waters created a set of flashcards with questions like, “When was the last time you got violent? Were you in the right?” and “Does death frighten you?”

As Waters recalled years later, “We would scour Abbey Road Studios for willing guinea pigs, bring them to the studio, sit them down, roll tape, and then ask them to respond to each card in order.” For example, the maniacal laughter that opens the album belonged to Floyd’s road manager Peter Watts (father of actress Naomi Watts), and the final line—“There is no dark side in the moon, really; as a matter of fact, it’s all dark”—was provided by Abbey Road’s Irish doorman, Gerry O’Driscoll.

It just so happened that Paul McCartney and Wings were down the hall recording the album *Red Rose Speedway*. Wings guitarist Henry McCullough provided one of *Dark Side*’s best-known lines (also at the end of “Money”): “I don’t know, I was really drunk at the time.” Paul and his wife Linda also participated in the Q&A sessions, but their answers didn’t make the final cut.

Why It Didn’t Happen: According to Floyd guitarist David Gilmour, Paul and Linda were “much too good at being evasive for their answers to be usable.” As Waters put it, “He was trying to be funny...He was the only person who found it necessary to perform.” Exactly what McCartney said has been lost to history, but for some reason he gave cheeky responses (like he did in the early Beatles days) instead of the raw, honest admissions Waters was hoping for.

Aftermath: McCartney has never given his side of the story, but to put things in perspective, this took place in 1972, when Pink Floyd was still just an art-house group



Why was the Patagonian toothfish renamed “Chilean sea bass” in 1977?
A fish wholesaler thought it would sell better. (He was right.)

with a dedicated following but no big hits. And McCartney was, well, Paul McCartney. It's a good bet that if the former Beatle had had any inkling that *Dark Side* would launch Floyd to superstardom and spend a record 18 years on the Billboard 200—selling 45 million copies and counting—he would have taken the session more seriously.



***The Dark Side of the Moon* was almost called *Eclipse (A Piece for Assorted Lunatics)*.**

Story: Pink Floyd spent an entire year working on their seminal 1973 album about universal themes like time, money, war, and lunacy. From the beginning, Roger Waters wanted to call it *Dark Side of the Moon*, but those plans hit a snag in 1972 when Medicine Head, an up-and-coming British blues-rock band, released an album called... *Dark Side of the Moon*. Garnering praise and support from influential rockers like John Lennon and Pete Townshend, it looked like Medicine Head's *Dark Side* would propel them to fame. Floyd guitarist David Gilmour later said that they were *very* annoyed, not at Medicine Head directly, but because “we had already thought of the title.” There wasn't much they could do about it, though, so Waters renamed the album *Eclipse (A Piece for Assorted Lunatics)*.

Why It Didn't Happen: Despite critical praise, Medicine Head's *Dark Side of the Moon* flopped, so Floyd quietly reclaimed the title and hoped no one would say anything. No one did. Waters ended up using the name “Eclipse” for the album's final track, which was originally called “End.”



Rick Wakeman almost joined *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*.

Story: In 1969, Wakeman was 20 years old and training to become a concert pianist in London when he decided to quit school to become a session musician because it paid better. “One Take Wakeman,” as he came to be called, quickly gained a reputation not just for his virtuoso playing but for his composing and arranging prowess. One of his first jobs—for which he received £9 (\$21.50)—was playing the Mellotron on David Bowie's first hit single, “Space Oddity” (the one that begins “This is Ground Control to Major Tom”). That session made Wakeman a Bowie fan for life.

Over the next two years, while playing in a folk-rock band called the Strawbs, Wakeman did session work for other top-tier acts such as Cat Stevens (he played the piano intro on “Morning Has Broken”), T. Rex, Elton John, and the crowning

DID YOU KNOW?

David Bowie was well ahead of his time when it came to music, fashion, and...the internet? His 1996 song “Telling Lies” was the first released solely online (300,000 people each spent around 11 minutes to download it). A year later, he launched the first internet subscription service, Bowienet. “I don't think we've seen the tip of the iceberg,” he said at the time. “We're on the cusp of something both exhilarating and terrifying.”

achievement of his early career: playing piano on Bowie’s “Life on Mars?” All the while, Wakeman was feeling stifled by his folk-rock band; he wanted to play in a progressive rock band like the one that the Strawbs had recently opened for, Yes.

Formed in London in 1968, Yes hit it big in 1971 with *The Yes Album* (featuring “I’ve Seen All Good People” and “Starship Trooper”). What Wakeman didn’t know at the time was that Yes was feeling stifled by their keyboardist, Tony Kaye, who was reluctant to expand beyond a Hammond organ. Then Yes’s Chris Squire (bass) and Jon Anderson (vocals) read an interview in *Melody Maker* magazine, in which Wakeman predicted that keyboards would become “almost the orchestral part of a band.” That’s exactly what Yes wanted.

In July 1971, Wakeman auditioned for Yes. They clicked immediately; by the end of that first jam session, Wakeman and the band had worked out the foundations for what would become two of Yes’s biggest hits, “Roundabout” and “Heart of the Sunrise.”

Later that day, Wakeman received an offer that any other keyboardist in England would have jumped at: to join Bowie on his next concept album, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*. “I sat up nearly all night thinking about it,” Wakeman recalled. “It was one of the most difficult decisions of my career.”

Why It Didn’t Happen: “If I joined Yes—and David was much bigger than Yes at the time—I thought, at least I’ll be able to...put in some of my own thoughts and music, and I could grow with it. So, I called David up and said, ‘I’m going to join Yes.’”

Aftermath: The decision paid off. Wakeman’s contributions to Yes’s next two albums, *Fragile* and *Close to the Edge*, helped make them huge hits both critically and commercially. Wakeman has been involved with Yes (on and off) ever since, while also releasing more than 90 solo albums. (Though not as well known in the U.S., he’s a household name in England.)

Wakeman admits to having “some regret” that he didn’t play on *Spiders from Mars*, which spawned two of Bowie’s biggest hits—“Suffragette City” and “Starman”—and sold 7.5 million copies. “The truth of the matter is,” Wakeman said in 2016 following Bowie’s death, “David was undoubtedly the most influential person I’ve ever worked with, but when I told him I was joining Yes, he said, ‘You’ve made absolutely the right decision.’”



5 FAMOUS CHRISTMAS SONGS WRITTEN BY JOHNNY MARKS

- “Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer”
- “Run Rudolph Run”
- “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day”
- “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree”
- “A Holly Jolly Christmas”



Why is New Mexico the only state with “USA” on its license plate? To avoid confusion...

MORE CLASSIC ROCK ALMOSTS

More stories of how a few twists of fate almost changed the history of rock 'n' roll. (Part I is on page 179.)



THE LOVIN' SPOONFUL ALMOST BECAME THE MONKEES.

Story: For a band that no one talks about that much anymore, the Lovin' Spoonful was a very big deal in the mid-1960s. They had nine top-20 hits from 1965 to 1967. Paul McCartney said the Beatles' "Good Day Sunshine" "was me trying to write something similar to 'Daydream'" (the song that begins "What a day for a daydream"). Ray Davies of the Kinks said he was more influenced by the Spoonful than the Beatles. Eric Clapton has cited the Spoonful as having a huge impact on his band, Cream. One of the Spoonful's other big hits, "Do You Believe in Magic," lives on in numerous TV commercials and in Disney films like *Return to Never Land*.

In 1965, two Hollywood filmmakers, Bob Rafelson and Bert Schneider, set out to make a TV sitcom that would cash in on the popularity of the Beatles' zany adventures in the film *A Hard Day's Night*. The original plan was to hire an existing band, and the Lovin' Spoonful—fresh from New York's Greenwich Village folk scene—fit the bill perfectly. Taking the job would turn them into instant celebrities.

Why It Didn't Happen: Rafelson and Schneider wanted to hire their own songwriters and retain the rights to the songs. "When we were asked to be a television rock 'n' roll group, we knew it was going to be as puppets, and we still had a few things to offer," explained lead singer John Sebastian (whose 1976 solo hit "Welcome Back" was used in 2020 for an Applebee's commercial).

Aftermath: With the Lovin' Spoonful out of contention (the band lasted until 1969), Rafelson and Schneider put out a casting call in Hollywood for "folk & rock musician-singers...four insane boys, age 17–21."



STEPHEN STILLS WAS ALMOST A MONKEE.

Story: More than 400 aspiring musicians and actors auditioned for one of the two remaining spots in NBC's 1966 sitcom about a zany rock group. The first two—English singer/actor Davy Jones and former child star and singer Micky Dolenz—had already been cast through their agents. The third spot went to singer-songwriter Mike Nesmith. Other future stars who tried out included Harry Nilsson and Paul Williams. (Despite the rumor that won't seem to die, Charles Manson did not audition for the Monkees.)



Can you name the only two countries in the world that are "doubly landlocked"—landlocked and surrounded by other countries that are also landlocked? Liechtenstein and Uzbekistan.

Stephen Stills, a 20-year-old singer-songwriter who had made a name for himself in New York's Greenwich Village folk scene, was the top prospect to fill the final spot. He had everything show creators Bob Rafelson and Bert Schneider were looking for: He could act, sing, and write catchy songs. But there were two things about Stills they didn't want.

Why It Didn't Happen: The story most often told is that Stills had "bad teeth and a receding hairline." While those two factors certainly didn't help his chances, there was another

"I want to write the songs because that's where the moola is."

reason he never became a Monkee. Like the Lovin' Spoonful, who were originally offered the job but declined, Stills would have had to give up his creative freedom and his publishing rights, so he told them, "I'm not that interested in the show... mainly I want to write the songs because that's where the moola is."

Aftermath: Rafelson asked Stills if he could recommend someone with the same "open Nordic look" (but with better teeth). "I know another guy that's a lot like me," he replied, "and he might be a little bit quicker and funnier." That other guy was Stills's former Greenwich Village bandmate, a 24-year-old folk singer named Peter Tork, who was working as a dishwasher in L.A. when he auditioned for the Monkees.

Tork got the part—playing a dim-witted version of himself, which he never quite lived down—and for the next two years was one of the most famous people in the country. His made-for-TV band outsold the Beatles in that time period, but for Tork, landing the "role of a lifetime" was a double-edged sword. As he sarcastically recalled years later: "Poor Steve had to settle for the consolation prize: Buffalo Springfield and then Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. Poor boy, he really suffered terribly for not being photogenic. And I dipped into the obscurities of Monkeedom."

Bonus fact: Rafelson and Schneider used their Monkees profits to finance a movie—the 1969 film *Easy Rider*, which brought 1960s counterculture into the mainstream, was one of the year's highest-grossing films, earned two Oscar nominations, and made Jack Nicholson a star.



PHIL COLLINS ALMOST JOINED THE WHO.

Story: From the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, the Who was one of the most respected but unpredictable bands in the world. A big reason for that went to Keith Moon, one of rock's most respected but unpredictable drummers. (The Muppets character Animal was based on Moon.) Then, in 1978, Moon died of a drug overdose, leaving the future of the band in doubt. "The Who were sleepwalking along the edge of a cliff," recalled guitarist Pete Townshend. "The band had become a celebration of itself and was slowly grinding to a halt. But no one would make a decision to call it a day."

What's the Half Way to Hell Club? Golden Gate Bridge construction workers who fell off the bridge...and landed on safety nets. There were 19 members.

One thing that Townshend was craving: stability. As he said in 2020, Moon's reckless abandon—both in his life and behind the kit—made him “difficult to play with.” That explains why Townshend looked to fill the empty drum stool with an old friend, Kenney Jones, formerly of the Faces, who was as mild as Moon was wild.

Before the lineup change was announced to the public, however, Townshend got a proposition from Phil Collins, drummer of the progressive rock band Genesis, whose own star had been rising after taking over lead vocals from Peter Gabriel in 1975. As Collins later recalled: “I was working with Townshend just after Moon died, and I said to him: ‘Have you got anybody to play the drums? Cos I’d love to do it. I’ll leave Genesis.’”

Why It Didn't Happen: “And Pete said: ‘F*ck, we’ve just asked Kenney Jones,’” said Collins, adding, “Because Kenney, unbeknownst to most people, played on stuff when Keith was too out of it. He was far too polite for the Who, but I would have done the job.”

Aftermath: It's safe to say that the 1980s would have sounded a whole lot different if Phil Collins had joined the Who. Instead, he stayed with Genesis and also became one of the top-selling solo artists of the decade, with an astounding 13 top-ten songs between 1984 and 1990.

The Who didn't fare as well. Jones lasted for two studio albums—neither of which performed well—and lead singer Roger Daltrey later admitted that he never thought the staid drummer was a “good fit.” The Who disbanded in 1982 after embarking on its first “Farewell Tour.”

Collins did join the Who in L.A. in 1989 for a star-studded performance of the 1969 rock opera *Tommy*. And he has high praise for the man who's been drumming behind Townshend and Daltrey in recent years: Zak Starkey, son of Ringo Starr and godson of Keith Moon. “They’ve got a great drummer now in Zak,” said Collins. “Someone with the balls that Moony had.”

* * *

A FISH STORY

Peter Joyce was paddling the Waccamaw River in North Carolina on a hot summer day in 2020 when, as he later described, “I thought I heard a fish jump to my left.” So he looked over to his left...just in time to see a large alligator coming at him. At full speed. With its head all the way out of the water. Before Joyce could react, the gator plowed into his kayak and capsized it, sending Joyce underwater. Luckily, Joyce was able to grab a nearby tree limb and right the boat (and himself). By that time, the gator was gone. “Turned out not to be a fish,” he said.



Australia is wider than the Moon.

STILL MORE CLASSIC ROCK ALMOSTS

Our final batch of stories about how a few twists of fate almost changed the history of popular music. (Part II is on page 260.)



FREDDIE MERCURY AND MICHAEL JACKSON ALMOST FINISHED RECORDING A SONG TOGETHER.

Story: The late 1970s and early 1980s saw a slew of chart-topping superstar duets. Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder on “Ebony and Ivory.” Paul McCartney and Michael Jackson on “Say Say Say.” Mick Jagger and David Bowie on “Dancin’ in the Streets.” David Bowie and John Lennon on “Fame.” Queen and David Bowie on “Under Pressure.” Freddie Mercury and Michael Jackson on “There Must Be More to Life Than This.” Never heard of that last one? That’s because it wasn’t released until after both singers were long dead.

Why It Didn’t Happen: According to legend, Jackson’s pet llama ruined the recording sessions. That did happen, but there was more to it than that. The King of Pop was a huge fan of Queen, attended several of their shows, and eventually struck up a friendship with Mercury. In fact, it was Jackson who convinced Queen to release “Another One Bites the Dust” as a single in 1980. The band was hesitant, but as Jackson predicted, the song hit number one.

Mercury and Jackson had often talked about working together. By the time their schedules allowed them to collaborate in 1983, “Wacko Jacko,” as the tabloids had started calling him, was spending nearly all his time at his home studio in Encino, California, on the sprawling Jackson estate where he grew up. So Mercury had to travel there. The plan was to record three songs: “There Must Be More to Life Than This” (which Queen had started but never finished for 1982’s *Hot Space*), “State of Shock,” and “Victory.”

But they barely completed one song because, as Mercury said in an exasperated phone call to his manager: “Michael’s bringing his pet llama to the studio every day! I’m really not used to recording with a llama, and I’ve had enough. And I want to get out.”

Other than Jackson doting over his llama (named Louie), the sessions were reportedly going well until Mercury left. He said he regretted not getting to them sooner: “I think one of the songs would have been on the *Thriller* album if we had finished it, but I missed out.”



Biologists say a zebra’s stripes help repel flies—the insects get confused and can’t land and bite.

Aftermath: The Queen singer recorded a solo version of “There Must Be More to Life Than This” for his 1985 solo album *Mr. Bad Guy*, but he never got the chance to work with Jackson again. Mercury was diagnosed with AIDS in 1987 and died in 1991.

In 2014, five years after Jackson’s death, Queen guitarist Brian May and drummer Roger Taylor finished the song for an album of “forgotten tracks” called *Queen Forever*, bringing in one of the industry’s most renowned producers, William Orbit (U2, Prince, Madonna), to combine the original Queen backing track with the separate vocal tracks that Mercury and Jackson had laid down a year later. “Hearing Michael Jackson’s vocals was stirring,” said Orbit. “So vivid, so cool, and poignant, it was like he was in the studio singing live. With Freddie’s vocal solo on the mixing desk, my appreciation for his gift was taken to an even higher level.” If you’ve never heard the duet, be forewarned—it’s definitely on the schmaltzy side (“I live and hope for a world filled with love”) but definitely worth a listen. What about the other two songs? “Victory” never saw the light of day, but “State of Shock” was re-recorded by the Jacksons in 1984 with lead vocals by Michael Jackson and Mick Jagger. It reached number three on the *Billboard* Hot 100.

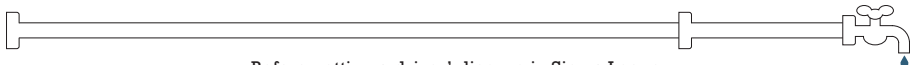


PETER FRAMPTON ALMOST JOINED GRAND FUNK RAILROAD.

Story: Another defining aspect of classic rock is the live album. Standouts include the Who’s *Live at Leeds* (1970), Led Zeppelin’s *The Song Remains the Same* (1976), the Allman Brothers Band’s *At Fillmore East* (1971), and Humble Pie’s *Performance: Rockin’ the Fillmore* (1971), which featured Englishman Peter Frampton on vocals and lead guitar. But the live album that arguably made the greatest impact on classic rock radio stations was 1976’s *Frampton Comes Alive*, which yielded three top-15 singles: “Show Me the Way,” “Baby I Love Your Way,” and “Do You Feel Like We Do.”

Ten years earlier, at age 16, Frampton joined a band called the Herd and quickly became one of England’s most sought-after guitarists. Then he joined singer Steve Marriott of the Small Faces in one of rock’s first “supergroups,” Humble Pie. Despite the supergroup status, they weren’t chart-toppers. And by the time *Performance: Rockin’ the Fillmore* was released in 1971, Frampton had already left Humble Pie to go solo.

Grand Funk Railroad (often shortened to Grand Funk), started out as a blues-rock band from Flint, Michigan. They’re known as much for their 10-minute opus “I’m Your Captain (Closer to Home)” (1970) as they are for their roller-coaster career. The band went from breaking a Beatles’ ticket-sales record in 1971 (the fastest band to sell out New York’s Shea Stadium) to getting sued for everything except their name by their manager (and former friend) Terry Knight. “He had taken all of our money and we were broke,” recalled drummer Don Brewer. If they wanted to stay afloat, they’d need a hit. “Rock radio was changing from being the FM underground thing with seven-minute songs,” said Brewer. “FM was becoming the hit radio and we needed to



Before getting a driver’s license in Sierra Leone, applicants have to play a driving safety board game called *The Drivers’ Way*.

follow that trend. We had done a tour with Humble Pie, and we heard that Frampton was no longer with them and that he was looking for something else.”

As one of rock’s rare singer-songwriters who could also play blistering guitar solos, Frampton would have been a huge addition to Grand Funk. “It was a phenomenal tour,” recalled Frampton, “and I got to know the guys really well. So when I announced that I was leaving Humble Pie, Grand Funk were the first people to say, ‘Will you join up with us?’”

Why It Didn’t Happen: Though Frampton was “thrilled and honored,” he told them, “I’ve got to stick with my guns and go this solo route.”

Aftermath: But by 1975, after five years and four solo albums that garnered better reviews than sales, Frampton must have been wondering if he’d taken the correct route. He paid the bills with session work (his highlight was playing guitar on George Harrison’s *All Things Must Pass*). All the while, Frampton toured with his band as often as he could, perfecting his live act, which came to include his signature “voice box” guitar effect.

It all came together one summer night in 1975 at the Winterland Ballroom in San Francisco. “We did this show that’s one where you walk off and go, ‘Oh, wish we’d recorded that.’ Well, we did.” *Frampton Comes Alive* hit record stores the following January and took off beyond his wildest dreams, spending 10 weeks at number one on its way to becoming the best-selling album of the year.

Who knows what would have become of Grand Funk if Frampton had accepted their offer? (After Joe Walsh joined the Eagles in 1975, their next album was *Hotel California*.) The Michigan rockers did manage a few hits—most notably 1974’s “We’re an American Band”—but nothing they did was as successful as *Frampton Comes Alive*. They split up in 1976, re-formed a few years later, split up again, and so on. In 2016, Grand Funk (with two original members) joined the “Rock Legends” cruise ship tour, sharing the bill with headliner Peter Frampton.



A FEW MORE NEAR MISSES

- Before he formed Led Zeppelin, Jimmy Page almost started a band with drummer Keith Moon (who wanted to quit the Who), bassist John Paul Jones, and fellow Yardbird guitarist Jeff Beck. They would have been called the New Yardbirds.
- Blind Faith almost played at Woodstock.
- Simon and Garfunkel’s “Mrs. Robinson” was almost called “Mrs. Roosevelt.” (The original lyrics were about First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.)
- Pink Floyd almost did the music for *A Clockwork Orange* and *Caddyshack*.
- Crosby, Stills and Nash almost did a song for the 1983 movie *WarGames*.
- John Lennon almost starred in the 1983 movie *WarGames*.



Adolphe Sax invented the saxophone, as well as the saxhorn, saxtuba, and saxtromba.