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THE ROOTS OF ROCK AND ROLL



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"It's like an act of murder; you play
with intent to commit something."

— Duke Ellington on Jazz



KEY TERMS

Tin Pan Alley
The Swing Era
Race music
Hillbilly music
Cover
Acoustical/electrical process
Album
Single
Major labels
Independent labels
Billboard magazine
Record Industry
Association of America (RIAA)

Gold, platinum and diamond records
Disc jockey (DJ)
The Moondog House
Rock and Roll Party
Top 40
Blues
Work song, shout, and field holler
Mississippi Delta
Country blues
AAB lyric form
Classic blues
Jazz
Black Gospel

Melisma
Rhythm and Blues
Doo-wop
British folk tradition
Bristol sessions
Grand Ole Opry
Cowboy songs
Western swing
Bluegrass
Honky tonk
Southern Gospel

KEY FIGURES

Bing Crosby
Frank Sinatra
Benny Goodman
Pat Boone
Alan Freed
Moondog
Todd Storz

Bessie Smith
Robert Johnson
Thomas Dorsey
Louis Jordan and His Tympany Five
Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers

Ralph Peer
The Carter Family
Jimmie Rodgers
Bill Monroe
Lester Flatt/Earl Scruggs
Hank Williams

ROCK AND ROLL: THE MUSIC THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

When rock and roll exploded onto the American landscape in the mid-1950s, it marked nothing less than a defining moment in history. In many ways its birth was a manifestation of a seismic shift that was already taking place in our cultural fabric: from an elitist to a working class ethos; from an adult oriented society to one that glorified youth; and from one where art was defined by European standards to one where it was defined in purely American terms. Rock and roll was purely American, as were all of its musical ancestors, which included the blues, jazz, Rhythm and Blues, gospel, hillbilly, country, bluegrass and honky tonk. And like America, rock and roll didn't sit still for long; it very quickly began to evolve as it embraced a wide variety of influences that ranged from new technologies to interpretations by British imitators. As a result, within just a few years there were a plethora of styles—folk rock, soul, psychedelic, hard rock, art rock, etc.—that all fit under the rock umbrella.

The emergence of rock and roll also signaled a major shift in the nature of our popular music. Unlike the pop music of the first half of the 20th century, which was largely conceived by an industry based in New York City and watered down to appeal to the largest audience possible—in other words, white, middle-class adults—rock and roll was from the South and middle states, and was

decidedly more rural, more lower class, more dynamic, more African American, and more youth oriented. Unlike the music of Tin Pan Alley, rock incubated in the streets in a grassroots fashion, so it had a mind of its own and would not easily take orders from anyone. Rock's sense of independence has remained intact—even today it continues to demonstrate a remarkable virus-like resistance to the constant meddling by the pop music industry. This is in fact one of the central themes that runs through the music's history: every time the corporate types appear to have harnessed the music for their own self-interest, rock seems to somehow wriggle free and reinvent itself. Like the musicians who create it, rock in this sense is rebellious and self-determined, resentful of authority, and defies subordination.

But above all, rock and roll, simply stated, is, always has been and always will be, the music of youth and all that goes with it. During the mid-1950s, it exploded onto the American cultural landscape through the insistence of small independent record labels, renegade radio DJs and a teen audience that wouldn't take the watered down industry product any more. For the first time in history, the music of the underprivileged and disaffected, the angry and unruly, the idealistic and discontented would emerge as America's most popular music. As rock and roll took its place on center stage, it changed our society, and in turn reflected those changes within itself.

Chapters 2–13 of this text chronicle the history of the music and the important events and personalities that shaped it. But before we get there, let's take a look at the American music scene in the first half of the 20th century and see how the groundwork was laid for the rock and roll revolution.

THE EARLY YEARS OF AMERICAN POP MUSIC

Tin Pan Alley

America's pop music industry was created in the late 1800s when the publishers and songwriters of **Tin Pan Alley** began to supply vaudeville and Broadway shows with popular songs. These songs were also made available in written form to the general public through the sale of sheet music. Tin Pan Alley was originally an actual place, on 28th Street between Broadway and 6th Avenue in New York, where many of the earliest publishing companies set up shop. Although most eventually moved uptown, the name stuck and today is generally used to describe the music publishing industry as it operated in the first half of the 20th century. The music of the Tin Pan Alley composers defined much of our popular song catalogue of the era, and was eventually used not only for theatrical shows but also for popular songs, Hollywood movies, and jazz standards. Among the greatest Tin Pan Alley composers were Irving Berlin ("God Bless America," "White Christmas"); George and Ira Gershwin ("I Got Rhythm," "'S Wonderful"); Richard Rodgers, teaming with lyricists Lorenz Hart ("My Funny Valentine") and Oscar Hammerstein II (Broadway musicals *South Pacific*, *Oklahoma*, *The Sound of Music*); and Cole Porter ("I've Got You Under My Skin").

KEY TERMS

Tin Pan Alley The term describing the music publishing industry in the first half of the 20th century.

TIN PAN ALLEY COMPOSERS

- Irving Berlin
- George and Ira Gershwin
- Richard Rodgers
- Lorenz Hart
- Oscar Hammerstein II
- Cole Porter



The First Pop Singers

One of the first important pop singers in 20th century America was Al Jolson who, singing in blackface as minstrel singers had done in the mid-1800s, became Broadway's biggest star in the early 1900s. In 1927 Jolson also starred in the first successful talking picture, *The Jazz Singer*. As recordings and radio began to replace sheet music as the most popular medium for the distribution of pop music, the first true pop singers, known as crooners emerged. Rudy Vallee, who used a megaphone to project his voice (before amplification was used) became one of the first entertainers to effectively use radio to reach stardom in the 1920s. **Bing Crosby** (1903–1977) became the most influential crooner with his easy-going charm and witty style of singing ballads. Starting his career in 1926 making records with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra (with whom he had his first #1 hit in 1928 with “Ol’ Man River”), Crosby began working in network radio and film in 1931, and eventually starred in more than 60 movies before his death in 1977. His recording of “White Christmas” from the 1942 movie *Holiday Inn* rose to the #1 spot on the charts, won a Grammy Award for best song of 1942, and eventually sold over 30 million copies, making it the best-selling vinyl single in history. (Elton John’s “Candle in the Wind” broke this record in 1997 with nearly 40 million copies sold in CD single format.)

The first pop singer to create a unique personal style and image was **Frank Sinatra**. Influenced by jazz singers Louis Armstrong and Billie Holiday, Sinatra (1915–1998) took liberties with melodies and interpreted songs in his own way. Starting as a big band singer with the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra, Sinatra became a solo artist and film star in the 1950s with a tough-guy attitude and good looks that made him popular among both male and female fans. Although he condemned rock and roll at first, Sinatra’s off-screen public macho posturing, womanizing, and associations with shadowy figures in fact became a sort of blueprint for many rock stars that followed him. He also spawned a generation of dark and handsome Italian singers such as Dean Martin, Tony Bennett, and Vic Damone that also had considerable pop success.



TRIVIA NOTE

Frank Sinatra was the first pop singer to create a unique personal style and image.



Frank Sinatra

SINATRA ON ROCK AND ROLL

Frank Sinatra, who was the object of shrieking female fans in the 1940s, originally dismissed rock and roll, commenting that “It is sung, played, and written for the most part by cretinous goons, and by means of its almost imbecilic reiteration and sly, lewd, in plain fact dirty, lyrics it manages to be the martial music of every side-burned delinquent on the face of the earth.” However, his tune quickly changed, and by 1960 he cohosted a network TV special with Elvis Presley on which the two sang each other’s signature songs, “Love Me Tender” and “Witchcraft.”

The Swing Era

During the **Swing Era** (1935–1946), big band jazz (now referred to as swing) became the dominant form of pop music. Swing brought the recording industry back to life after it was almost killed by the Depression. It helped the country get through WWII, as many of the biggest Swing Era hits were sentimental in nature and reflected the mood of anxiety that accompanied the war. Swing also firmly established itself as music to dance to, and spawned dozens of dance fads such as the Fox Trot, Lindy Hop, Jitterbug, and Rumba. The term “swing” was used as a marketing ploy to overcome the negative connotations that still persisted about jazz in the 1930s. During the early years of the Swing Era, most of the hit records were of original material written and arranged by the bands themselves. Later, as swing became more popular, most of the hits were novelty, sing-along, and sentimental songs written by Tin Pan Alley professionals that featured the band vocalists. It was in this way that the careers of Frank Sinatra, Doris Day, Peggy Lee, and others were launched.

The first star of the Swing Era was the unassuming **Benny Goodman** (1909–1986), whose meteoric rise to fame started at the Palomar Ballroom in Los Angeles on August 21, 1935. Hundreds of teens showed up that night to hear and dance to the music they had been hearing on the NBC network radio program *Let's Dance*. One secret of Goodman's success was the arrangements he had bought from black musicians such as Fletcher Henderson and Don Redman that up to that point had rarely been heard outside of Harlem. By virtue of being white, Goodman was able to bring the music of African American culture to the mass white audience, in much the same way that Elvis Presley would do 20 years later. In his wake, hundreds of other bands that looked like Goodman's and sounded like pale imitations of the Harlem musicians who created the music provided the country with the soundtrack to an era.

The Post-War Transitional Years

From 1946 to 1954, the years between the Swing Era and the early years of rock and roll, the pop music business was in a state of transition. Although the major record labels continued to successfully promote mainstream pop artists such as Sinatra and Patti Page, **race music** (later known as Rhythm and Blues) and **hillbilly music** (later called Country Western) were becoming increasingly popular among a growing, albeit segmented audience. Around this same time, a number of small, independent record labels emerged that specialized in making race and hillbilly records. In spite of the fact that by 1952 there were around 100 independents, their mark on the industry was still negligible—only five of the more than 150 singles that became million sellers during this period came from independent labels.

On the rare occasion that an R&B or country record did break through and become a hit, the strategy that major labels often employed was to quickly record a cover version by a pop singer who had a broad commercial appeal. **Covers** were usually stripped of anything that might be offensive to any segment of record buyers, such as any traces of ethnic vocal delivery or off-color lyrics. As a result, most covers ended up sounding sanitized and antiseptic, even laughable. The poster child for this tactic could have been **Pat Boone**, whose



KEY TERMS

Swing Era The name given to the period from 1935–1946 when big band jazz was the most popular music in America.



TRIVIA NOTE

The unassuming Benny Goodman was the first star of the Swing Era.



KEY TERMS

Race music A catchall term to describe any records or songs by black artists, including the blues and what would later be known as Rhythm and Blues.

Hillbilly music The traditional old time music of the rural southern United States, with origins in English folk music. Hillbilly music is the foundation of modern country music.

Cover A new recording of a charting song that seeks to ‘cover’ up the original song.



watered-down covers of Fats Domino's "Ain't That a Shame" in 1955 and Little Richard's "Tutti Frutti" in 1956 both outsold the original versions.

Covers were an effective strategy for the 1946–1954 period, and as a result were an obstacle to commercial success for many R&B and country artists and their independent labels. However, once white teenagers started demanding the real thing, covers were no longer an effective marketing approach.

THE RECORD INDUSTRY

Record Sales: 1920–1954

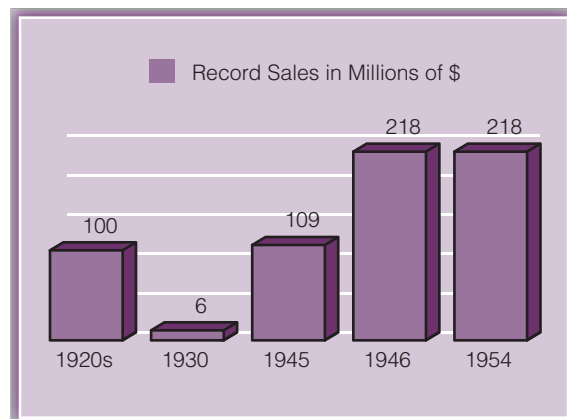
Although Victrola phonograph players had been around since the early 1900s, it took several years before they became popular with consumers and there were any significant record sales. Before 1920, two of the most popular artists were opera singer Enrico Caruso and concert bandleader John Phillip Sousa (composer of "The Stars and Stripes Forever"). The first jazz recording, "Livery Stable Blues" made in 1917 by the Original Dixieland Jass Band was one of the first records to sell over one million copies. Throughout the 1920s, record sales were generally strong, hovering around \$100 million a year. However, when radio first became popular in the mid-1920s and the Great Depression hit in 1929, record sales went into a tailspin, dropping to \$6 million almost immediately, causing most of the smaller labels to go out of business.

Helped by the popularity of crooners like Bing Crosby and the big band music of the Swing Era, record sales rebounded throughout the 1930s and 1940s. By 1945, sales were back up to \$109 million; after wartime restrictions on shellac were lifted, sales soared to \$218 million in 1946 where they leveled off for the next eight years. Helping the recovery was the introduction of the Duo Jr. in 1932, the first affordable and portable electric turntable, which sold for \$16.50. By 1934 jukeboxes began popping up in thousands of restaurants and nightclubs around the country, which in some years accounted for as much as 40 percent of all record sales. The mid-1920s saw a dramatic improvement in the technology used to make recordings. Before 1925, recordings were made using the **acoustical process**, in which an acoustical horn captured the sound of the musicians huddled in front of it and transferred the sound vibrations

KEY TERMS

Acoustical process

The process used before 1925 in which an acoustical horn captured and transferred sound vibrations to a stylus that cut grooves onto a wax disc.



- Columbia—founded in 1885 in New York
- RCA Victor—1901, New York
- Decca—1934, New York
- Capitol—1942, Los Angeles
- Mercury—1946, Chicago
- MGM—1946, Hollywood

THE MAJOR LABELS IN THE EARLY FIFTIES

to a stylus that cut grooves onto a wax disc. Because the shellac records that resulted spun at 78 rpm, only three minutes of music could be recorded on a side. Because of the poor frequency response of the process, records also sounded tinny. In 1925, the **electrical process** was introduced, where microphones were used to convert the sound waves into an electrical signal, greatly improving sound quality.

After World War II, magnetic tape was increasingly used to record master tapes from which records were pressed. Among the many advantages of tape recording over disc recording is the ability to edit the master tape. An engineer could now construct a new version of a song by splicing two or more separate takes (or versions) together, eliminating any mistakes that may have been present in the original takes. This was a giant leap forward for recording artists, who previously had to strive for cutting a perfect take to disc, or settle for an imperfect one. Tape is also cheap, and can be reused many times, allowing an engineer to simply record over a bad take to further cut costs. It also allowed for longer songs to be recorded, as tape reels could hold up to 30 minutes of music, eliminating the 3-minute limit of the 78-rpm disc.

The post-war years also saw dramatic changes in the way recordings were manufactured and sold to consumers. In 1948, Columbia introduced the 12-inch 33-1/3 rpm LP (long-playing) **album** format. In addition to an increased playing time of 23 minutes of music per side, LPs were made of vinylite (vinyl), which offered superior fidelity and made the records less breakable and easier to distribute. The next year, RCA Victor introduced a rival format, the 7-inch 45 rpm **single** format, also on vinyl (later on polystyrene). RCA also introduced a low-cost portable turntable that included an attachment enabling several 45s to be stacked, allowing the listener a sequence of uninterrupted songs to play. Within a few years most record labels were releasing product on both formats. LPs became the choice of adults, who bought console hi-fi systems and placed



KEY TERMS

Electrical process

The recording process in which microphones are used to convert sound waves into an electrical signal.

Album The 33-1/3 rpm 12" LP (long playing) format introduced by Columbia Records in 1948.

Single The 45 rpm 7" format introduced in 1949 by RCA Victor.

- King—founded in 1945 in Cincinnati by Syd Nathan
- Specialty—1945, Los Angeles by Art Rupe
- Modern—1945, Los Angeles by Jules and Saul Bihari
- Imperial—1945, Los Angeles by Lew Chudd
- Chess—1947, Chicago by Phil and Leonard Chess (originally named Aristocrat)
- Atlantic—1948, New York by Ahmet Ertigan and Herb Abramson
- Duke/Peacock—1949, Houston by Don Robey
- Sun—1953, Memphis by Sam Phillips

IMPORTANT INDEPENDENT LABELS FROM THE LATE FORTIES AND EARLY FIFTIES



them in the living room along with the TV set. The cheaper 45s became more popular with teens, who were able to buy the latest hit single and play them in their bedrooms on their portable players. In 1958, the world standard for stereo was established and the first stereo LPs were sold soon after.

Record Labels: The Majors and the Independents

Over the early years of the 20th century, the largest corporate record labels (known simply as the **major labels**) had built up well-established distribution networks and alliances with radio stations, record stores and jukebox operators to distribute and promote their product. By virtue of their nearly total control of the marketplace in the pre-rock and roll era, the majors (of which there were six) were able to prevent most records that they did not distribute from making an impact on the national charts. Even though most majors had a few R&B and country artists on their rosters, these singers were considered to have a specialty market outside the mainstream, and as a result were not marketed as heavily. Thus, when Mercury Records decided to release “Tennessee Waltz” in 1950, it was given to pop singer Patti Page rather than a country singer who might have been a better fit for the song. Even though Page’s record became a #1 hit, for the most part the majors simply ignored R&B and country. This provided an opening for smaller, **independent labels**, or “indies” to find a niche in the market, and by the mid-1950s there were more than 100 of them scattered around the country. It was these indie labels that played an important role in fueling the growth of R&B and country music in the post-war years.

The typical major was headquartered in New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles with a team of producers, talent scouts, A&R (artist & repertoire) staff, song pluggers and advance men. Professional composers, arrangers, and recording studios were also utilized to carefully craft the product to standards that would appeal to the widest possible audience to maximize sale potential. Independent labels, on the other hand, could be found in any town, and might be operating out of the back room of a store, a basement, garage, or even the trunk of a car. The small staff (often less than five, usually just one or two) handled all details, from finding the talent to distributing the records in stores and meeting with disc jockeys to get airplay. Although some indies had their own small studios, storage rooms or garages were often used as makeshift studios. With their low overhead and constant struggle for survival, indies were more willing to take risks and quickly change business tactics to keep up with emerging industry trends.

Despite their competitive disadvantages, the indie labels were perfectly positioned to grab a larger share of the record market as a growing number of white teenagers started to turn away from major label pop to listen to R&B. But to connect with this new audience, they needed some help along the way, which they got from a group of renegade radio disc jockeys (more on that in a moment).

Hot 100s and Gold Records

The most reliable source for charting record sales throughout the Rock Era has been **Billboard magazine**. First published in 1894, *Billboard* began charting songs in 1940. In 1942 the magazine began to track the emerging country

KEY TERMS

Major labels The largest corporate record labels.

Independent labels The small startup labels that began emerging in large numbers in the 1940s and 1950s.

Billboard magazine The industry magazine that charts record sales.



and R&B styles under a single category “Western and Race,” but eventually split them into two separate charts, “Country and Western” and “Rhythm and Blues” in 1949. From 1955 until 1958, it published a number of separate charts, including the Top 100, Best Sellers in Stores, Most Played in Jukeboxes, and Most Played by Disc Jockeys, all of which were merged into the new Hot 100 in 1958. The chart listings used in this book for singles are from the Hot 100 (or the Top 100 chart that preceded it), unless otherwise noted.

The RIAA (**Recording Industry Association of America**, the trade group representing the record industry) was founded in 1952 and began certifying singles with sales of one million units as gold and in 1958 certifying two million units as platinum. In 1989 these standards were lowered to 500,000 and one million respectively, making it much easier for a single to achieve gold status. The gold standard for albums was set in 1958 at 500,000; starting in 1976 albums with sales of one million were designated as platinum. In 1999 the RIAA also established the diamond certification for albums with sales of 10 million. As of this writing, 115 albums have achieved diamond status. In the early 2000s, the RIAA filed a number of lawsuits against file sharing sites such as Napster and the users of such sites on behalf of the recording industry. This controversial maneuver, which ultimately became a losing cause for the RIAA, is discussed at length in Chapter 13.

KEY TERMS

Record Industry Association of America (RIAA)

The industry trade group that certifies record sales and designates gold, platinum and diamond records.



Although the Beatles and Elvis Presley are the all-time runaway record sales leaders, the 1970s pop/country group the Eagles certainly deserve credit for their own sales achievements. Because the 1976 platinum distinction for album sales of one million units was not applied retroactively, the first album to achieve this status was Eagles/Their Greatest Hits: 1971–1975, which achieved platinum status on February 24, 1976, just weeks after its release. Today the album holds the distinction of being the third best selling LP in U.S. history with sales of 29 million (and more than 40 million worldwide). The Eagles currently have eight albums listed in the top 100 selling albums of all time (U.S.), three of which have achieved diamond status. In all, 16 Eagles LPs have achieved platinum or multi-platinum status.

GOLD, PLATINUM AND DIAMOND

RADIO

The Birth of Radio and Important Early DJs

The first commercial radio station in America, KDKA in Pittsburgh, began broadcasting in 1920. Throughout the early 1920s, radio experienced explosive growth: by 1924 there were nearly 600 commercial stations broadcasting and three million receivers in homes. In the late 1920s, NBC and CBS established radio networks that provided programming to affiliate stations throughout the country. However, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, as television appeared on the scene many analysts were predicting radio's demise. Radio stations up to this point had programmed a variety of material, including live music, drama, variety



TRIVIA NOTE

Riley B. King began his career as a DJ. King was known on the air as the “Blues Boy”; he later adopted those initials and became known simply as B. B. King.

shows, sporting events, and news. With TV’s dramatic growth in popularity, radio stations in the 1950s began concentrating their efforts on playing music and emphasizing local programming rather than relying on the network feed. These trends led to the rise in popularity of the local **disc jockey** or **DJ**. DJs often had complete control of the style of their show and the records that they played. After a time, it was not enough just to have a unique show, and many DJs started developing flamboyant and eccentric on-air personalities. They became showmen; in fact, several early rock and roll artists actually began their careers as DJs, including one at WDIA in Memphis named Riley B. King. King was known on the air as the “Blues Boy”; he later adopted those initials and became known simply as B. B. King.

Like the nation itself, in the late 1940s and early 1950s radio was segregated: a small number of black stations programmed jazz and R&B to black audiences, while white stations played pop and country for white audiences. However, R&B was becoming increasingly popular during the 1946–54 transitional period with white teenagers, who responded to the way the music was more emotional and viscerally exciting than conventional pop. To get their R&B fix, these teens began tuning in to black stations such as WDIA (“America’s Only 50,000 Watt Negro Radio Station”), WERD in Atlanta, and KXLW in St. Louis. Among the most popular black DJs in R&B radio were “Yo’ Ol’ Swingmaster” Al Benson in Chicago, “Jockey Jack” Gibson in Atlanta, Tommy “Dr. Jive” Smalls in New York, and “Professor Bop” in Shreveport.

KEY TERMS

Disc jockey (DJ)

A radio announcer who spins records (discs) interspersed with lively banter. The first DJ is believed to have been Al Jarvis of KFWB in Los Angeles, who was injecting his own personality into his show as early as 1932.



As the audience for R&B grew, the more attentive white DJs picked up on the trend and also began to play R&B records. Early white DJs who programmed R&B included Hunter Hancock (*Huntin’ with Hunter*) at KFVD and KGFJ in Los Angeles, George “Cat Man” Stiles at WNJR in Newark, George “Hound Dog” Lorenz at WKBW in Buffalo, and “Symphony Sid” Torin at WBMS in Boston and later WOV in New York. By connecting the rapidly expanding needs of the teenage nation with R&B and rock and roll records, these renegade DJs, both black and white, essentially saved radio from television’s onslaught. For all its strengths as a medium for family entertainment, TV could not connect with the young in the same direct way that radio could. By playing rock and roll records (which was also—conveniently—cheap programming), radio could pinpoint its audience with deadly accuracy. It was also portable: teens could listen at home or after school on the newly introduced transistor radio, or in their cars while cruising at night.

Alan Freed

The most famous and influential of all the white DJs was Alan Freed (1921–1965). Freed was a former jazz musician from Pennsylvania who was entrepreneurial, flamboyant, a hard worker, and a hard drinker. In June 1951 he took over the late-night Record Rendezvous show on Cleveland station WJW and turned it into an R&B program after seeing first-hand how white teenagers enthusiastically bought R&B records at a local store. Freed, who often drank while on the air, developed a wacky personality and renamed the show *The Moondog House Rock and Roll Party* (he sometimes howled like a dog during the show opening). Encouraged by the program’s popularity, Freed’s next move was to promote



TRIVIA NOTE

Alan Freed (1921–1965) was the most famous and influential of all the white DJs.

a dance that featured the same artists whose records he played. The Moondog Coronation Ball was set for the 10,000-seat Cleveland Arena in March 1952, but a near riot ensued as an overflow crowd of over 21,000 tried to get in, forcing the cancellation of the show. Later concert attempts proved successful however, and Freed's growing popularity led to his being hired by WINS in New York in September 1954. Freed named his new program The Rock and Roll Show, and began calling himself "Mr. Rock and Roll". Ratings for WINS soared, and Freed became immensely popular; however, he also became an easy target for a growing backlash against rock and roll by conservative and religious groups. Freed eventually became the focus of a congressional investigation into the music business in 1959 that ultimately ended his career (more on that in Chapter 3).

When Alan Freed moved to WINS in 1954, he was forced to change the name of his show from *The Moondog House Rock and Roll Party* to *The Rock and Roll Show* by a blind street musician who dressed up in a Viking costume. Thomas Louis Hardin claimed that he had in fact used the name Moondog for many years, and that by using the name for his radio show, Freed was infringing on Hardin's right to make a living. After Hardin filed suit, Judge Carroll Walter awarded him \$7,500 and forbade Freed from using the name Moondog. Although Alan Freed did not coin the term Rock and Roll (it was a black euphemism for sex that had been around for at least 30 years), he undoubtedly helped connect the label to the music for an ever-widening audience.

MOONDOG

Top 40

Just as DJs such as Alan Freed were playing important roles in the incubation of rock and roll, a new radio format was emerging that would ultimately undermine their influence. **Top 40** was the brainchild of **Todd Storz**, the owner of a small group of radio stations, including ratings cellar-dweller KOWH in Omaha. While at a tavern located across the street from the station one night in 1955 (although some say the year was 1953), Storz and his companions noticed that patrons were plugging the jukebox to play the same songs over and over, and when the bar closed, the waitresses took their tip money and played those songs again. Storz and his program director wrote down the names of the top songs and began playing them throughout the day on KOWH, eliminating the classical, country, and other programs the station had been playing. Within two years, KOWH went from last to first in the Omaha market, and Storz was able to buy other stations in New Orleans, Kansas City, Minneapolis, and Miami, which he formatted in the same way. Top 40 was popular with listeners because they knew that they were never more than a few minutes away from hearing their favorite song played, and it quickly spread throughout the industry. Ultimately the Top 40 format had a homogenizing effect on radio, limiting playlists all over America to mainstream pop singles. And, of course, it further diminished the power of the DJ, who in the end was shut out from selecting the songs that he played on his show.

KEY TERMS

Top 40 The radio format in which the 40 top selling songs are played in repetition, first developed by Todd Storz at KOWH in Omaha, Nebraska.





KEY TERMS

Blues The form developed in the Mississippi Delta and other Southern locales in the late 19th century that incorporates a 12-bar verse, AAB lyric form, and tonalities from the blues scale.

Work songs, shouts, and field hollers African song forms used to accompany work and other aspects of everyday life that were adapted by slaves on plantations and Southern work camps.

Mississippi Delta The 250 mile long area of Mississippi stretching from Memphis south to Vicksburg that is widely believed to be the birthplace of the blues.

Country blues The earliest form of the blues, performed by solo male singers accompanying themselves on guitar.

AAB lyric form The format of most blues poetry, in which each verse is comprised of three lines, the second of which is a repeat of the first.

THE BLACK ROOTS OF ROCK AND ROLL

The Blues

The **blues** is a uniquely American musical form, born in the Southern middle states sometime between the years 1880 and 1900. It evolved from the **work songs, shouts, and field hollers** sung by slaves in plantation fields and prison camps. Songs sung to accompany various daily jobs and duties were a functional part of everyday life in Africa and a celebration of doing work to improve the quality of one's life. In the New World however, the very nature of the work song began to change, as the singer was no longer doing work for himself but for someone else—and the work no longer improved his quality of life. Over time, the songs sung in the fields therefore became personal expressions of pain and oppression. Singing work songs and field hollers became a catharsis for feelings of lost love, sexual frustration, poverty, jealousy, and hard times. It is from this context that the blues evolved.

After the Civil War, thousands of freed slaves began traveling through the South, looking for work, armed with no job skills to speak of other than as a common laborer. Once Reconstruction ended, life became increasingly bleak for many of them, as newly enacted Jim Crow laws and racial oppression became as commonplace as the hard work and poverty. Singing in work camps, street corners, and juke joints for food and tips was one of the few professions available to a black man in which he wasn't directly working for the white man (preaching was another, and in fact many of the first blues singers were former preachers). Today many scholars speculate that the blues incubated in the **Mississippi Delta**, a 250-mile oval of land stretching south from Memphis, Tennessee, to Vicksburg, Mississippi.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BLUES

1. 12-bar musical form
2. Three-phrase AAB lyrical form
3. Emotional, personal lyrics convey feelings of lust, lost love, jealousy, suffering, hard times, etc.

THE FIRST BLUES SINGERS

The first blues performers were solo singers who accompanied themselves on the guitar in a rambling and spontaneous fashion that became known as **country blues**. These performers worked out the basic standard blues formula: a three-phrase **AAB lyric form** of 12-bar length, with each phrase answered by the guitar

in a call-and-response fashion. This evolution occurred in the backwoods away from almost everyone who might have been interested, and before there were any recording devices, so documentation of exactly how it happened is scarce. One of the first to archive the blues was W. C. Handy, a bandleader and former schoolteacher from Alabama who in 1903 heard a man playing and singing at the train station in Tutwiler, Mississippi. In his autobiography Handy wrote: “As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. ‘Goin’ where the Southern cross’ the Dog’. The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard. The tune stayed in my mind.” Realizing the commercial potential of this new music, Handy became the first to publish blues songs, including “Memphis Blues” in 1912 and “St. Louis Blues” in 1914. Both were huge hits through the sale of sheet music, and earned Handy the title “Father of the Blues.” The blues sold on sheet music remained popular until 1917 when the first jazz recording started the jazz craze, and consumers began to buy more records.

THE FIRST BLUES RECORDINGS

The blues remained popular throughout the 1920s with the first commercially sold blues recordings by what became known as the **classic blues** singers. When “Crazy Blues” by Mamie Smith sold one million copies within a year of its 1920 release, record companies realized that there was a huge untapped black consumer market. Most of the classic blues recordings were released on small independent labels such as Vocalion, Black Swan, and Okeh that specialized in race music, a market that the major labels were largely unwilling to pursue. Although many of these female singers were merely singing pop tunes with a tragic delivery (and nearly all the records had the word “blues” in the title), some of them, such as **Bessie Smith** (the “Empress of the Blues” 1894–1937) and Ethel Waters were outstanding blues singers. In 1929, the Depression almost killed the record industry, and did manage to finish off the classic blues era.

It wasn’t until 1925 that the first country blues singers began to record. It was that year that Blind Lemon Jefferson recorded “Black Snake Moan” in Chicago, after having worked his way north through the Mississippi Delta from his native Texas. Another Texan, Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly, surfaced in the 1940s New York City folk scene with Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger after several troublesome years in and out of prison. But the most spine-tingling blues performances came from the haunting vocals and bottleneck guitars of the Delta bluesmen, such as Charley Patton, Willie Brown, Son House, and **Robert Johnson** (1911–1938). Although Johnson only recorded 29 sides during his life, his songs are among the most influential in American history, including “Love in Vain,” “Cross Road Blues,” “Sweet Home Chicago,” and “I Believe I’ll Dust My Broom.” Johnson’s singing and guitar playing on these recordings is riveting even today. Unfortunately, his mythic life ended before he achieved any real national attention when a jealous husband poisoned him at a juke joint outside of Greenwood, Mississippi in 1938.



TRIVIA NOTE

In 1929, the Depression almost killed the record industry, and did manage to finish off the classic blues era.



KEY TERMS

Classic blues An early form of the blues from the 1920s, sung by female vocalists with small group backing.

MUSIC CUT 1



"CROSS ROAD BLUES" (ROBERT JOHNSON)— ROBERT JOHNSON

Personnel: Robert Johnson: guitar, vocals. Recorded on November 27, 1936 in the Gunter Hotel, San Antonio, TX; produced by Don Law and Art Satherley.

When Robert Johnson recorded "Cross Road Blues" in a makeshift studio at the Gunter Hotel in San Antonio, he had already recorded 11 of the 16 songs that would come from the three sessions held during the week of November 22, 1936, including the classics "Sweet Home Chicago" and "Terraplane Blues." These sessions, along with a second round of sessions held on June 19 and 20, 1937 (which produced 13 more songs), produced what are arguably the most defining and influential blues recordings in history. With his haunting vocals and use of a bottleneck slide on the guitar, Johnson helps define the sound of Delta blues. The influence of Johnson's recording of "Cross Road Blues" can be found in the recordings of other artists who have covered it, which includes Cream, the Doors and Van Halen.

Jazz



KEY TERMS

Jazz The music of individual expression whose main characteristics are improvisation and swing rhythm.

An improvisational art form of individual expression, **jazz** developed as a parallel universe alongside the blues throughout the first half of the 20th century. Originally evolving as an ensemble form in New Orleans and other Southern locales around the turn of the century, like the blues it worked its way north to Chicago around 1920. It was in the 1920s that its first true innovator, trumpeter Louis Armstrong, revolutionized jazz by turning it into a soloist's art form simply on the strength and drama of his virtuoso improvisations. The 65 sides that he recorded for Okeh as the leader of the Hot Five and Hot Seven between 1925 and 1928 are among the most important artifacts of American music. By the 1930s, the center of the jazz world had moved to New York, where composers and arrangers such as Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington helped develop the jazz big band that was to become the standard ensemble of the Swing Era. At the same time, bandleaders in Kansas City like Count Basie were developing an exciting riff-based boogie style that would further invigorate swing music with the blues.

DELTA BLUESMEN

- Charley Patton
- Willie Brown
- Son House
- Robert Johnson

- Alto saxophonist Charlie Parker
- Trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie
- Pianist Thelonious Monk

BEBOP'S ARCHITECTS

During the Swing Era, jazz became America's pop music, and music industry manipulation caused creative innovation and musical integrity to suffer. But jazz began to reinvent itself around 1940 in the late-night jam sessions at tiny nightclubs in Harlem such as Minton's Playhouse. Modern jazz, or bebop, was created by a small group of young musical revolutionaries in search of more stimulating musical expression. Bebop's architects were some of the most gifted musical talents America has ever produced, including alto saxophonist Charlie Parker, trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and pianist Thelonious Monk. Although bebop infused a fresh new vitality into jazz, it also made it impossible for most people to dance or even listen to. In the post-bebop era, jazz musicians began to experiment with different stylistic approaches, including cool jazz, hard bop, and free jazz. In 1969 trumpeter Miles Davis, who had often been at the forefront of innovation throughout his music career, fused rock and jazz together with his seminal album *Bitches Brew*. Jazz continues to incorporate influences from rock and its offshoots to this day.

Black Gospel

Black Gospel emerged as a style in the early 1930s from the traditional spirituals that had been a part of black religious culture since the days of slavery. The man most responsible for commercializing gospel music was **Thomas Dorsey** (1899–1993), who is often called the “Father of Gospel Music.” Ironically, before turning his attention to religious music, Dorsey was known as “Georgia Tom,” the piano-playing half (along with guitarist Tampa Red) of the Hokum Brothers. Their hit recording “It’s Tight Like That” from 1928 contained lewd, off-color, humorous lyrics that presaged similar songs by Louis Jordan, Little Richard, and Chuck Berry. In the 1930s Dorsey started writing songs of good news and salvation with blues-influenced melodies and rhythms that eventually became popular at church services in the black community. Among his many gospel standards are “Take My Hand, Precious Lord,” written in 1932. Later gospel stars include Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Mahalia Jackson.

Black gospel's influence on American popular music is immense. The **melismatic** singing of gospel can be heard throughout the entire history of rock music. Gospel backup bands often used the Hammond B3 organ, which became one of the most popular instruments in rock in the 1960s and 1970s. Typically performing in church accompanied by large choirs, the male gospel quartets that started to become popular in the 1930s were ancestors to doo-wop groups in the 1950s. Many of the early crossover R&B stars of the 1950s had gospel roots, including Little Richard and Sam Cooke, whose career took off when he joined the venerable gospel group the Soul Stirrers. Gospel is also one of the foundational



TRIVIA NOTE

The man most responsible for commercializing gospel music was Thomas Dorsey, who is often called the “Father of Gospel Music.”



KEY TERMS

Black Gospel Highly emotional evangelical vocal music that emerged from spirituals and was highly influential to Rhythm and Blues.

Melisma The singing embellishment of a single syllable into several notes.



KEY TERMS

Rhythm and Blues

An evolution of the blues that was more dance and commercially oriented. R&B bands often included electric instruments such as guitars, bass guitars and organs, vocalists and a horn section, often with a honking tenor saxophone soloist.



TRIVIA NOTE

As the Swing Era came to an end in 1946, Rhythm and Blues replaced jazz as the music America wanted to dance to.

blocks of soul music, and its influence can be heard in the voice of the first soul singer, Ray Charles, and in every 1960s soul singer from James Brown to Otis Redding and Aretha Franklin.

Rhythm and Blues

In the 1940s, blues musicians in Chicago began amplifying themselves in order to be heard over the din of the crowded clubs in the city's South Side. Once the blues went electric, it was a natural progression to speed it up, put in a heavier beat and make it more danceable. Although the term **Rhythm and Blues** wasn't coined until 1949 (by Jerry Wexler of *Billboard* magazine), the style was developed in the 1940s out of jazz and blues roots. As the Swing Era came to an end in 1946, Rhythm and Blues, with its boogie-woogie bass lines and honking tenor sax solos, increasingly replaced jazz as the music America wanted to dance to. Jazz veteran Lionel Hampton had one of the first R&B hits in 1942 with "Flying Home," and the biggest R&B hit of 1946, "Hey! Ba-Ba-Re-Bop." Omaha native Wynonie Harris had the #1 R&B hit of 1947 with "Good Rocking Tonight," a song that Elvis Presley would later cover. Joe Turner's 1954 hit recording of "Shake, Rattle and Roll" was also covered by Presley and Bill Haley.

R&B styles ranged from the raunchy to the polished. On one end of the spectrum were the down-and-dirty bar bands that emerged from the urban blues of Chicago's South Side. The most prominent Chicago R&B performers were Muddy Waters, harmonica players Little Walter and Sonny Boy Williamson, guitarists Elmore James and John Lee Hooker, bassist and composer Willie Dixon, and singer Chester Burnett, better known as Howlin' Wolf. These performers all recorded at Chess Records, where they were closely linked to the soon-to-emerge rock-and-roll styles of Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry. They were also highly inspirational to a number of rock bands in the 1960s, including the Rolling Stones and Cream. (One of Waters' more influential records was 1950's "Rolling Stone," which provided the English band with their name.)

Jump bands, which usually included a small horn section along with the rhythm section and vocalist, played a smoother, more jazz-influenced type of R&B. Popular jump bands of this era included those of Johnny Otis, Louis Prima, and **Louis Jordan** (1908-1975). As leader of the **Tympany Five**, Jordan scored an unbelievable 18 #1 and 54 Top 10 records on the R&B charts in the 1940s. He still holds the record for the total number of weeks at #1 on the R&B charts—113 (Stevie Wonder is second with 70). Jordan sang songs that often contained street-smart jive and humor, such as "Open the Door, Richard" and "Saturday Night Fish Fry." His biggest hits included "Choo Choo Ch'Boogie," "Caldonia," and "Ain't Nobody Here But Us Chickens." Jordan also made innovative short movies of the Tympany Five in performance that were shown between feature films at theaters—predecessors to the contemporary music video.

Rhythm and Blues would become one of the most prevailing influences in popular music in the last half of the 20th century. In the mid-1950s its most commercially successful practitioners would play important roles in shaping the sound of early rock and roll. The lives and music of these men, Bo Diddley,

MUSIC CUT 2



“CHOO CHOO CH’ BOOGIE” (VAUGHN HORTON/DENVER DARLING/ MILT GABLER)—LOUIS JORDAN AND HIS TYMPANY FIVE

Personnel: Louis Jordan: alto sax, vocals; Aaron Izenhall: trumpet; Josh Jackson: tenor sax; Bill Davis: piano; Carl Hogan: guitar; Po Simpkins: bass; Eddie Byrd: drums. Recorded January 23, 1946 in New York City; produced by Milt Gabler. Released 1946 on Decca; 18 weeks on the charts, peaking at #1 R&B, #4 pop.

“Choo Choo Ch’ Boogie” is a great example of the kind of R&B that made Louis Jordan the most popular black recording artist in the 1940s. Jordan’s group the Tympany Five, a so-called jump band, played a smooth, jazz-influenced type of R&B that prominently featured riffing horns and a driving rhythm section. In addition to being a fine vocalist who could deliver his often-humorous lyrics with a clear, smooth enunciation, Jordan was also a first rate alto saxophonist who had worked in the legendary Chick Webb Orchestra at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem before going out on his own.

Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Fats Domino and others, will be discussed in the next chapter.

- Muddy Waters
- Little Walter
- Sonny Boy Williamson
- Elmore James

- John Lee Hooker
- Willie Dixon
- Howlin’ Wolf

PROMINENT CHICAGO R&B PERFORMERS

Doo-Wop

In terms of record sales, **doo-wop** was the most popular black music style in the 1950s. Its origins go back as far as the 1930s and the popularity of male gospel quartets and commercial vocal groups such as the Mills Brothers and the Ink Spots. The Mills Brothers (who were in fact four brothers from Ohio) prided themselves in creating a tightly woven cross between jazz and barbershop vocal harmonies with only guitar accompaniment. The Ink Spots were also influential to doo-wop, featuring lead vocalist Bill Kenny singing in a melismatic, gospel-inspired high tenor voice that became a staple of doo-wop. Both groups were immensely popular throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

THE EARLIEST DOO-WOP GROUPS

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, it became fashionable for amateur teenage vocal groups to perform a cappella on street corners and on the stoops of apartment buildings, especially in New York. This was usually just for fun, although the possibility of being discovered by a talent scout was never far from anyone’s thoughts. The first of these groups to hit it big was the Ravens with their 1947 hits “Write Me a Letter” and “Old Man River.” The latter record,



KEY TERMS

Doo-wop The cappella group vocal style that incorporates high falsetto vocal leads, scat singing, rhythmic vocal backings, and sometimes lead vocals or spoken verse by the bass singer.



which sold two million copies, was unusual in that bass singer Warren Suttles sang the vocal lead. This technique was to become one of the signature characteristics of the doo-wop genre. The Ravens also featured choreography in their shows—another first that was to become a staple of later soul acts such as the Temptations and the Supremes.

Other groups started to copy these innovations. The Orioles (who, like the baseball team, were from Baltimore) first pop hit was “It’s Too Soon to Know,” which hit the Top 20 in 1948. The song’s huge crossover appeal was unprecedented for a race record and helped the group become regulars on the R&B charts over the next few years. Their biggest success came in 1953 with “Crying in the Chapel,” which climbed to #11. With the success of the Orioles and the Ravens, other “bird” groups appeared, including the Penguins, Flamingos, and Swallows. Later “car” names became popular, with the Cadillacs, T-Birds, Fleetwoods, and Imperials, to name just a few.

Another doo-wop group that achieved notoriety of sorts was Hank Ballard and the Midnighters. In 1954 they had a series of “Annie” records (“Work with Me Annie,” “Annie Had a Baby,” and “Annie’s Aunt Fanny”) that sold over a million copies each despite being widely banned from radio play. Each song contained sexually suggestive lyrics—the “work” in the first hit was a thinly disguised metaphor for sex—that were as funny as they were risqué. Ballard also wrote “The Twist” in 1958, which became a #1 hit for Chubby Checker in 1960 and spawned the dance craze of the same name. In the context of the “Annie” records, one should reconsider what Ballard was writing about in the first line of “The Twist”: “Well come on baby, *let’s do the twist*.” Perhaps it wasn’t dancing he was singing about.



TRIVIA NOTE

In terms of record sales, doo-wop was the most popular black music style in the 1950s.

A PARTIAL LIST OF DOO-WOP GROUPS FROM THE 1950s

Bird Groups:

Ravens
Orioles
Penguins
Flamingos
Swallows
Bluebirds
Crows
Robins

Car Groups:

Cadillacs
T-Birds
Imperials
Fleetwoods
Corvairs
Galaxies
El Dorados
Impalas

THE INDUSTRY MOVES IN

Although doo-wop originated as an a cappella style, recordings were most often made using instrumental accompaniment, as record labels tried to maximize the commercial appeal of the records and make them more danceable. Many labels also took advantage of the street singers, who most often had no business skills and were just happy to get a record contract. The classic example of this type of exploitation is the story of **Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers**, who rose to fame in 1956 with “Why Do Fools Fall in Love” (#6) when Lymon was only 13 years old. Producer George Goldner paid Lymon a stipend of \$25 a week with

MUSIC CUT 3



“WHY DO FOOLS FALL IN LOVE” (FRANKIE LYMON/MORRIS LEVY)— FRANKIE LYMON AND THE TEENAGERS

Personnel: Frankie Lymon, Jimmy Merchant, Sherman Garnes, Herman Santiago, Joe Negroni: vocals; Jimmy Wright: tenor sax; Jimmy Shirley: guitar; Al Hall: bass; Gene Brooks: drums. Recorded 1955 at Bell Sound Studios, New York, NY; produced by George Goldner. Released January 1956 on Gee; 21 weeks on the charts, peaking at #6.

The Teenagers, made up of five school buddies from New York, were the quintessential “unknowns” discovered singing on the street corner” doo-wop group. After another singer named Richard Barrett discovered them in 1955, the group signed with George Goldner’s Gee records. At their first recording session, they performed “Why Do Fools Fall in Love,” a song that Teenagers Herman Santiago and Jimmy Merchant co-wrote. However, Santiago, who was supposed to sing lead, had a cold, and the job was handed to Lymon. Subsequently he and producer Goldman were given writing credits for the song (this was later overturned by a federal judge in the early 1990s). The song has been a Hot 100 hit four times, most recently in 1981 with Diana Ross’s version.

the rest of his earnings going into a “trust fund.” When Lymon’s voice changed a few years later and his career went in decline, he discovered that there was in fact no trust fund. He turned to heroin and died from an overdose at 26. Many other doo-wop groups were “one hit wonders,” as bad business deals, competing cover versions, and instability of the small independent labels took their toll. One of the best examples of the one hit wonder was the Chords, whose only hit “Sh-Boom” in 1953 was quickly buried by the Crewcuts’ cover.

One fledgling record company, Atlantic Records, had unusual success with doo-wop. Although its primary focus was on jazz when it was founded in 1947, Atlantic signed Clyde McPhatter of the Dominos in 1953 and built a new group, the Drifters, around him. They were an instant smash, with five hits that went to #1 or #2 on the R&B charts within the next two years. McPhatter was drafted into the military in 1955, and was replaced by a succession of lead singers until Ben E. King took over in 1958. At around the same time, the young songwriting duo of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller were assigned to the group, and their first production, “There Goes My Baby” went to #2 pop and stayed on the charts for fourteen weeks. Between 1957 and 1959, Leiber and Stoller also wrote five Top 10 hits for another doo-wop group, the Coasters.

THE WHITE ROOTS OF ROCK AND ROLL

Traditional Rural Music

Traditional rural music in America evolved primarily from the folk music brought to the New World by British immigrants. The Appalachian region of Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia were particularly fertile areas for the survival of this music tradition, as the rural and isolated mountainous settings hampered contact with the changing outside world. By the early 20th century, city dwellers began to mockingly call the poor white inhabitants of this region “hillbillies,” and the simple folk music they played **hillbilly music**.

KEY TERMS

Hillbilly music The traditional old time music of the rural South and Appalachian regions, with origins in English folk music. Hillbilly music is the foundation of modern country music.





The **British folk tradition** included ballads, which typically tell a story, some of them epic tales; lyric songs, which are often songs of love; and work songs. Unlike African work songs, British work songs often came in the form of sea chanteys, railroad songs, and lumber songs. At first, folk music in America was simply sung verbatim by the new colonists as it had been in England; over time songs often underwent subtle changes as their original meanings and purposes were forgotten and singers adapted them to their new environment. New songs in the same tradition were also written. A good example of a traditional English ballad that survived in America is “Barbara Allen,” a timeless song about young lovers and death believed to be from the 17th century. Although it has evolved over the years, it is still a folk standard that has been performed by everyone from Joan Baez to the Everly Brothers to Bob Dylan. On the other hand, “Sweet Betsy from Pike,” written around 1870 using a traditional English melody, is a uniquely American song about the hard journey West, with lyrics that invoke the imagery of the Platte River, Salt Lake City, and California.

Unlike blues and country musicians who eventually embraced the use of electric instruments, rural and folk musicians continued to use the traditional acoustic instruments from the past, such as the fiddle, acoustic guitar, and banjo. After 1900 other acoustic instruments such as the mandolin, string bass, auto-harp, and Hawaiian steel guitar were also often included. To this day, many folk musicians typically use only these traditional instruments in their performances.

THE FIRST COUNTRY RECORDINGS

Traditional rural music was first recorded in 1923 when Okeh Records recorded Atlanta favorite Fiddlin’ John Carson at a local radio station. The records sold surprisingly well throughout the region, much to the amazement of company officials. Sensing a business opportunity, **Ralph Peer** (1892–1960) of Victor Records went on a talent hunt for other rural musicians in August of 1927. Setting up his primitive mobile recording equipment in a warehouse in Bristol, Tennessee, and offering \$50 per song to anyone who would audition, Peer struck gold. Among the many that came down from the hills to record at the **Bristol Sessions**, as they became known, were both the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers, who would become the first commercially successful and important performers of country music, as it was starting to be labeled by the late 1920s.

The **Carter Family**, led by A. P. Carter, his wife Sara, and their sister-in-law Maybelle, had learned hundreds of traditional songs and performed them putting emphasis on their strong vocals and a revolutionary flat picking guitar style that is still commonly used by folk guitarists. **Jimmie Rodgers**, known alternately as the “Father of Country Music,” “America’s Blue Yodeler,” and the “Singing Brakeman,” was indeed a railroad worker until his poor health forced him to quit and concentrate on music. Between 1927 and 1933 when he died from tuberculosis, Rodgers (1897–1933) recorded over 100 songs, sold millions of records, and became the first nationally known country star. His song topics and vocal style (which included blues inflections and his signature yodeling) set the mold for later stars such as Ernest Tubb and Hank Williams. As one of the three original inductees into the Country Music Hall of Fame, Rodgers’s plaque identifies him as “the man who started it all.”

KEY TERMS

British folk tradition

The traditional folk music, including ballads, lyric songs and work songs, of the British Isles. British immigrants brought these songs to the New World.

Bristol Sessions The first important country music recordings made in Bristol, Tennessee in 1927 by Ralph Peer. Among the artists that Peer recorded were Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family.



MUSIC CUT 4



“BLUE YODEL #1 (T FOR TEXAS)” (JIMMIE RODGERS)— JIMMIE RODGERS

Personnel: Jimmie Rodgers: guitar, vocals. Recorded on November 30, 1927 at RCA Victor Studio 1, Camden, NJ; produced by Ralph Peer. Released February 3, 1928.

“Blue Yodel #1 (T for Texas)” was recorded in the RCA Victor Studio 1, the former Trinity Baptist Church in Camden, New Jersey. It was Rodgers’s second session for the label and its producer Ralph Peer (the first being the famous August 4, 1927 session in Bristol, Tennessee), and the one that made him a star. Rodgers originally called his song “T for Texas,” but Peer, impressed by the “oh-de-lay” yodels at the end of each verse, renamed it “Blue Yodel.” It became a smash that ended up selling approximately one million copies, and instantly made Rodgers a household name. Rodgers became known as “America’s Blue Yodeler,” and went on to record ten more “Blue Yodels.” His use of both blue-infused melodies and yodels made him a major influence to both the black and white vocalists of his day.

NASHVILLE AND THE GRAND OLE OPRY

Radio played an important role in popularizing country music. In 1923, the first “barn dance” program was broadcast on station WBAP in Dallas, featuring live performances by country artists. Other shows soon followed: in 1924, Chicago’s WLS premiered its National Barn Dance program, and on November 28, 1925, the WSM Barn Dance began broadcasting in Nashville. In 1927, WSM (which still resides at 650 Hz on the dial) changed the name of the program to the **Grand Ole Opry** and with the station’s clear channel designation, the Opry became the most widely heard and influential radio show of its kind. Other “barn dance” programs included the Louisiana Hayride on KWKH in Shreveport, Louisiana, the Midwestern Hayride on WLW in Cincinnati, and the Big D Jamboree on KRLD in Dallas.

Today, the Grand Ole Opry is the longest continuously running radio program in the United States. It has influenced the course of country music by putting an emphasis on programming pop-oriented and crooning country singers (and forbidding drums for many years). Careers were often made by a successful debut there. Because the Opry was a live broadcast, performers had to maintain a presence in Nashville at least one day each week, and throughout the 1940s and 1950s, many moved there permanently. Songwriters, publishers, recording studios, and all the major record labels soon followed, and by the early 1950s, Nashville became the capital of the country music industry—in large part because of the Grand Ole Opry.

Cowboy Music, Western Swing, and Bluegrass

Around the same time that radio was starting to make country music more accessible, Hollywood filmmakers were popularizing **cowboy songs** in Westerns, and stars such as Gene Autry (“The Singing Cowboy”) and Roy Rogers rose to fame. Cowboy songs were dressed up and orchestrated to give them a smoother and more commercial sound; the singing cowboys themselves were also dressed up in hats, boots, and ties to elevate them from the older and undesirable hillbilly



TRIVIA NOTE

Today the Grand Ole Opry is the longest continuously running radio program in the United States.

KEY TERMS

Grand Ole Opry The radio program that began broadcasting in 1925 from WSM in Nashville that essentially made that city the center of the country music industry.

Cowboy songs Traditional country and hillbilly songs used in Hollywood films that were orchestrated to create a more commercial pop sound.





KEY TERMS

Western swing A form of country music that incorporates jazz swing rhythm and instruments associated with a jazz swing band.

Bluegrass A fast paced, acoustic music that incorporated virtuoso improvised solos similar to those found in jazz.

Honky-tonk A country-oriented predecessor to rock and roll that used a rhythm section, electric guitar, and electric pedal steel guitar to create a louder and hard driving sound. Honky tonk lyrics often dealt with drinking, cheating, etc.

Southern Gospel A Christian-based genre of music that first became popularized in the Southern United States in the early 20th century by male vocal quartets singing with piano or small group accompaniment.

image. Cowboy songs helped pave the way for other commercialized offshoots of country to emerge that would reinvent the genre. One of these was **Western swing**, which became popular during the Swing Era and whose biggest star was Texas fiddler Bob Wills. Wills began broadcasting on station KVOO in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1934 with his band the Texas Playboys, which combined traditional country instruments with those found in a swing big band: trumpets, saxophones, and drums. Despite their tendencies toward jazz, the Playboys wore the traditional country attire of cowboy hats, boots, and string ties. Wills had his biggest hit in 1940 with “New San Antonio Rose,” which went to #11 on the charts.

Another stylistic development was **bluegrass**, which was invented and named by mandolin player **Bill Monroe**. With his band the Blue Grass Boys, which he formed in 1938, Monroe developed a unique genre that relied on faster tempos and jazz-like virtuoso solos that were spread evenly among mandolin, fiddle, and guitar. When guitarist and vocalist **Lester Flatt** and banjo wizard **Earl Scruggs** joined the band in 1944, the Blue Grass Boys were in their prime. Scruggs did nothing less than reinvent banjo playing with his amazing fast picking style. Flatt and Scruggs left in 1948 (due to Monroe’s stubbornness and difficult personality) and started their own band, which in time became more popular than Monroe’s.

Southern Gospel

Southern, or “white” gospel had a parallel course of development to that of Black Gospel. Its beginnings can be traced back to the earliest white settlers from Britain, who along with folk songs brought their hymns. Throughout the 19th century a style of singing known as Sacred Harp or shape note music became popular, especially in the South, which used a simple notation system that even illiterates could read. By the late 1800s a rebirth of hymn writing known as Gospel led to the creation of many hymns that are still sung today, including “Jesus Loves Me” and “Blessed Assurance.” As hymn publishers began to flourish in the 20th century, it became fashionable for them to use traveling vocal groups known as Southern Gospel Quartets as sales representatives for songbooks. The man who is today known as the Father of the Southern Gospel music industry was James D. Vaughan, who started a publishing company in 1900, a music school in 1911, and one of the first radio stations in the South in 1922. In 1910 Vaughan became the first publisher to use a vocal quartet to sell songbooks.

As other publishers picked up the idea of using vocal quartets to sell books, the Southern Gospel industry took off. In addition to the early Vaughan groups, other popular Southern Gospel groups in the early to mid 1900s included the Blackwood Brothers, Oak Ridge Quartet, the Statesmen, the Statler Brothers, the Louvin Brothers, and the Gaither Vocal Band. The records from these groups were important influences on the earliest white rock and rollers, including Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, and Carl Perkins. Southern Gospel was such an important part of Presley’s musical background that he recorded three gospel albums during his lifetime, and sang “Peace in the Valley” – a song written by Thomas Dorsey and a standard among Southern Gospel groups – with the white gospel group the Jordanaires on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1957.

Honky-Tonk

Honky-tonk grew out of the bars and roadhouses (called “honky-tonks”) of Texas and the South, where the patrons were rough and rowdy and hard drinkers. The music is characterized by songs of drinkin’ and cheatin’, loves gained and lost. To be heard above the din of the crowded saloons, the honky-tonkers developed a louder, driving sound by adding drums, electric guitar, and electric pedal steel guitar that modernized country music and inched it closer in sound to the first rock-and-roll style, rockabilly. The first honky-tonk artist was Ernest Tubb, who with his Texas Troubadours had been touring constantly and performing on radio since the early 1930s, achieving national celebrity in the 1940s with movie roles and Opry appearances. Another honky-tonk artist, Texas-born William “Lefty” Frizzell, is widely credited with creating a smoother singing style that became the blueprint for modern country singers. He was a regular on the country charts throughout the 1950s and early 1960s.

MUSIC CUT 5



“YOUR CHEATIN’ HEART” (HANK WILLIAMS/FRED ROSE)— HANK WILLIAMS

Personnel: Hank Williams: guitar, vocal; other musicians unidentified. Recorded September 23, 1952 at Castle Studios, Nashville, TN; produced by Fred Rose. Released January 1953 on MGM; a #1 hit on the country charts.

“Your Cheatin’ Heart,” the song that is often called the song that defines country music—and honky tonk—was recorded at Hank Williams’s last recording session. According to legend, Williams, who had just separated from his first wife Audrey, wrote the song while driving around with the woman who would become his second wife, Billie Jean Williams. After Billie Jean wrote down the lyrics, Hank took them to Nashville songwriter Fred Rose, who edited them and produced the final version of the song. After recording the song, Williams told a friend, “It’s the best heart song I ever wrote.”

Although his recording career lasted only six years, the man who most personified honky tonk was undoubtedly **Hank Williams** (1923–1953), the “Hillbilly Shakespeare.” Williams was a master poet with a knack for catchy melodies who wrote some of the most enduring tunes in country music history, including “Hey Good Lookin’,” “Jambalaya,” “Cold, Cold Heart,” and “Your Cheatin’ Heart.” Williams became so popular in the late 1940s and early 1950s that he had 11 records that sold a million copies or more, and his concerts often resembled the near riots that Elvis Presley would incite a few years later. Unfortunately, his growing drinking problem paralleled that of his rising fame, and his life began to fall apart. He died of alcohol intoxication in the back seat of a car on the way to a gig on January 1, 1953. The last single released in his lifetime was his prophetic composition “I’ll Never Get Out of This World Alive.”

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STUDY QUESTIONS

Name _____ Date _____

1. Describe Frank Sinatra's relationship to rock and roll, both his reaction to it and his influence on it.
2. Describe how technology changed the way music was recorded and packaged in the years leading up to 1954.
3. What were some differences between the major and independent labels, both in how they operated and what kind of music they specialized in?
4. What role did radio play in the explosion of rock and roll, and who were the important personalities?
5. Describe how the blues evolved from its beginning until the 1940s.



6. Describe the music that influenced doo-wop and how doo-wop in turn influenced rock and roll.
7. Describe how music from the British folk tradition changed after it was brought to America.
8. Describe how Nashville became such an important music center.
9. What were the musical influences on Western swing and how did they manifest themselves?
10. Why is honky tonk music so important to early rock and roll?