

## CHAPTER EIGHT: “ROCK AROUND THE CLOCK”: ROCK ’N’ ROLL, 1954–1959

### Chapter Outline

#### I. Rock ’n’ Roll, 1954–1959

The advent of rock ’n’ roll during the mid-1950s brought about enormous changes in American popular music.

Styles previously considered on the margins of mainstream popular music were infiltrating the center and eventually came to dominate it.

R&B and country music recordings were no longer geared toward a specialized market.

1. Began to be heard on mainstream pop radio
2. Could be purchased nationwide in music stores that catered to the general public

#### Misconceptions

3. It is important to not mythologize or endorse common misconceptions about the emergence of rock ’n’ roll.
  - a) Rock ’n’ roll was not a new style of music or even any single style of music.

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- b) The era of rock ’n’ roll was not the first time music was written specifically to appeal to young people.
- c) Rock ’n’ roll was not the first American music to bring black and white pop styles into close interaction.
- d) “Rock ’n’ roll” was a designation that was introduced as a commercial and marketing term for the purpose of identifying a new target for music products.

### II. The Rise of Rhythm & Blues and the Teenage Market

The target audience for rock ’n’ roll during the 1950s consisted of baby boomers, Americans born after World War II.

1. Relatively young target audience
2. An audience that shared some specific important characteristics of group cultural identity:
  - a) Recovering from the trauma of World War II—return to normalcy
  - b) Growing up in the relative economic stability and prosperity of the 1950s yet under the threat of atomic war between the United States and the USSR

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- c) The first generation to grow up with television—a new outlet for instantaneous nationwide distribution of music
  - d) The Cold War with the Soviet Union was in full swing and fostered the anticommunist movement in the United States.
3. New levels of racial tension in America emerged following the 1954 Supreme Court decision in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, mandating the end of racial segregation in public schools.
4. The emergence of rock ’n’ roll as a genre and a market was dependent on a teenage audience with a disposable income.
5. Teenagers listened to radio programs that contradicted the Tin Pan Alley entertainment of their parents:
- a) Vocal styles were raw, harsh, and threatening.
  - b) Lyrics were suggestive or even explicit.
  - c) Instruments were played loudly (especially the electric guitar and drums).
  - d) Drum beats produced emphatic dance rhythms.
  - e) The prevailing emotion was excitement.

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6. Juke box operators, record store owners, and disc jockeys noticed a demand for R&B among white teenagers in the early 1950s.

### Alan Freed and rock ’n’ roll

7. Alan Freed (1922–1965)
  - a) Disc jockey and concert promoter
  - b) Dubbed the “Pied Piper” of rock ’n’ roll
  - c) Supporter and champion of R&B
8. “Rock ’n’ roll”
  - a) Term derived from the many references to “rockin’” and “rollin’” in R&B songs and race records
  - b) Clearly had sexual implications, which eventually faded as “rock ’n’ roll” increasingly came to refer simply to a type of music
9. *The Moondog Rock and Roll Party*
  - a) In 1951, Freed hosted a radio program on the independent station WJW in Cleveland called *The Moondog Rock and Roll Party*.

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- b) As a disc jockey, he played an important role in broadening the audience for R&B among white teenagers during the early 1950s.
- c) During the rock ’n’ roll years, he supported black artists by securing them appearances in films and promoting concerts for racially mixed audiences.
- d) He would also regularly feature black artists’ records on his radio show.
- e) Freed promoted African American musicians in the face of resistance in society as a whole to the idea of racial integration.

### 10. WINS and New York City

- a) Freed moved his very successful radio show to WINS in New York in 1954.
- b) By 1954, dozens of R&B disc jockeys emerged around the country with shows aimed at white, middle-class teenage audiences.
- c) Freed was featured in three films: *Rock around the Clock* (1956), *Rock, Rock, Rock*, (1956), and *Don’t Knock the Rock* (1957).

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11. By 1958, he was a national celebrity; however, his fame and fortune did not last long.

- a) His preference for original R&B records instead of the white cover versions put him at odds with the music industry.
- b) In 1958, his TV show, *Rock ’n’ Roll Dance Party*, was cancelled when the camera showed Frankie Lymon, a black teenage singer, dancing with a white girl.
- c) Later that year, he was charged with inciting a riot when fights broke out at a concert he promoted in Boston.
- d) His career was ruined by payola investigations. He was accused of accepting bribes from record companies and was fired by WABC in 1959.
- e) In 1962, he was found guilty of commercial bribery. In 1964, unemployed and suffering from alcoholism, he was charged with income tax evasion.
- f) He died before his case came to trial.

### III. Cover Versions and Early Rock ’n’ Roll

Cover versions

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1. Copies of previously recorded performances; often adaptations of the originals’ style and sensibility, and usually aimed at cashing in on their success
2. Often were bowdlerized imitations of R&B songs
3. Usually performed by white singers such as Pat Boone
4. Helped fuel the market for rock ‘n’ roll

### The “Little Bird Told Me” decision

5. A 1947 recording of “A Little Bird Told Me” by R&B star Paula Watson for the independent label Supreme was covered in 1951 by singer Evelyn Knight for Decca Records.
6. Supreme sued Decca and lost the case. A judge ruled that musical arrangements are not copyrightable property.
7. This case opened the gates for cover versions.

### Cover version 1: Big Joe Turner, Bill Haley, and “Shake, Rattle, and Roll”

8. Big Joe Turner (1911–85)
  - a) Often called the original and greatest “blues shouter” because of his spirited, sometimes raucous vocal delivery

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- b) Born in Kansas City, started out singing with local bands led by Bennie Moten, Andy Kirk, and Count Basie
- c) His partnership with boogie-woogie pianist Pete Johnson in the late thirties made him nationally famous.
- d) From 1945 to 1951, he made recordings with many different labels before signing with Atlantic in 1951.
- e) “Shake, Rattle, and Roll” (1954) was his biggest rock ’n’ roll record for Atlantic.

9. The original “Shake, Rattle, and Roll,” by Big Joe Turner (February 1954)

A *Get out of that bed, wash your face and hands*

A *Get out of that bed, wash your face and hands*

B *Well you get in that kitchen, make some noise with the pots and pans*

A *Well you wear those dresses, sun comes shinin’ through*

A *Well you wear those dresses, sun comes shinin’ through*

B *I can't believe my eyes—all of this belongs to you*

A *I believe to my soul you're the devil, and now I know*

A *I believe to my soul you're the devil, and now I know*

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B *Well the harder I work, the faster my money goes*

Chorus:

*Shake, rattle, and roll (4 times)*

*Well you won’t do right to save your dog gone soul*

A *I’m like a one-eyed cat, peepin’ in a seafood store*

A *I’m like a one-eyed cat, peepin’ in a seafood store*

B *Well I can look at you and tell you ain’t no child no more*

Chorus:

*Shake, rattle, and roll (4 times)*

*Well you won’t do right to save your dog gone soul*

A *I said over the hill, and way down underneath*

A *I said over the hill, and way down underneath*

B *You make me roll my eyes, baby make me grit my teeth*

Chorus:

*Shake, rattle, and roll (4 times)*

*Well you won’t do nothin’ to save your dog gone soul*

10. “Shake, Rattle, and Roll,” by Bill Haley and the Comets (June 1954)

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a) The lyrics were bowdlerized by the producer Milt Gabler to ensure airplay on white radio stations.

b) This song was only a minor hit when it was released.

A *Get out in that kitchen and rattle those pots and pans*

A *Get out in that kitchen and rattle those pots and pans*

B *Well roll my breakfast cause I’m a hungry man*

Chorus:

*Shake, rattle, and roll (4 times)*

*Well you never do nothin’ to save your dog gone soul*

A *Wearin’ those dresses, hair done up so nice*

A *Wearin’ those dresses, hair done up so nice*

B *You look so warm, but your heart is cold as ice*

Chorus:

*Shake, rattle, and roll (4 times)*

*Well you never do nothin’ to save your dog gone soul*

A *I’m like a one-eyed cat, peepin’ in a seafood store*

A *I’m like a one-eyed cat, peepin’ in a seafood store*

B *I can look at you and tell you don’t love me no more*

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A *I believe you’re doin’ me wrong and now I know*

A *I believe you’re doin’ me wrong and now I know*

B *The more I work, the faster my money goes*

Chorus:

*Shake, rattle, and roll* (4 times)

*Well you never do nothin’ to save your dog gone soul*

Cover version 2: The Chords, the Crew Cuts, and “Sh-Boom”

11. Original version composed and performed by the Chords

- a) Good example of the R&B black vocal group style
- b) Number Two R&B, Number Five pop in 1954
- c) Standard AABA love ballad with unexpected elements in the arrangement and performance

(1) Uptempo

(2) A cappella vocal introduction

(3) Scat singing—borrowed from jazz

(4) Sax solo accompanied by doo-wop backup vocals

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12. Cover version by The Crew Cuts

- a) One of the most famous cover versions of the era
- b) Number One for nine weeks in 1954
- c) Begins with scat singing
- d) No sax solo—group nonsense-syllable singing and timpani stroke
- e) Sounds more like a novelty record
- f) Crooner style

Cover version 3: Herman (“Little Junior”) Parker, Elvis Presley, and “Mystery Train”

13. Original version recorded in 1953 by Herman (“Little Junior”) Parker (1927–71)

- a) Singer, songwriter, and harmonica player
- b) His R&B band, Little Junior’s Blue Flames, recorded “Mystery Train” for Sam Phillips’s Sun label in Memphis, Tennessee.
- c) Received little attention at the time of its release

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d) Strophic twelve-bar blues structure, with one harmonic irregularity

(1) Some strophes begin on the subdominant chord rather than on the tonic

(2) The first two four-bar phrases of these particular strophes are harmonically identical.

e) Darkly evocative record with obvious roots both in rural blues and in R&B traditions

(1) The train was a favorite subject for country blues singers.

(2) The spare, nonlinear lyrics are clearly aligned with country blues traditions; this train is certainly “mysterious.”

f) Instrumentation—typical R&B lineup for its time: electric guitar, acoustic bass, piano, drums, and saxophone.

(1) “Chugging” rhythm conveys the train’s steady, inexorable momentum.

(2) The saxophone evokes the train’s whistle.

(3) Vocals imitate the sound of the train’s brakes as it finally comes to a stop.

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(4) In the first strophe, the “long black train,” with its “sixteen coaches” taking the singer’s “baby” away, paints a funereal picture.

(5) By the time we reach the third and final strophe, the train is bringing Baby back to the singer, and the mood has brightened.

(6) But that brightening is darkened by the certainty already communicated in the second strophe: the train that took Baby away will “do it again.”

(7) Parker’s “Mystery Train” articulates a pessimistic worldview characteristic of the blues by asserting that the singer may triumph over adversity, but only temporarily. (Two out of the three strophes portray Baby’s departure, while only one depicts her anticipated return.)

14. Cover version—recorded early in 1955 by Elvis Presley for Sun Records

- a) The last record that Elvis made with Sam Phillips before he signed with RCA Victor
- b) More aggressive and raw than the original

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- c) The expression of a young white singer looking with optimism toward an essentially unbounded future, flush with new possibilities for stylistic synthesis that would help ensure both intensely satisfying personal expression and an unprecedented degree of popular success
- d) Less a traditional cover than a reconceptualization of the song
- e) The two versions demonstrate the synergy between R&B and country music that led to rock ’n’ roll and the essential role of small, independent record labels in disseminating “marginal” music.

### The rock ’n’ roll business

15. The vitality of the American economy after World War II pushed the profits of the entertainment industry to new levels.

- a) Sales of record players and radios expanded significantly after the war.
- b) Total annual record sales in the United States rose from \$191 million in 1951 to \$514 million in 1959.

16. Growth was accompanied by a gradual diversification of mainstream popular taste and the reemergence of indie record companies.

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a) Most of these smaller companies specialized in R&B and country and western recordings.

b) They began to attract a large national audience.

17. The “majors,” large record companies such as RCA Victor, Capitol, Mercury, Columbia, MGM, and Decca

a) Specialized mainly in the music of Tin Pan Alley, performed by crooners

b) Decca managed to score some early rock ‘n’ roll hits with its R&B and country and western records.

c) Other large companies took several years to react to the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll.

d) RCA signed rockabilly star Elvis Presley and began promoting him as a Hollywood matinee idol and rock ‘n’ roll’s first superstar.

18. Sales charts published in industry periodicals like *Billboard* and *Cashbox* during the 1950s chronicle changes in popular taste:

a) The role of the indies in channeling previously marginal types of music into the pop mainstream

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- b) The emergence of a new teenage market
- c) Complex patterns of competition among musical styles
- d) Rock ’n’ roll records were side by side on the charts with Latin American ballroom dance hits and recordings by big band crooners such as Frank Sinatra.

Bill Haley (1925–81), former DJ and western swing bandleader from Pennsylvania

19. Dropped his cowboy image, changed the name of his accompanying group from the Saddlemen to the Comets

20. In 1953, wrote and recorded the song “Crazy, Man, Crazy,” which offered a reasonable emulation of dance-oriented black R&B.

- a) The record, released by a small indie label, rose to Number Twelve on the pop charts.

21. In 1954, the Comets were signed by Decca Records.

- a) Moved toward the R&B jump band sound encouraged by A&R man Milt Gabler, who had produced a series of hit records with Louis Jordan and his Tympany Five.

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b) Bill Haley and the Comets recorded commercially successful cover versions of R&B hits in the mid-1950s:

(1) “Shake, Rattle, and Roll” (Number Seven, 1954)

(2) “See You Later, Alligator” (Number Six, 1956)

22. Their largest success came in 1955 with “Rock around the Clock” (Number One, 1955).

- a) Recorded in 1954 and not a big hit when first released
- b) Popularized in the 1955 movie *Blackboard Jungle*, a film about inner-city teenagers and juvenile delinquency
- c) Became the first rock ’n’ roll record to be a Number One pop hit
- d) Stayed in the top spot for eight consecutive weeks during the summer of 1955
- e) Eventually sold over twenty-two million copies worldwide
- f) “Rock around the Clock” demonstrated the unprecedented success that a white group with a country background could achieve playing a twelve-bar blues song driven by the sounds of electric guitar, bass, and drums.

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g) Signaled the enormous changes in American popular music and opened the floodgates for artists like Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, and Buddy Holly.

### The electric guitar

23. Rock ‘n’ roll elevated the electric guitar to a central position in American popular music.

24. Development of the electric guitar shows the complex relationship between technological developments and changing musical styles.

25. Up through the end of World War II, the guitar was found mainly in popular music that originated in the South (blues and hillbilly music) and in various “exotic” genres (Hawaiian and Latin American guitar records were quite popular in the 1920s and 1930s).

26. Because of its low volume, the acoustic guitar was difficult to use in large dance bands and equally difficult to record.

27. Engineers began to experiment with electronically amplified guitars in the 1920s.

28. In 1931, the Electro String Instrument Company (better known as Rickenbacker) introduced the first commercially produced electric guitars.

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a) Laid across the player’s knees like the steel or Hawai’ian guitars used in country music and blues, these instruments were called “frying pans” because of their distinctive round bodies and long necks.

29. By the mid-1930s, the Gibson Company had introduced a hollow-body guitar with a new type of pickup—a magnetic plate or coil attached to the body of the guitar, which converts the physical vibrations of its strings into patterns of electric energy.

a) This pickup later became known as the Charlie Christian pickup after the young African American guitarist from Texas (1916–42) who introduced the guitar into Benny Goodman’s band and helped pioneer the modern jazz style called “bebop.”

30. The solid-body electric guitar

- a) Developed after World War II
- b) First used in R&B, blues, and country bands
- c) The first commercially produced solid-body electric guitar was the Fender Broadcaster (soon renamed the Telecaster), brainchild of Leo Fender and George Fullerton.

This model, released in 1948, featured two electronic pickups, knobs to control volume and tone (timbre), and a

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switch so that the two pickups could be used alone or together, enabling the player to create a palette of sounds.

d) In 1954, Fender released the Stratocaster

(1) The first guitar with three pickups

(2) The first with a “whammy bar” or “vibrato bar,” a metal rod attached to the guitar’s bridge that allowed the player to bend pitches with his right as well as his left hand.

e) The Gibson Company released a solid-body guitar in 1952.

(1) Named the Les Paul in honor of the popular guitarist who helped popularize the new instrument and the use of multiple track tape recording

f) The Fender Precision Bass, the first widely popular electric bass guitar, was introduced in 1951.

31. The instrument came into the popular mainstream with a somewhat dubious reputation.

a) Carryover from the medieval European association of stringed instruments with the Devil

b) Associated with the music of marginalized regions and people

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- c) A lot of the put-downs aimed at young rock ’n’ rollers by the mainstream music press of the 1950s ridiculed the guitar, suggesting that it was an instrument that anyone could play.
- d) The electric guitar became a symbol of the energetic diversity that was elbowing its way into the mainstream of American popular music during this period.
- e) This feeling of excess and invasion was reinforced by the development of portable tube amplifiers, which, if pushed hard enough, could provide a dense, sizzling, and very loud sound, eventually augmented by special effects devices such as wah-wah pedals and “fuzz boxes,” and perfectly designed to drive parents and other authority figures nuts.
- f) The suitability of the guitar for use as a phallic symbol—a formerly male practice more recently appropriated by female rockers—has added to the instrument’s aura of danger and excitement.

### IV. Early Rock ’n’ Roll Stars on the R&B Side

Three most prominent African Americans to be identified with the new music:

1. Chuck Berry addressed his songs to teenage America (white and black) in the 1950s.

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2. Little Richard’s outrageous performance style attracted attention through strangeness, novelty, and sexual ambiguity.
3. Fats Domino most directly embodied the continuity of R&B with rock ‘n’ roll.
4. All three crossed over to the pop charts and had mainstream success within a few months of the massive success of Bill Haley’s “Rock around the Clock.”

Charles Edward Anderson (“Chuck”) Berry (b. 1926)

5. Born in California but grew up in St. Louis
6. Absorbed blues and R&B styles
7. One of the first and most successful black musicians to consciously forge his own version of blues and R&B styles for appeal to the mass market
8. Knew country music and found that his performances of country songs in clubs appealed strongly to the white members of his audience

Listening: “Maybellene”

9. Distantly modeled on a country number called “Ida Red”
10. Primary elements trace their roots clearly to R&B:

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- a) Thick, buzzing timbre of Berry’s electric guitar
- b) Blue notes and slides in both voice and guitar
- c) Socking backbeat of the drum
- d) Form derived from twelve-bar blues structures

### 11. Original elements:

- a) Explosive tempo
- b) No vocal-based R&B song had ever gone at this pace.
- c) It is difficult to articulate words and breathe at this tempo.
- d) The lyrics describe a lover’s quarrel in the form of a car chase.
- e) Punning invented verb form (“motorvatin’”)
- f) Humorous details (“rain water blowin’” under the automobile hood, which is “doin’ my motor good”)
- g) Breathless ending in which the singer catches Maybellene in her Cadillac at the top of a hill

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h) Implied class distinction in the lyrics between Maybellene, in her top-of-the-line Cadillac Coupe de Ville, and the narrator, in his “V-8 Ford”

### 12. Form

- a) Verse-chorus form based on the twelve-bar blues
- b) Chorus—“Maybellene, why can’t you be true” follows the twelve-bar blues chord pattern.
- c) Verse—no chord changes—all on the “home” (or tonic) chord
- d) Voice delivers rapid-fire lyrics using brief, repetitive patterns of notes.
- e) Repetitive melodic formulas allow Berry to concentrate on articulating the densely packed words; the continuous verbal activity more than compensates for the lack of musical variety.
- f) Verses build enormous tension, so that when the choruses and chord changes return, there is a feeling of release and expansion.

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13. “Maybellene” is a beautifully formed record, building inexorably from start to finish, where everything is made to count, without a single word or note wasted.

14. The record opens arrestingly with the sound of Berry’s hollow-body electric guitar playing a bluesy lick that sizzles with sonic energy.

15. Infectious rhythmic groove and texture established by Berry and a gifted group of sidemen:

a) Blues composer and bassist Willie Dixon, an integral part of Muddy Waters’s recordings for Chess Records

b) Jerome Green, whose maracas were central to the Bo Diddley sound

c) Pianist Johnny Johnson, who may well have played a role in the creation of Berry’s songs

16. Credit for the overall sound of the recording must also go to Phil and Leonard Chess, who in their years of recording Chicago blues musicians such as Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf had learned how to stay out of the way of a good recording.

17. Bass line

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- a) Prominent, very regular, and unsyncopated bass line, on beats 1 and 3 of each bar
- b) The rhythmic feel of this bass line is much more suggestive of country music than of R&B.
- c) Shows Berry’s knowledge of country music and the country origins of “Maybellene”

18. Berry’s rock ’n’ roll songs became more and more explicit celebrations of American teenage culture and its music.

- a) “Roll over Beethoven” (1956) praises R&B at the expense of classical music.
- b) “School Day” (Number Eight pop, Number One R&B in 1957)
  - (1) Describes drudgery relieved by an after-school trip to the “juke joint”
- c) “Rock and Roll Music” (Number Eight pop, Number Six R&B in 1957) articulates the virtues of its subject, as opposed to the limitations of “modern jazz” or a “symphony.”
- d) “Sweet Little Sixteen” (Number Two pop, Number One R&B in 1958) wittily describes the young collector of “famed

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autographs,” coping with growing up (“tight dresses and lipstick”), for whom a rock ’n’ roll show becomes—in her mind, at least—a national party where all the “cats” want to dance with her.

e) “Johnny B. Goode” (Number Eight pop, Number Five R&B in 1958)

(1) Berry’s consummate statement on rock ’n’ roll mythology

(2) Berry relates the story of a “country boy” who “never learned to read or write so well” but who “could play a guitar just like a-ringin’ a bell.”

(3) The “country boy” was originally a “colored boy,” but Berry opted to make his tale color-blind, recognizing the diversity of his audience and the potential universality of his myth.

f) Berry is probably the only musician of his generation to be inescapably influential on three essential fronts:

(1) Brilliantly clever and articulate lyricist and songwriter

(2) Fine rock ’n’ roll vocal stylist

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### (3) Pioneering electric guitarist

19. The mass adulation belonged to Elvis Presley, but the greatest influence on musicians was unquestionably Berry.

Richard Wayne Penniman (“Little Richard”) (b. 1932)

20. Early career as an R&B performer

21. Hit the pop charts in 1956 with the song “Tutti-Frutti”

a) Alternated nonsense choruses (“Tutti-frutti, au rutti, a-wop-bop-a-loom-op a-lop-bam-boom!”) with nonspecific but obviously leering verses (“I got a gal named Sue, she knows just what to do”)

b) Delivered in an uninhibited shouting style, complete with falsetto whoops

c) Accompanied with a pounding band led by Little Richard’s uninhibited piano

22. Little Richard epitomized the abandon celebrated in rock ‘n’ roll lyrics and music.

23. Both the sound of his recordings and the visual characteristics of his performances made Little Richard an exceptionally strong influence on later performers.

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24. He performed in three rock ’n’ roll movies during the two years of his greatest popular success, 1956–57: *Don’t Knock the Rock*, *The Girl Can’t Help It*, and *Mister Rock ’n’ Roll*.

Listening: “Long Tall Sally”

- a) Built on the twelve-bar blues, adapted to reflect the more traditionally pop-friendly format of verse-chorus
- b) Here, the first four bars of each blues stanza are set to changing words—verses—while the remaining eight bars, with unchanging words, function as a repeated chorus.

Antoine “Fats” Domino (b. 1928)

25. Born and raised in New Orleans

26. An established presence on the R&B charts for several years before scoring rock ’n’ roll hits

27. His large-scale pop breakthrough was in 1955 with “Ain’t It a Shame” (Number Ten pop, Number One R&B).

28. Popularized the distinctive New Orleans sound

29. His distinctive regional style exemplifies the strong connections between rock ’n’ roll and earlier pop music.

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30. His early influences include

- a) jazz, especially boogie-woogie,
- b) the R&B piano style of Professor Longhair (1918–80; real name Henry Roeland Byrd), and
- c) the jump band style of trumpeter Dave Bartholomew’s ensemble.

31. First African American to beat white cover versions in the mid 1950s

32. Recorded a number of standards in contradistinction to artists like Chuck Berry and Little Richard

33. Domino’s 1956 remake of “Blueberry Hill” proved to be his most popular record.

- a) Number Two on the pop charts and Number One on the R&B charts.
- b) Tin Pan Alley tune that had originally been a big hit in 1940 for the Glenn Miller Orchestra
- c) Domino preserved his own R&B-based style when performing “Blueberry Hill.”

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- d) Brought a new kind of musical hybrid to mass-market attention.
- e) The smooth Tin Pan Alley–style crooning and uninflected urban diction were replaced by Domino’s rhythmically accented, full-throated singing in his characteristic New Orleans accent.

34. Another pop success for Domino was his rocking, uptempo version of “My Blue Heaven,” a striking and amusing contrast to Gene Austin’s original recording.

Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Fats Domino all achieved their success recording on independent labels.

35. Berry’s records were issued on Chess, the Chicago label of the Chess brothers Leonard and Phil, which also served as home for an impressive list of blues-based artists and other rock ‘n’ rollers

36. Little Richard was an artist for Specialty Records, Art Rupe’s Hollywood label, which had on its roster R&B stars along with important African American gospel groups and soloists.

37. Domino recorded for Imperial, a Los Angeles–based concern headed by Lew Chudd.

### V. Early Rock ‘n’ Roll Stars on the Country Side

## CHAPTER EIGHT: “ROCK AROUND THE CLOCK”: ROCK ‘N’ ROLL, 1954–1959

### A. Elvis Presley (1935–77)

1. Born in Tupelo, Mississippi
2. Moved to Memphis, Tennessee, as a teenager
3. “Discovered” by Sam Phillips, owner of Sun Records, a small, independent label in Memphis
  - a) His first recordings were for Sun Records:
    - (1) “That’s Allright”
    - (2) “Mystery Train”
  - b) The biggest rock ‘n’ roll star to come from the country side of the music
4. RCA Victor
  - a) Bought out Presley’s contract from Sun in late 1955 for \$35,000
  - b) Turned the “hillbilly cat” into a mainstream performer without compromising his appeal to teenagers
5. Presley’s manager, Colonel Thomas Parker, saw to it that Presley was featured repeatedly on television variety shows and in a series of romantic Hollywood films.

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6. RCA’s Nashville producer Chet Atkins saw to it that Presley’s records for the label were made pop-friendly.

7. Presley’s television performances were denounced by authorities as vulgar because of the singer’s hip-shaking gyrations.

8. His television performances were attended by hordes of screaming young fans and were watched by millions of young viewers.

9. Presley’s records racked up astronomical sales as he dominated the pop charts steadily from 1956 on into the early 1960s.

10. He established himself as the biggest-selling solo artist of rock ‘n’ roll, and then as the biggest-selling solo recording artist of *any* period and style—a title he still holds at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

11. Presley’s biggest hit, “Don’t Be Cruel,” topped the charts for eleven weeks in the late summer and fall of 1956, eventually yielding pride of place to another Presley record, “Love Me Tender.”

12. Listening: “Don’t Be Cruel”

a) Based on the twelve-bar blues

b) Presley’s vocal is heavy with blues-derived and country inflections

(1) A striking regional accent

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(2) “Hiccapping” effect

- c) The strong backbeat throughout evokes R&B.
- d) The repeated electric guitar figure at the opening is reminiscent of rhythmic ideas favored by western swing bands.
- e) Imposed on all these diverse and intense stylistic elements is a wash of electronic reverb—an attempt by the engineers at RCA’s Nashville studios to emulate the distinctive (and decidedly low-tech) “slap-back” echo sound of Presley’s previous recordings on Sun Records.
- f) There is also the sweetening sound of the backing vocal group, the Jordanaires, whose precise “bop, bop”s and crooning “aah”s and “ooo”s are doubly rooted in white gospel music and in the most genteel, established, mainstream pop style.
- g) The commercial success of these records was unprecedented, and their mixture of styles was yet another indication of the extent to which the traditional barriers in pop music were falling down.

13. “Hound Dog,” on the other side of “Don’t Be Cruel,” was Presley’s version of a song that had been a major R&B hit in 1953 for Big Mama Thornton.

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- a) Big Mama Thornton’s version is full of sexual innuendo.
- b) This innuendo is absent from Presley’s rendition.

14. Presley’s extraordinary popularity established rock ‘n’ roll as an unprecedented mass-market phenomenon.

- a) His reputation as a performer and recording artist endured up to his death in 1977 at the age of forty-two.
- b) Graceland, his home in Memphis, Tennessee, is now a public museum visited by upwards of 600,000 people annually.
- c) Elvis Presley’s principal importance as a musical influence and innovator rests on his achievements during the early years of rock ‘n’ roll.

Buddy Holly (Charles Hardin Holley) (1936–59)

15. Clean-cut, lanky, bespectacled

16. Born in Texas

17. Began his career with country music but soon fell under the influence of Presley’s musical style and success and formed a rock ‘n’ roll band, the Crickets.

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18. Holly’s first record in his new style, “That’ll Be the Day,” rose to Number One on the pop charts in late 1957 and established his characteristic and highly influential sound.

- a) Combined elements of country, R&B, and mainstream pop

19. Holly’s vocal style exhibits elements of both fine country singing and fine blues singing, full of country twang and hiccups.

- a) Expressive blue notes
- b) Mixture of toughness and vulnerability

20. The Crickets’ instrumental lineup

- a) Two electric guitars (lead and rhythm), bass, and drums provided strong support for Holly’s voice.
- b) During instrumental breaks, Holly’s lead guitar playing was active, riff-based, and hard-edged in a way that reflected the influence of Chuck Berry.

21. Form of “That’ll Be the Day”

- a) Structured like a typical pop song, alternating verses and choruses of eight bars each

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b) At the instrumental break, the Crickets play a twelve-bar blues pattern.

c) On some later records, like “Oh, Boy!” and “Peggy Sue,” Holly used a twelve-bar blues structure for the song itself.

22. Killed in a plane crash in 1959 along with Richie Valens and the Big Bopper (J. P. Richardson)

23. The Beatles modeled their insect-based name, their four-piece instrumental lineup, and aspects of their vocal style on the Crickets.

24. Holly was an important rock ’n’ roll songwriter.

a) Songs that he wrote and recorded include “Everyday,” “Not Fade Away,” and “Rave On.”

b) Holly’s work with arrangements and studio effects looked forward to some of the recording techniques of the 1960s.

(1) He frequently used double tracking, two nearly identical versions of a vocal or an instrumental part recorded on top of each other.

(2) Some of his last records used orchestral strings.

VI. Wild, Wild Young Women: The Lady Vanishes

## CHAPTER EIGHT: “ROCK AROUND THE CLOCK”: ROCK ‘N’ ROLL, 1954–1959

Early rock ‘n’ roll was dominated by male artists.

1. Women who aggressively embraced the new stylistic trends were a negligible presence on the charts.

Wanda Jackson (b. 1937 in Oklahoma)

2. Multitalented singer, instrumentalist, and songwriter
3. Successful country singer who toured with Hank Thompson
4. As a teenager, she switched to a rockabilly style at the encouragement of Elvis Presley.
5. Her first rockabilly song was “I Gotta Know,” recorded in 1956.
  - a) A transitional song for her, it presented the unique pairing of breakneck, rocking verses with a moderately paced, country-waltz chorus.
6. Between late 1956 and early 1958, Jackson recorded fierce performances of unapologetic rockers like “Hot Dog! That Made Him Mad,” “Fujiyama Mama,” “Let’s Have A Party,” and her own “Mean Mean Man.”
7. Established herself as one of the most powerful and convincing rockabilly musicians of her time

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8. In the early days of rock ‘n’ roll, Jackson had all the right things going for her:

- a) Exceptional recording artist
- b) Young and extremely photogenic
- c) Enthusiastic live performer
- d) Supported by a major label (Capitol)

9. Her records are rockabilly “classics” in every respect—except for one: none of them were hits!

10. Courted controversy

- a) Toured with an integrated band and refused to perform in any venues where her African American pianist would face prejudicial treatment

11. Abandoned her attempt to build a career as a major rock ‘n’ roll artist, concentrated on more traditional-sounding country music, and maintained a presence on the charts into the early 1970s.

Janis Martin (b. 1940 in Virginia)

12. Signed by RCA Victor (Elvis Presley’s label) at the age of sixteen

13. Promoted by RCA as the “female Elvis” in 1956

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14. Teen-friendly records, like “My Boy Elvis” and her own composition “Drugstore Rock ‘n’ Roll,” are energetic, professional rockabilly, and compare favorably with hits from the era.

15. Martin proved unable to make the hoped-for big impact.

16. Her secret marriage unavoidably became public knowledge as a result of her pregnancy.

17. By 1958, she had been dropped by RCA and quickly consigned to obscurity.

Jo-Ann Campbell (b. 1938 in Florida)

18. Showcased by disc jockey Alan Freed as “the blonde bombshell” on radio, in his “rock ‘n’ roll revues,” and in his movie *Go, Johnny, Go!* (1959)

19. Her recordings failed to achieve commercial success.

Lorrie (Lawrencine) Collins (b. 1942 in Oklahoma)

20. Performed with her younger brother Larry as the “Collins Kids” duo

21. Became well known through television in the mid-1950s

22. Cut some scintillating rockabilly records for Columbia between 1956 and 1958

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23. In particular, “Heartbeat” and “Mercy,” both written by the Collins Kids themselves, feature the intense sound of Lorrie Collins’s solo voice.

24. Neither these nor any of their other recordings made the charts.

B. Like Wanda Jackson, these three women all were gifted rock ’n’ roll performers at a young age.

1. Martin, Campbell, and Collins are so obscure today that they have been written out of history.

2. Clearly, the essential conservatism of the 1950s, politically and culturally, made it a particularly inauspicious time to be seen as a rebellious and empowered young woman.

3. Given the tenor of the times, an empowered *black* female rock ’n’ roll “idol” would have been even more unlikely—which is why African American women have played no part in this discussion.

4. The Bobbettes

a) Group of five African American schoolgirls from New York’s Harlem

b) In 1957, scored a rock ’n’ roll hit about their fifth-grade teacher, “Mr. Lee” (Number Six pop, Number One R&B)

Connie Francis (b. Concetta Rosa Maria Franconero, 1938, in New Jersey)

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5. The first woman recording “star” of the rock ’n’ roll era
6. String of hit records began in 1958 with her revival of a Tin Pan Alley tune from 1923, “Who’s Sorry Now”
7. Occasionally performed bona fide rockers (such as “Stupid Cupid,” Number Fourteen pop in 1958, and “Lipstick on Your Collar,” Number Five pop in 1959)
8. More of a mainstream pop singer who appreciated the importance of appealing to the new young audience
9. Compared with someone like Wanda Jackson, Connie Francis—both on records and in her public image—seemed, if not demure, at least utterly unthreatening.

Brenda Lee (b. Brenda Mae Tarpley, 1944, in Georgia)

10. Young recording artist with a somewhat feisty public image
11. Known as “Little Miss Dynamite”
12. Engaging rock ’n’ roll songs:
  - a) “Sweet Nothin’s” (Number Four pop, 1960)
  - b) “Rockin’ around the Christmas Tree” (Number Fourteen pop, 1960)

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13. Also recorded many slow, sentimental love songs

### VII. Songwriters and Producers of Early Rock ’n’ Roll

A. The boundaries that separated songwriters and performers began to blur in the early years of rock ’n’ roll’s mainstream success.

1. The roots of rock ’n’ roll lie in R&B and country music.

a) Performers often wrote their own songs.

b) Songwriters frequently performed and recorded their own works.

2. Of the five early rock ’n’ roll stars we have discussed in detail, only Elvis Presley did not regularly write his own material.

3. The independent songwriter became less important, a major shift brought about by the rock ’n’ roll revolution.

4. The role of the record producers became more important in the later 1950s and the early 1960s.

a) Producers could be responsible for

(1) booking time in the recording studio,

(2) hiring backup singers and instrumentalists,

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(3) assisting with the engineering process, and

(4) shaping the characteristic sound of the finished record.

b) The best producers left a strong sense of individual personality on their records.

c) The importance of the producer was even greater when the producer and the songwriter were the same.

Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller (both b. 1933)

5. The most innovative songwriting-producing team of the early rock ’n’ roll years

6. Not recording artists

7. Began writing R&B songs as teenagers

8. Wrote and produced many hits for Elvis Presley

9. Worked with one of the most popular vocal groups of this period, the Coasters

a) The team constructed what they called “playlets” for the Coasters.

(1) Scenes from teenage life of the 1950s distilled into brilliantly funny rock ’n’ roll records

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10. Like many by Chuck Berry, the Coasters’ hits were specifically about their intended audience.

Listening: “Charlie Brown”

11. About a class clown

a) The biggest market of potential record buyers consisted of school kids: the junior high schoolers and high schoolers, even elementary schoolers, each of whom probably knew a “Charlie Brown” in at least one class.

12. The period and culture of the 1950s is evoked through a sparing but telling use of then-current slang terms like “cool” and “daddy-o.”

13. The Coasters were adept at delivering a dense, cleverly worded text very clearly at a fast tempo.

14. The intensity of their vocal style owes much to R&B.

15. Comic effects suggest roots going back to vaudeville routines.

a) Low bass voice repeatedly asking, “Why’s everybody always pickin’ on me?” and asking, “Who, me?” in the bridge

16. Form

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- a) Combines aspects of two formal designs: AABA structure and twelve-bar blues
  - b) Mainstream pop roots in its overall AABA structure
  - c) The A sections are twelve-bar blues stanzas, not typical of a Tin Pan Alley tune
  - d) Each A section divides the twelve bars into a verse-chorus structure of the type we have seen in “Long Tall Sally” and “Don’t Be Cruel.”
  - e) The most direct kinship is with “Long Tall Sally”: four bars of verse, followed by eight bars of chorus.
  - f) In both “Charlie Brown” and “Long Tall Sally,” the twelve-bar blues stanzas start off with vocal solos.
  - g) A continuous full accompaniment does not join in until the fifth bar of the structure.
17. The B section, in contrast, is eight bars, providing a harmonic and rhythmic release from the succession of blues structures.