

# The History of Rock Music: 1955-1966

Genres and musicians of the beginnings

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## Rock'n'Roll 1951-57

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**(These are excerpts from my book ["A History of Rock and Dance Music"](#))**

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### *The economic boom*

The illusion of peace after the bloodbath of World War II did not last for long. After the Korean war (1950) it became apparent that another war was underway, a war by proxy against the Soviet Union (that had just exploded its first atomic bomb). The two winners of the war represented two opposing ideologies: capitalism versus communism, democracy versus tyranny. Previous wars had been largely fought over territory, resources, prestige, patriotism; not quite over ideology. The tragedy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki made the confrontation all the more dangerous: a war between the USA and the Soviet Union would have caused massive destruction. China became no less hostile to the West, shutting down all communication with the capitalist world. India gravitated mostly towards the Soviet Union too. The communist countries supported independence movements by all the former European colonies, and many of them ended up being ruled by socialist regimes. Thus the "Cold War" would spread throughout the planet. Another impact of the "Cold War" on USA society was a renewed sense of insecurity. Between 1948 and 1954 senator Joseph McCarthy successfully launched a "witch hunt" against intellectuals suspected of being communist spies. When a civil war in Cuba was won by the communist Fidel Castro (1959), the paranoia only increased.

The war had left behind some good inventions. First came the computer (the first commercial computer, the Univac, was introduced in 1951), then the transistor radio (1954), then cheaper television sets (that allowed sitcoms such as the "Honeymooners" to become national phenomena), then the integrated circuit (1956), then the first artificial satellite, the "Sputnik" (1957), then the first intercontinental jet service (1958), then the first telecommunication satellite, the "Telstar" (1962). However, the symbol of the USA economy was the car. 73% of world cars were produced in the USA in 1952, and in 1956 the country embarked on a project to build a nation-wide network of freeways. Homes were

built outside cities, thus creating a suburban culture.

The USA was experiencing one of its greatest economic booms. Two events of 1955 are suitable metaphors: the first McDonald's restaurant opened near Chicago and Disneyland was inaugurated in Los Angeles. In 1957 a record number of babies were born (the peak of the "baby boomers" generation, conventionally those born between 1946 and 1960). In 1958 the USA's gross national product was about half of the world's national product. In 1960 Manhattan alone had 98 buildings which were taller than 100 meters: the rest of the world had none. The spirit of the age was summed up by John Kennedy (1961), the youngest president ever, who spoke of a "New Frontier". When a few months later Yuri Gagarin became the first astronaut, Kennedy launched the "space race" culminating in a program to put a man on the Moon. It was the zenith of USA optimism.

The late 1950s and the 1960s were the age of the car. After all, owning and driving a car was almost cheaper (relative to the returns) than owning a television set: in 1950 the average cost of a new car was \$1,500 versus \$250 for a (black and white) tv set and \$60 for a radio, and gasoline was still only 18 cents per gallon (68 cents per liter). It was in 1956 that the USA embarked in the project to build a nation-wide network of freeways, thus de-facto creating the culture of suburban America. A new house in California cost less than \$10,000, which was only twice the average salary. Ten years later prices had not changed that much: the average house was \$13-15,000 and the average car was \$2,500 and a gallon of gas was 25 cents. But the median income had almost doubled, and it almost doubled again during that decade. The cars were big and heavy. The average Cadillac weighed more than two tons. And a new kind became popular, the two-seat convertible sport cars: General Motors introduced the Corvette in 1953, and Ford the Thunderbird in 1954 (but even more successful was to be the Mustang introduced in 1964). And USA car manufacturers dominated the world market, especially after the end of the Korean War allowed them to focus on civilian cars. People liked to spend so much time in their cars that "drive-in" cinemas, restaurants and even churches popped up everywhere. In Europe it was a different story: it was the age of the small car. The car that best defined the 1960s in Britain was the Austin Mini (introduced in 1959), and the cars that best defined the economic booms in Germany and Italy were the Volkswagen "Beetle" and the Fiat 500 (introduced in 1957).

Those were also the years of consumerism, of shopping malls, of tv commercials, of fast food (the first McDonald's restaurant had opened in 1955), of appliances, of "plastic fantastic", of Disneyland (that had opened in 1955 and represented a metaphor for the artificial life of the economic boom). It was still an age of routine lives with well-defined roles both in the family, in the community and at work, although the triumph of the suburban bourgeoisie had slightly changed the stereotypes of husband and wife, of neighborhood and of workplace. Suburban life emanated a reassuring sense of "artificial" that replaced the insecurity of down-to-earth rural life.

However, there were strains in the society. On one hand, black communities were still segregated, and in 1955 the arrest of Rosa Parks, a humble woman who refused to give her seat to white folks, sparked non-violent protests led by Martin Luther King, while in 1956 Malcolm X became the spokesman for the violent "Nation of Islam". In 1960 Martin Luther King delivered his speech "I Have A Dream", inaugurating the era of the civil-right movement. On the other hand the white intellectuals of the "beat generation" repudiated the "American

way of life". Last but not least, the youth of the USA was increasingly torn between the traditional morality (represented by the stable family of a working husband, a housewife and three children, and by a puritanical ethic that criminalized sex and fun) and a looser lifestyle. The older generation became paranoid about the "juvenile delinquents" that were out to subvert the codes of conduct. In 1962 Tom Hayden and others founded the "Student for Democratic Society" (SDS), introducing the generational issue at the intellectual level. This marked a strategic move, because it initiated the process by which the youth became a political force. On another front, in 1962 Helen Gurley Brown published "Sex and the Single Girl", a book that defended a woman's right to have sex for pleasure. While very few girls read it, it marked the beginning of the sexual revolution.

Alaska (1958) and Hawaii (1959) marked the last tokens of territorial expansion. However, in 1962 the USA sent troops to Vietnam to counter Soviet help for the communist guerrilla. That was the beginning of a different kind of expansionism. This too triggered an intellectual reaction, that led to a peace movement. The USA still had a draft, and that induced many teenagers to join the peace movement. It had been easy for president Roosevelt in 1941 to convince young people to go to war after Japan attacked the USA, but it was not easy to convince young people to go to war against people who posed no threat. All these tensions exploded violently in the next few years. In november 1963 Kennedy was assassinated. A few months later Mario Savio founded the "Free Speech Movement" and student riots erupted at the Berkeley campus. The nation's psyche was now split between an economic boom and constant social unrest.

In the meantime, Europe was slowly recovering. Elizabeth II had become queen of Britain in 1952, inaugurating one of the longest reigns of all times, but also presiding over the two crucial transformations of the century: the decline of the monarchy and the dissolution of the empire. In the following decade dozens of Britain's former colonies declared independence: the British Empire was no more. Nonetheless the reconstruction of Europe brought prosperity to the United Kingdom (as it was still called). The "Swinging London" enjoyed a period of blissful exuberance. The social transformations were even more visible than in the USA, but somehow more tolerated. Kids wore long hair, Mary Quant launched the mini-skirt (1965), poor neighborhoods were terrorized by juvenile delinquent called "mods", the sexual revolution was underway.

In continental Europe peace was maintained by USA troops and by a number of new organizations, notably the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) that had been founded in 1951. France too lost most of its empire, although at a cost of millions of lives in Indochina and Algeria. Charles DeGaulle still believed in a "Grande France" at a time when France was obscured by the two emerging superpowers, the USA and the Soviet Union. The tragedy of Europe was not over yet. After so many wars, there was still one "cold war" to fight: in 1961 the Soviet Union built a wall to isolate West Berlin and to discourage people from fleeing the Soviet-controlled eastern part of Germany. It was the final act in the division of Europe, once arrogant and ruling the world, between the USA and the Soviet Union. Europe took consolation in sport: football and cyclism often prevailed over politics. They marked a return to peace (no matter how many nuclear bombs the superpowers were deploying on its soil) and presented heroes that did not kill.

### ***Rock prehistory***

The list of serious pretenders to the title of first rock'n'roll song (not just a title referencing the act of "rocking") begins with *The Fat Man* (1949), cut by Antoine "Fats" Domino, a New Orleans performer, which certainly sounded like a new kind of boogie. The man who is commonly credited with inventing the term "rock'n'roll" is a white Cleveland disc-jockey, Alan Freed, who in 1951 decided to speculate on the success of Leo Mintz's store and started a radio program, "Moondog Rock'n'Roll Party", that broadcasted black music to an audience of white teenagers. Other white disc-jockeys had done and were doing the same thing, but it was Freed's enthusiasm for black music that became contagious. That same year [Ike Turner's](#) *Rocket 88* (1951) was definitely rock'n'roll (although an adaptation of Pete Johnson's instrumental *Rocket 88 Boogie* of 1949). And that same year Gunter Lee Carr cut the dance novelty *We're Gonna Rock*. Therefore, everybody was already "rocking". Alas, they were mostly black, i.e. distributed only locally.

The record industry was aware that a new music was being created by the blacks, and tried to exploit it with Bill Haley. His success proved that there was an audience for that music, and it was an audience desperate for anything that would play that music.

White people had the money, but black people were making the most exciting music. This created a niche for independent labels recording black artists for the white audience, but it could never become a mass market. The USA was still largely a racially-divided country. There was little chance that a black singer could become as popular as, say, Frank Sinatra. When Sam Phillips founded Sun Records in Memphis (Tennessee), he made the famous statement "If I could find a white man who sings with the Negro feel, I'd make a million dollars".

In 1952 a white singer, Bill Haley, formed the Comets, which can be considered the first rock'n'roll band. 1952 is also the year in which Bob Horn's "Bandstand" tv program (which in 1956 would become Dick Clark's "American Bandstand") began airing from Philadelphia every weekday afternoon, and the year in which Alan Freed (now more famous as "Moondog") organized the first rock'n'roll concert, the "Moondog Coronation Ball". And the year in which the first rock'n'roll song to enter the Billboard charts was Bill Haley's *Crazy Man Crazy* in 1953. At the same time, Sam Phillips was recording the first Elvis Presley record in his Sun studio, using two recorders to produce the effect of "slapback" audio delay that would become the typical sound of rockabilly.

Rock'n'roll was certainly not the only thing to happen to the USA music scene in those post-war years. The sentiment of euphoria was contagious. [Hank Williams](#) reached the top of the country charts in 1949, and turned country music into a serious art. Howlin' Wolf (out of Memphis) and Joe Turner (out of Kansas City) were popularizing the aggressive blues style of the "shouters". In 1952 Roscoe Gordon, a Memphis pianist, invented the "ska" beat with *No More Doggin'*. Charles Brown's *Hard Times* (1952) was the first hit by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller to enter the charts, and marked the beginning of a new era for pop music. The Orioles' *Crying in the Chapel* (1953) was the first black hit to top the white pop charts. The following year saw the boom of a new kind of black vocal harmony, doo-wop, inaugurated by the Penguins' *Earth Angel* (1954) and by the Platters' *Only You* (1955).

Technological innovations laid the groundwork for further stylistic innovations. In 1952 Gibson introduced its solid-body electric guitar, invented by Les Paul a

few years earlier, and the following year Leo Fender introduced the Stratocaster guitar (that he had invented in 1950). In the meantime, since 1951 the first juke-box machines that played 45 RPM records had begun to spread in every corner of the USA.

In 1954 all the record companies switched from 78 RPMs to 45 RPMs: the 78 RPM was dead, and the 45 RPM came to symbolize a new era of prosperity and fun. That same year a Japanese electronic company, TTK (later renamed Sony), introduced the last thing that was missing to turn popular music into a universal language: the world's first transistor radio. The new, cheaper gramophones and the portable radios caused a musical revolution of their own in the way people (especially young people) listened to music. The masses were now able to listen to music when they wanted and where they wanted.

[Bill Haley's](#) *Rock Around The Clock* (1954), written in 1953 by James Myers and Max Freedman (both white) for a boogie group, was the first rock song used in a movie soundtrack. Bill Haley was the most unlikely "teen idol" (he was almost 30), and that song sounded like a novelty number, not a revolutionary anthem, but that was the song that turned rock'n'roll into a nation-wide phenomenon. Two films of 1955, "Rebel Without A Cause" and "Blackboard Jungle", established a new role model for teenagers: the rebellious loner and sometimes juvenile delinquent (not exactly the role model that their parents would have liked for them).

### *From black to white rockers*

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Musically, the real event of 1955 was [Chuck Berry's](#) first recording session. His songs were the first ones to have the guitar as "the" lead instrument, and introduced the descending pentatonic double-stops (the essence of rock guitar). His music was the meeting point of the guitar technique of T Bone Walker, the vocal technique of the "shouters" and the rhythm of boogie-woogie (with help from his pianist Johnnie Johnson). His songs also told a story that teenagers could relate to, that emphasized the generation gap, and hinted at taboo subjects such as adolescent love, notably in *School Day* (1957) and *Sweet Little Sixteen* (1958). He began the process of transforming the issues of a young generation into mythology. The riffs of his three masterpieces, *Roll Over Beethoven* (1956), *Rock And Roll Music* (1957) and the mythological *Johnny B. Goode* (1958), electrified millions of white kids. Last, but not least, his songs were... "his": Berry was the first major composer of rock'n'roll (not just an interpreter). But Berry was black, and blacks did not get the same airplay as white musicians. He remained a cult item.

In the same city and in the same year, another black musician, Chuck Berry's bassist [Bo Diddley](#) (born Otha Ellas Bates, raised Ellas McDaniel), invented the "hambone" rhythm (a syncopated boogie rhythm), that harked back to tribal Africa and gave songs such as *I'm A Man* (1955), the ominous *Bo Diddley* (1955) and *Who Do You Love* (1955) suspenseful, sinister and hypnotic quality. The album **Bo Diddley** (mar 1955 - ? 1957 - ? 1958), *Mona* (1957), *Love Is Strange* (1957), written for Mickey (Baker) & Sylvia (Robinson), *Dearest Darling* (1958), typical of his devilish approach to the mystical, the proto-rap *Say Man* (1959), the novelty *Road Runner* (1960) coupled primordial energy and good-time humor. He also pioneered the blues-rock format with the four lengthy

jams of **Two Great Guitars** (mar 1964 - jul 1964), a collaboration with Chuck Berry.

Rock'n'roll was certainly more closely related to rhythm'n'blues than to country music. Chicago rhythm'n'blues naturally morphed into rock'n'roll with black musicians such as Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley.

If Berry invented the kind of rock'n'roll that will rule for the following 50 years, others laid the foundations for several strains of rock'n'roll. Perhaps the most influential on future generations was the kind of rock'n'roll that arose from gospel music. In New Orleans a singer and pianist named [Esquerita](#) (Eskew Reeder) coined a wild style of playing and singing that was popularized by New Orleans vocalist and pianist "[Little](#)" [Richard Penniman](#). They performed like animals, and added another level of provocation: clothes and facial make-up that were obscene. Esquerita and Little Richard invented decadence-rock. Little Richard's frenzied songs of the time (mostly propelled by the drums of Earl Palmer) would remain the most hysterical specimens of rock'n'roll until punk-rock: *Tutti Frutti* (1955), *Long Tall Sally* (1956), Bumps Blackwell's *Rip It Up* (1956), *Lucille* (1957), *Keep A-Knockin'* (1957), Bumps Blackwell's *Good Golly Miss Molly* (1958). Larry Williams (also from New Orleans) was a Little Richard clone: *Short Fat Fannie* (1957), *Bony Moronie* (1957) and *Dizzy Miss Lizzie* (1958).

Sam Phillips' dream came true when he met [Elvis Presley](#). Presley went on to become the first great swindle of rock'n'roll, and the prototype for the ones that would follow. Sam Phillips had found his man, equipped him with a masterful rhythm section (Bill Black on bass and Scotty Moore on guitar), and proceeded to market him as the juvenile delinquent that he was not. In a segregated society like the USA of the time, Presley became the ultimate white robber of black hits: Arthur Crudup's *That's All Right Mama* (1954), Roy Brown's *Good Rockin' Tonight* (1955), Junior Parker's *Mystery Train* (1955). He began to move towards "whiter" material with Carl Perkins' *Blue Suede Shoes* (1956), with Frederick "Shorty" Long on piano, Mae Axton's *Heartbreak Hotel* (1956), perhaps his vocal masterpiece, Leiber & Stoller's *Hound Dog* (1956), but his black soul still emerged in Otis Blackwell's diptych *Don't Be Cruel* (1956), his greatest hit, and *All Shook Up* (1957). Leiber & Stoller's *Jailhouse Rock* (1958), finally an irreverent boogie, was his swan song. Presley the rocker died there: he went on to croon and shout operatic melodies such as old Italian songs, and to specialize in seduction numbers such as *Love Me Tender* (1956, stolen from the soundtrack of "Rancho Notorious"), and Hugo (Peretti) & Luigi (Creatore)'s *Can't Help Falling In Love* (1961, a rewrite of Giovanni Martini's *Plaisir d'Amour*).

Presley's success was important in enabling hundreds of kids to play the music of the blacks. White rockers were finally tolerated, and even promoted by the "majors" (major label companies). These rockers (or, rather, Sam Phillips' production) defined "rockabilly", a style whose singer sang in a stuttering and hiccuping manner, accompanied by a small combo of slapping bass and frantic guitars, while the whole was captured using two recorders to produce an effect of "slapback" audio delay. Rockabilly songs were simulated bursts of lust.

Among early white rockers, [Jerry Lee Lewis](#) was, by far, the most faithful to the wild style of black rockers. James "Roy" Hall's *Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On* (1957) and Otis Blackwell's *Great Balls Of Fire* (1957) coined a style of psychotic singing that will make the history of rock music (unlike Presley's, that

will make the history of easy listening) and coined a manic style at the piano that was as ferocious as Berry's guitar riffs.

Other notable white rockers (all based in Memphis unless noted) were Carl Perkins, the stereotypical rockabilly singer, who wrote *Blue Suede Shoes* (1956) for Presley; Wayne "Buddy" Knox of the Rhythm Orchids, a Texan who wrote *Party Doll* (1956) for his friend Holly; [Gene Vincent](#) (Craddock) of the Blue Caps, an authentic rebel from Virginia who spewed out *Be Bop A Lula* (1956), reminiscent of the Drifters' *Money Honey*, and formed the Blue Caps, one of the first rock bands; Louisiana's Dale Hawkins, whose swampy *Suzie Q* (1957) was derailed by James Burton's bluesy guitar solo; [Johnny Burnette](#), a schoolmate of Elvis Presley whose trio recorded Tiny Bradshaw's *Train Kept A-rolling* with one of the first solos of distorted guitar (by Paul Burlison); Charlie Feathers, with a vocal style that was both nonsensical and virtuoso (*Defrost Your Heart*, 1955; *Tongue Tied Jill*, 1956); Albert "Sonny" Burgess of the Pacers, from Arkansas, one of the wildest (*Red Headed Woman*, 1956); Billy Lee Riley, leader of Sun's house band and one of the most sound-conscious (Ray Scott's *Flying Saucers Rock'n'Roll*, 1957, Billy Emerson's *Red Hot*); West Virginia's wildman and one-man band Hasil Adkins (*She Said*, 1955; *The Hunch*, 1957; *Chicken Walk*, 1962); and Ronnie Hawkins (*Mary Lou*, 1959). [Wanda Jackson](#) in Los Angeles was the "queen" of rockabilly (*Honey Bop*, 1956; *Fujiyama Mama*, 1958), and one of the very first white women to adopt a provocative, rebellious stance. The fact that their songs didn't climb the charts does not mean that they were any less talented than Presley. If nothing else, they mostly wrote the songs they sang.

There was also a brief "Latino rock" fad, with Ritchie Valens' *Come On Let's Go* (1958) and Chan Romero's *Hippy Hippy Shake* (1959), two of the most frantic rockabilly songs.

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The limit of white rockers was their roots in country music. Their music was rarely as powerful and original as the music of black rockers. Black rockers who developed a unique style included Junior Parker, whose *Mystery Train* (1954) was the best wedding of country and blues, Richard Berry, a doo-wop performer who wrote *Louie Louie* (1956) for his Pharaohs (and sung it in Jamaican patois), Joe Turner, whose *Shake Rattle And Roll* (1957) would remain one of the most frenetic songs of all times, Screamin Jay Hawkins, from Cleveland (Ohio), who introduced voodoo into rock'n'roll with *I Put A Spell On You* (1956) and whose macabre stage antics virtually invented gothic-rock. Otis Blackwell, a black songwriter from New York, is one of the unsung heroes of the genre: he wrote *Fever* (1955) for Little Willie John, *Don't Be Cruel* (1956) and *All Shook Up* (1957) for Elvis Presley, and *Great Balls Of Fire* (1957) and *Breathless* (1958) for Jerry Lee Lewis. Jazz organist Bill Doggett bridged jump blues and rock'n'roll with the one instrumental track that mattered, *Honky Tonk* (1956), which actually emphasized guitar and sax.

Los Angeles-based [Eddie Cochran](#) was perhaps the greatest talent of the second white generation, but he died at 22. *Summertime Blues* (1958) and *C'mon Everybody* (1958), on which he overdubbed all instruments and vocals, were moving away from rockabilly.

Texas-based [Buddy Holly](#) was even more of an "enfant prodige": he also died at

22, but left behind an impressive corpus of songs. He radically altered the image of rock'n'roll: wearing glasses and a formal high-school outfit, he represented the exact opposite of the juvenile delinquent. His childish, naive optimism contrasted with the nasty, morbid world of the other rockers. His lyrics reached for the primal child in every teenager: they were made of onomatopoeic tongue-twisters and of "baby talk" (syllables, rather than words, silly repetitions, trifling rhymes). His vocal phrasing was a recital of exaggerated tones of voice, hiccupping from bass to falsetto, a nonsense lingo of guttural ejaculations and martial slogans. His music was catchy, but set to bizarre accompaniments (clapping, tom-toms, celesta), distilled from blues, tex-mex, folk, pop and country. *That'll Be The Day* (1957) and *Peggy Sue* (1957), a childish nursery-rhyme accompanied by one of the most famous drum beats in history, were his rockabilly masterpieces, but *Words Of Love* (1958), *Everyday, It's So Easy* and *Well All Right* already belonged to another genre, a form of jangling, melodic music straddling the line between folk and rock, and arranged in creative ways. In many ways, Holly was the first of rock's singer-songwriters. Last but not least, his Crickets forged the standard of the rock band: their line-up was two guitars, drums and bass; they wrote their own material, and the sound of their songs mainly relied on their playing (not on session musicians or orchestras).

### ***A social disease***

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Slowly but steadily, this new generation of white rockers overthrew two entrenched praxes of the recording industry. First, the guitar took over the piano. Second, singers began to sing their own songs. Since the beginning of the recording industry, professional songwriters had been writing the hits for pop singers to sing (and nameless players to accompany). Black rockers, instead, were writing most of the songs that they were singing. Pop songwriters were mainly pianists: they would compose a song on the piano, and then score the orchestral arrangements. Black rockers were composing on the guitar, just like bluesmen had been doing ever since, and knew too little about other instruments to arrange their compositions for an orchestra (they also used much simpler chords). Thus rock'n'roll became essentially a guitar-based genre. Thus the natural unit of delivery for rock'n'roll was the small combo, instead of the orchestra. Thus rock'n'roll emphasized the rhythm, not the harmony.

The guitar soon became integral part of the character: while pop singers only dealt with microphones, rockers were expected to swing a guitar in front of them (even though the majority of white rockers did not know how to play it).

"What" these singers sang also changed. Pop songwriters had always focused on universal values and feelings: each story was rehearsing the eternal themes (love, for example) of western literature. Black rockers came from a tradition that was more realist: the bluesmen sang about life in the plantation, in the jail, in the street, in the ghetto. Black rockers continued that tradition, except that they set their stories in a modern milieu that connected with the personal experiences of the white youth of the USA.

Rock'n'roll was, in many ways, the by-product of changes that were taking place within the USA society: mass education through a public school system (that put kids of the same community in daily contact with each other), the widespread diffusion of the radio, the juke-box and the 45 RPM record (that put kids from

far-flung communities in daily contact), consumerism (that granted teenagers limited financial independence from their parents), increased racial integration (that allowed white kids to learn the more libertine customs of black people). The sexual revolution may have started before rock'n'roll, but certainly rock'n'roll became its soundtrack. The net effect of these developments was to favor a "clandestine" genre such as rock'n'roll was in the beginning. In 1955 the establishment applied the capitalistic rules of mass marketing to this new product, and sanctioned its existence. Rock'n'roll was, therefore, an almost inevitable synthesis of the USA civilization of the 1950s.

The tone of rock'n'roll was certainly different from the traditional tone of popular music. The sentimental, the tragic and the comic tones of popular music became (respectively) erotic, violent and sarcastic. That "was" a teenager's view of the world.

Rock'n'roll was revolutionary at several levels. It originated from small, independent labels (rather than big corporations). It ridiculed the stars and the sounds (and, indirectly, the lifestyle) of the establishment. It bridged the gap between the white public and the black public. It invented the notion of a rebellious youth. These were all destabilizing facts.

Puritans were right when they claimed that rockers (by appropriating the convulsions of strippers, the sensuality of perverts, and the "savagery" of blacks) were inciting male teenagers to become criminals and female teenagers to become prostitutes. It was their way to vent a generation's feeling of independence.

Through rock'n'roll, young people began searching for an identity, a process that would continue for decades, parallel to the evolution of rock music.

There had already been signs of discontent and dissent within the white capitalistic society (the beatniks in literature, for example), but they had not affected the masses. The "revolutionary" power of rock'n'roll far exceeded any political or cultural movement that had preceded it. Music became the terminal stage of an anelastic process: from social alienation to musical alienation to musical revolution to social revolution. Music became more than entertainment. Music became more than a universal language. Music became more than a message board. Music became a revolutionary tool for the youth of the USA.

### *The disease spreads*

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Rock'n'roll spread to Britain, causing the first mass adoption of a USA musical style by the European masses. British rock hits included: Tommy Steele's *Rock With the Cavemen* (1956), Cliff Richard (Harry Webb)'s *Move It* (1958), written by his guitarist Ian Samwell, Marty Wilde's *Bad Boy* (1959), Frederick "Johnny Kidd" Heath's *Shaking All Over* (1960), and especially Billy Fury, who made the best album of British rockabilly, **The Sound Of Fury** (apr 1960 - ? 1960). These rockers laid the foundations for the British takeover of rock'n'roll.

The popularity of rock'n'roll caused the record industry to boom and allowed independent labels to flourish. Between 1955 and 1959, the USA market share of the four "majors" dropped from 78% to 44%, while the market share of

independent record companies increased from 22% to 56%. The US market had increased from 213 million dollars to 603 million, and the market share of rock'n'roll increased from 15.7% to 42.7% in 1959. The excellent health of the recording industry was probably one reason why they kept experimenting with the format. In 1956 Elektra pioneered the "compilation" record, containing songs by different musicians, and in 1958 RCA introduced the first stereo long-playing records.

As musicians were allowed to make more and more bizarre records, they began to plunder the repertory of the rest of the world. In 1955 [Pete Seeger](#) released the first album of African music by a white musician, **Bantu Choral Folk Songs** (? 1955 - ? 1955), and in 1956 Martin Denny's **Exotica** created a new genre. Interest in Indian music (until then largely unknown in the west) was triggered by sarod player Ali Akbar Khan's 1955 concert in New York. Mexican composer [Juan-Garcia Esquivel](#) concocted super-kitschy lounge music, scoring odd melodies and counterpoints for exotic instruments and just about anything that had an unusual sound, from theremins to harpsichords. As a title of his best album goes, **Other Worlds Other Sounds** (jan 1958 - ? 1958).

Rock'n'roll was only the tip of the iceberg. Music was changing at every level. The Chordettes of *Mr Sandman* (1955) were the first "girl-group". Also in 1955, Ray Charles invented "soul" music with *I Got A Woman*, a secular adaptation of an old gospel.

The first Jamaican recording studio had opened in 1951 and recorded "mento" music, a fusion of European and African folk dance music. By fusing the mento rhythm and Memphis' rhythm'n'blues, a new genre, "ska" began to spread in the island.

So many parallel developments did not eclipse the traditional forms of popular music, which was still largely dependent on Broadway's musicals. For example, the best-selling album of 1955 was Doris Day's **Love Me Or Leave Me** (? 1955 - may 1955), and the mega-seller of the following year was Rodgers' and Hammerstein's **Oklahoma** (may-jul 1954 - ? 1955). The kids were still only a fraction of the market. Presley himself began to dominate the market only with his movie soundtracks (from 1957 on), and even he was eclipsed by the album of Leonard Bernstein's musical **West Side Story** (1961), that spent 54 weeks at the top of the charts (a record that no rock musician would ever beat).

While the youth of the USA danced at a faster rhythm and was being entertained by rebellious singers, isolated minds were experimenting with ever more unusual sounds. One of the most under-rated and eccentric geniuses of the 20th century, [Moondog](#), who was a blind New York street performer, virtually invented every future genre of rock music between 1949 and 1956. Harry Revel's suite **Music Out of the Moon** (1947), issued as a set of three 78 RPM records, was arranged by Les Baxter for cello, horn, choir and (mainly) a theremin played by Sam Hoffman, the man who had debuted the instrument in Miklos Rozsa's soundtracks for **Lost Weekend** (1945) and **Spellbound** (1945). Louis and Bebe Barron's soundtrack for the science-fiction film **The Bells of Atlantis** (1952), and later for the more famous **Forbidden Planet** (1956), employed only electronic instruments.

### ***Restoration***

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It didn't last. Soon, the puritanical element that was so pivotal in the USA society managed to kill the new genre. Actually, there were at least three forces working against rock'n'roll, despite its commercial success: a political force (the USA was coming out of Joseph McCarthy's "witch hunt" but unruly behavior was easily suspected of communism), a religious force (rock'n'roll, with its obvious references to sex, wasn't exactly the kind of music that church-goers desired for their children), and a racial force (rock'n'roll was clearly a black invention, in an age that was still obsessed with racial separation).

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The impact of rock'n'roll could still be felt long after the last rocker retired or emigrated: the new pop idols promoted by Dick Clark's "American Bandstand" program (which was broadcast by 105 tv stations), were younger, and spoke to a younger audience. But the format went back to the melodic, romantic song of the vocal groups, and the guitar/bass/drums band was replaced by the string orchestra.

This was not true in Britain, where neither of those three forces was particularly strong, and where bluesmen and jazzmen were treated like living legends. Black music became very popular among white kids of the British middle-class at the same time that was being forgotten in the USA. In fact, two of the most influential phenomena of the 1950s originated from this passion for the Afro-American culture. London was the center of "trad" ("traditional jazz"), which spawned a generation of white musicians playing black music, notably [Alexis Korner](#). *Rock Island Line* (1955), sung by Lonnie Donegan for trombonist Chris Barber's jazz combo, launched the fad of "skiffle", a sort of fast-paced, exuberant and melodic jug-music performed with cheap instruments. (In the 1920s, "skiffle" was used by USA record companies to refer to music performed by musicians who were too poor to buy instruments, thus using washboards, kazoos and jugs). Within a year, there were almost a thousand groups of skiffle bands in London alone, notably the Vipers (featuring the young Hank Marvin) of *Don't You Rock Me Daddy-O* (1956) and *Streamline Train* (1957).

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