

# The Forefathers of Rock

It is extremely difficult to pinpoint the very moment that rock and roll officially became a style of music. Therefore, we tend to credit the period of time between 1951 and 1954 as the birth and infancy years of rock and roll. During this time many social elements, important artists, specific songs and a number of musical influences merged and evolved to become rock and roll. The addition of a heavy “back beat” and rock ‘n’ roll themes of partying, fast cars and girls mixed with the jump blues styles of Louis Jordan and Big Joe Turner are definite precursors to rock and roll.

Many consider Jackie Brenston’s 1951 hit “Rocket 88” to be the first actual rock and roll song. Others believe it wasn’t until Elvis Presley released “That’s Alright Mama” in 1954 that rock and roll was really established. Radio disc jockey Alan Freed helped give an identity to this emerging style when he coined the term “Rock and Roll.” By using this term Freed was referring to the electric rhythm and blues (R & B) that he played on his late night radio shows between 1951 and 1954. Credit for the actual musical foundation generally goes to Little Richard and Chuck Berry as the “Fathers of Rock and Roll,” a fact rarely disputed. Richard and Berry significantly impacted America with their music and were consistent in their execution of the rock and roll style. Rock and roll’s basic ingredients are a blend of rhythm and blues and country music with hints of boogie-woogie and any other style that can spice up the rhythm, groove, melody and harmony, or overall band structure.

## The Precursors

### “Big Joe” Turner

Joseph Vernon “Big Joe” Turner was born in Kansas City (May 18, 1911–November 24, 1985) and was one of the most influential forefathers of rock and roll. He began his career in cabaret style performing, but established himself quickly as a blues shouter. After an appearance at Carnegie Hall in the 1930s, he gained national acclaim. He is credited with introducing a heavy backbeat to his music that influenced the 1950s rockers. During his career, Turner performed with some of the twentieth century’s most famous musicians

## Big Joe Turner

Big Joe Turner was a pivotal figure between the swing era and early rock and roll.



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including Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Art Tatum, King Curtis, Dizzy Gillespie and Milt Jackson. People generally consider him a blues and swing music singer, but his handful of “pop” style recordings introduced the “rockin’ blues” style. Turner’s biggest rock ‘n’ roll hit was with “Shake, Rattle and Roll” in 1954. The song is rife with sexual references and when Bill Haley recorded his version, he had to clean up the lyrics significantly for commercial release. Most importantly, the song uses a 12-bar blues form, a heavy backbeat and a riff-based saxophone solo that is typical of 1950s rock and roll. Turner continued to perform up until his death in 1985 despite continuous health issues. Big Joe was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame in 1983 and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1987.



### Recommended Listening

- Chains of Love
- Shake, Rattle and Roll
- Flip, Flop, Fly
- Roll ‘em Pete
- Corrina, Corrina

### Trivia

- Bill Haley and the Comets made Big Joe Turner’s “Shake, Rattle and Roll” (written by Jesse Stone under the pseudonym Charles E. Calhoun) internationally famous.
- Turner was one of the featured artists in John Hammond’s “Spirituals to Swing” concert at Carnegie Hall in NYC, in 1938.

## Louis Jordan

Louis Jordan (July 8, 1908–February 4, 1975) was a popular saxophonist and singer during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. In his early career he supported blues singers Ma Rainey, Ida Cox and Bessie Smith and he played in the bands of Louis Armstrong, Clarence Williams, Chick Webb and Ella Fitzgerald. In 1938, Jordan formed his first combo, the Elks

Rendezvous Band, which blended music and comedy. The band changed their name in 1939 to the Tympany Five and enjoyed increasing success on the R&B charts throughout the 1940s. By the mid-1950s, Jordan faded out of prominence as rock 'n' roll artists like Little Richard and Chuck Berry became popular. Jordan's "jump blues" music directly influenced many early rock musicians such as Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Bill Haley, B. B. King and James Brown. And his song "Caldonia" is an excellent example of the jump blues style. The song begins with a boogie-woogie piano introduction and a band shout chorus, and also makes use of "stop-time" and band "kicks" in the choruses. From mid 1946 to 1947, Jordan had five consecutive #1 hit songs and held the #1 place on the R & B charts for forty-four weeks running. Louis Jordan was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1987.



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### Louis Jordan

Jump blues entertainer Louis Jordan embodied the energy of the incoming rock and roll.

### Recommended Listening



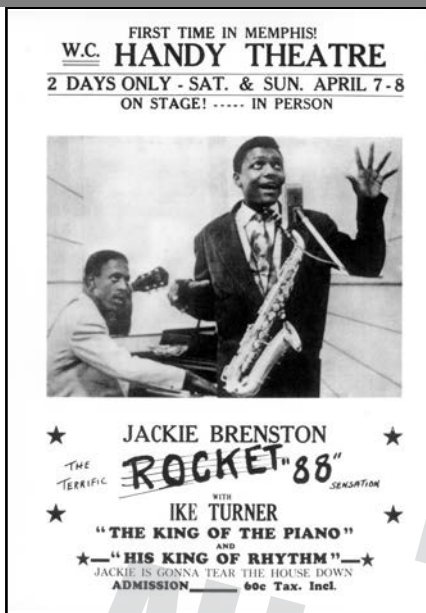
- Caldonia
- G.I. Jive
- Let the Good Times Roll
- Saturday Night Fish Fry (Pts. 1 & 2)
- Ain't Nobody Here But Us Chickens
- Choo Choo Ch 'Boogie

### Trivia

- The name "Tympany Five" came from Jordan's drummer Walter Martin who often used tympany (usually spelled timpani) drums during performances.
- The Broadway show, *Five Guys Named Moe* was devoted to Jordan's music.
- In the 1940s, Jordan scored a staggering eighteen #1 singles and fifty-four Top Ten placings.
- To this day Louis Jordan ranks as the top African-American recording artist of all time in terms of the total number of weeks at #1. His records spent an incredible total of 113 weeks in the #1 position.
- On two occasions during arguments, Jordan's wife stabbed him, and the second time she nearly killed him.

## Jackie Brenston

Jackie Brenston and his Delta Cats (with Ike Turner at the piano) receive credit for the first rock and roll song.



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lot before the session. Ike Turner went on to a very successful career in the music industry, while Jackie Brenston, who didn't handle fame very well, became an alcoholic and died at the age of 49.

### Ike Turner and the Kings of Rhythm, Jackie Brenston and his Delta Cats, and "Rocket 88"

Izear "Ike" Luster Turner (November 5, 1931-December 12, 2007) and his band, the Kings of Rhythm, are probably the most pivotal group in the transition to rock and roll. After a recommendation to future Sun Records founder Sam Phillips, Ike Turner's band began recording and releasing a series of jump blues style songs. Turner's band recorded the song "Rocket 88," which is now credited as the first rock and roll song, in early 1951 on the Chess label with Jackie Brenston, Turner's saxophone player, singing. Phillips made the decision to credit the song to Jackie Brenston and His Delta Cats because he wanted to release another record credited under Turner's name simultaneously. A great example of early guitar distortion is present in the boogie-woogie bass line of the original version of this song. "Rocket 88" achieved instant success, spending five weeks in the #1 spot on the R & B charts, and the unique electric guitar sound on the recording occurs because the amplifier was apparently dropped in the parking



#### Recommended Listening

- Rocket 88

#### Awards

- Ike Turner was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1991
- Turner was inducted into the Blues Foundation Hall of Fame in 2005
- Star on the Saint Louis Walk of Fame, 2001
- Rocket 88, along with Jackie Brenston, inducted into the classic blues recording section of the Blues Hall of Fame in 1991

### Trivia

- In 1991, after a great deal of debate, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame recognized “Rocket 88” as the first rock and roll song ever recorded.
- General Motors gave Jackie Brenston a Rocket 88 to thank him for the publicity the song generated for the car.
- The piano intro on “Rocket 88” influenced Little Richard to use it on his 1958 hit “Good Golly Miss Molly” and “True Fina Mama.”
- Ike Turner claims to have had thirteen marriages. However, his most public (and notorious) marriage and most fruitful musical collaboration was to Tina Turner, whose real name is Anna Mae Bullock.
- Ike was in prison at the time of his induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, so Tina Turner accepted the award on his behalf.

### Other Important Precursors and Songs Influential to Developing Rock and Roll

- Roy Brown—Good Rockin’ Tonight
- Ruth “Miss Rhythm” Brown—Teardrops from My Eyes
- Wynonie “Mr. Blues” Harris—All She Wants to Do is Rock
- Jimmy Liggins—Cadillac Boogie
- Joe Liggins—The Honeydripper
- Jimmy Nelson—T-99 Blues

### History of the Term “Rock and Roll”

People had used the terms “rock” and “roll” for several hundred years in social settings to describe dancing, sex, shaking things up or simply disturbing the current social climate. These descriptions seem to suit very well how those in favor—and against—rock and roll music perceived its early influence. “Rocking” also appeared in American gospel music as describing a spiritually moving experience that brought one closer to God. “Roll,” referring to sex, has appeared in verse and prose by poets and writers as far back as the Middle Ages, as in “had a good *roll* in the hay.” The word “rock” took on the same connotation in the 1930s. Common usage of “rock and roll” together began to occur in the early 1920s. Evidence of this appears in 1922 with blues singer Trixie Smith’s recording of “My Daddy Rocks Me (With One Steady Roll)” and in 1934 with the Boswell Sisters’ “Rock and Roll.” The term digressed into frequent use as a double entendre for sex in the 1940s. This is noticeable in the mid-1940s’ songs “Rockin’ Rollin’ Mama,” by Buddy Jones, Lil Johnson’s “Rock That Thing,” Ikey Robinson’s “Rock Me Mama” and “Good Rockin’ Tonight” by Roy Brown. The term though, did not always represent sex. Swing bands in the 1930s played songs such as “Rockin’ in Rhythm” that referred to music with a good solid beat, and rock and roll is still a form of freestyle swing dancing today.

When Alan Freed needed an alternative, but exciting, term to use for the electric rhythm and blues music he was airing on his late night radio programs in the early 1950s, he began to call it rock and roll. At this late hour, Freed could quite liberally play “race music,” ordinarily prohibited from popular radio play, to a much wider white audience, which helped bring this music into general popularity by 1954.

### Alan Freed

Disc jockey Alan Freed, the man who coined the term rock and roll



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### Alan Freed and the Rock and Roll House Party

Albert “Alan” James Freed (December 15, 1921–January 20, 1965) is the radio DJ who coined the term “rock and roll” as it relates to what we now call rock music. He also significantly popularized the term nationally. Freed began playing R & B in 1951 on the radio from Cleveland’s WJW station, calling the show “The Moondog Rock ‘n’ Roll House Party.” In September 1954, he moved to New York’s WINS and turned it into a rock and roll station. He moved to his last major station, WABC, in 1958 just prior to the payola investigations that ultimately ended his career. During his heyday, Freed helped manage and promote the careers of many future rock and roll stars, hosted the first stadium-sized rock concerts and brought “race music” into mainstream popularity. He also made a number of TV appearances, and featured in mid-1950s movies such as *Rock Around the Clock*, *Rock, Rock, Rock*, *Mr. Rock and Roll*, *Don’t Knock the Rock* and *Go, Johnny Go!* Alan Freed died at the age of 43, suffering from alcoholism following the payola investigations that stripped him of his livelihood during the early 1960s.

## The Fathers of Rock and Roll

### Little Richard

The self-proclaimed, “architect of rock and roll,” Little Richard (Richard Wayne Penniman), was born December 5, 1932 and raised in Macon, Georgia. His fusion of gospel, spirituals, boogie-woogie and blues helped create rock and roll. Little Richard’s songs, piano playing and high-energy performances, along with his flamboyant appearance and unique singing style, ensured his place in the development of early rock and roll.

Little Richard grew up firmly rooted in southern gospel music. He sang with the Penniman Singers and Tiny Tots Quartet and began singing gospel music semi-professionally at age ten, performing in local talent shows and spending his spare time learning the techniques of popular Macon piano players. In 1951, Little Richard won a talent contest that gave him a small recording deal with RCA-Victor (through Camden Records), but in 1952, when his father was killed, he became the breadwinner of the family. During this time, he washed dishes in the cafeteria at the Macon bus station and performed with his band The Upsetters at night.

Little Richard recorded for the Peacock label from 1952–1954 without much success. Then, after sending in a demo tape, Specialty Records invited him to sign in February 1955. The first few months with Specialty were somewhat productive, but it wasn’t until Little Richard let loose on his song “Tutti Frutti” during a recording session break that producers saw exactly where his talent lay. The lyrics of the song were, of course, too racy for a commercial recording, but the blend of Richard’s hard hitting boogie-woogie piano, up tempo gospel vocal lines and signature “whoop” blues hollar had an immediate impact on 1950s popular music. The producer changed the opening line of the first verse, “tutti frutti, good booty,” to “tutti frutti, awe rootie” and cleaned up other original lyrics, and recorded the song that same

day. “Tutti Frutti” raked in over two hundred thousand sales in the first ten days of its release, propelling Little Richard to overnight success. In the next eighteen months, he went on to record a string of hit songs for Specialty and two albums that scored high on both the R & B and pop charts. Another great example of Little Richard’s work is “Good Golly Miss Molly” where all of the elements of his rock and roll style come out: the strong bluesy piano intro, the straight eighth note groove, the heavy backbeat, the boogie-woogie bass line played by both the bass and the guitar and harmonized by the tenor and baritone saxophones, as well as a stop-time feel in the verses, a powerful vocal style and, of course, his signature “whooo.” He borrowed the piano intro from “Rocket 88” (key of Eb) but played his version a major 3rd higher (key of G), creating more intensity and drive.

While on a tour to Australia in 1957, and after a plane scare, Little Richard claimed to have had an epiphany with God. He discarded nearly ten thousand dollars worth of rings and jewelry and claimed “you can’t be with God and rock ‘n’ roll at the same time, God doesn’t like that.” Since that day, Little Richard has gone in and out of both the rock and roll and preaching the gospel scenes.

Since 1955, Little Richard has appeared in many movies, television shows and commercials. He has also personally mentored the early careers of many up and coming stars including James Brown, Billy Preston, Jimi Hendrix, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones and sold over 32 million records by 1968.



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### Little Richard

The “architect of rock and roll,”  
Little Richard

### Recommended Listening



- Tutti Frutti
- Lucille
- Good Golly Miss Molly
- Long Tall Sally
- Rip It Up

### Awards

- Inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986
- Received a star on the Hollywood walk of fame in 1990
- Received the Lifetime Achievement award at the Grammys in 1993
- Received a lifetime achievement award from the Rhythm and Blues Foundation as a Prestigious Pioneer in 1994
- Earned the Award of Merit from the American Music Awards in 1997

### Trivia

- Once claimed that “if Elvis is the King of rock and roll, then I must be the Queen of rock and roll”
- Little Richard’s father, Charles “Bud” Penniman, was a Seventh Day Adventist preacher who sold moonshine and ran a juke joint on the side.
- Little Richard sang background vocals on the U2-B. B. King song “When Love Comes to Town” in 1989

### Chuck Berry

Chuck Berry was born in St. Louis, Missouri on October 18, 1926, and brought up in a middle class area, which allowed him the opportunity to study music. He learned how to perform and play guitar in high school and joined a working club band in 1952. In 1953, Sir John’s Trio invited Berry to join. Eventually, due to Chuck’s growing popularity, the trio re-named itself the Chuck Berry combo. “Sir John” (Johnnie Johnson) was a great piano player who mentored Chuck Berry’s developing style. Berry liked to play his own rockin’ style of country and western music and with Johnson’s encouragement decided to pursue a career as a full-fledged country artist.

In 1955, on a road trip to Chicago, Chuck Berry became friends with one of his idols in music, Muddy Waters. Waters instructed him to go to Chess Records to present his music, which he did at the first opportunity. The song that inspired Chess to sign Chuck Berry was a bluegrass style country song he had adapted titled “Ida May” (a variation of Gene Autry’s “Ida Red”). And, with the help of Willie Dixon, the song received a strong backbeat, was reinforced with a touch of R & B and renamed “Maybelline.” It was an instant hit, rising to #5 on the pop charts and #1 on the R & B charts. Berry quickly followed with other hits including “Brown-Eyed Man,” “Too Much Monkey Business,” “School Days,” “Rock and Roll Music,” “Sweet Little Sixteen,” “Memphis Tennessee,” “Roll Over Beethoven!” and “Johnny B. Goode.”

Many consider the song “Johnny B. Goode” the coming of age of rock and roll with the now standard verse-chorus lyric format, unforgettable guitar hook and rockin’ rhythm section groove that became the classic map for future rock and roll artists to follow. Written in 1955 (although not released until 1958), the song is a dedication to Berry’s mentor Johnnie Johnson. The song itself is somewhat autobiographical and still has Berry’s country “story” element through each verse. Although Johnnie Johnson played on many of Chuck Berry’s recordings, he did not play on “Johnny B. Goode.” Berry later wrote a sequel called “Bye Bye Johnny” about how he made it to Chicago to get that famous recording contract.

#### Chuck Berry

The eternal teenager,  
Chuck Berry



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As the hits kept coming Chuck Berry toured feverishly, was featured on television shows and in movies, and earned the nickname “the eternal teenager” due to his popularity among white teens across America. Even though Chuck Berry frequented the top of the R & B charts, it wasn’t until 1972 that he managed to get a #1 hit on the pop charts. Although a great achievement, the song that put him in the number one spot was, compared with his 1950s masterpieces, a fairly tacky song that appealed to his teenage audience’s prurient interest in euphemistic lyrics. Concert goers across the globe chanted that infamous song, “My Ding-a-Ling,” for two decades. For his contribution to the founding of rock and roll, Chuck Berry was one of the first inductees of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986.

### Guitar Spotlight



Chuck Berry was the most influential rock and roll guitarist of the 1950s and possibly all of rock history. Berry wrote the rule book on playing rock and roll rhythm guitar, which he got from boogie-woogie piano when he joined the Johnnie Johnson trio. The rhythm Berry plays is the exact rhythm boogie-woogie pianists play with their left hand. The power chord (used in rock and heavy metal) comes from this chord shape, which includes the 1 and 5 of a chord. Berry's classic intros and solos utilize double stops (two string licks). Berry states that jazz guitarist Charlie Christian influenced him, but his double stop playing sounds closer to the right hand of a boogie-woogie pianist (i.e. Johnnie Johnson). One can hear Berry-influenced double stop licks through all of rock from the 1950s to the British invasion, punk rock and heavy metal.

### Recommended Listening



- Maybellene (1955)
- School Days (1957)
- Sweet Little Sixteen (1957)
- Rock and Roll Music (1957)
- Johnny B. Goode (1958)

### Trivia

- John Lennon once said, “If you tried to give rock and roll another name, you might call it Chuck Berry.”
- “My mama said, You and Elvis are pretty good, but you’re no Chuck Berry.” —Jerry Lee Lewis
- Chuck Berry was born on Goode Avenue in St. Louis (Johnny B. Goode).
- “Johnny B. Goode” is a feature on the Voyager Golden Record as one of three examples of American music.
- John Lennon borrowed a line from Chuck Berry’s “You Can’t Catch Me” for his song “Come Together.” Berry’s music publisher subsequently sued him!
- When Keith Richards inducted Chuck Berry into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, he said, “It’s hard for me to induct Chuck Berry because I lifted every lick he ever played!”