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American Popular Culture and the Struggle for Art: Rock 'n' Roll as Metaphor

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Abstract

Contrary to traditional reckoning, Rock and Roll between Elvis Presley and Punk Rock was not a revolutionary genre. It has for years been accorded mythical status, but as my thesis attempts to illustrate, such an aggrandizement of its place in history overlooks and overshadows the complex operational dynamic by which it empowered and was empowered by its audiences. My goal is to relocate Rock from its lofty place as a harbinger of cultural of social and cultural change and place it in the more modest position of that of an historically locatable event within American popular music industry.

Insofar as a disruption of traditional modes of listening to music had occurred at least since the advent of recorded music in the late 1800's, rock's status as a "revolutionary" phenomenon is called into question. My grounds for this assertion are implicit in the course of rock music history as fans, critics, and performers of Rock and Roll sought relentlessly to elevate the status of their popular idiom to the status of art. While rock music may have derived from a particular musical heritage, one of its key characteristics was that it could not continue to carry full weight and import of this heritage to new young consumers. Ultimately, rock and roll referred far more to an ideology or means of empowerment than simply to a style of music. The elements which comprised rock and roll were simultaneously musical, social, economic and political. Therefore, rock needs to be viewed from a time specific point of reference, and with respect to the ever-increasing rate of technological, and social change. The re-valuation of art which characterized rock culture was more of an extension of prior practice than the beginning of a revolution. As Rock criticism and analysis itself often prided itself in its dis-inheritance of what was acceptable in the past, it was only natural to think of it as a new "kind" of art form, when in fact it was merely a site of conflict in the continuing dialogue in the struggle for the popular against art.

It was not so much that Rock did not have a special quality about it to its fans which made it seem superior to all other forms of music but that their judgments were grounded in a view of the world which renounced the musical past as part of the practice of re-valuing the popular. For instance, even rock icon Elvis Presley was regarded by an entire generation of fans to have been irrelevant to cause of “artistic” rock music a mere ten years after he was lauded as the revolutionary figure who “launched” the idiom in the mid-fifties. While his legend lived on, his music no longer qualified as “revolutionary” in spite of his being canonized as a figure of the most far-reaching influence and importance. What seemed more important for youth was the amount of cultural capital which the Elvis legend gave to the institution of rock rather than the actual music of the artist himself.

The re-evaluation of the popular vis-à-vis rock music can also be seen as a process which occurred in response to the ever-increasing pace of change in the music industry. As the relative “life-span” of any given top pop hit of the first decade of rock music was diminishing steadily in order to market new entries, rock fans became increasingly willing to forego the old for the new. In place of the continuity which a musical heritage could provide, youth preferred to de-value even its own music in order to differentiate from a culture with which it wanted no part. While the history of rock shows a wide diversity of styles and practices for achieving this defiance, the most consistent strategy of youthful audiences was to subjectively differentiate “authentic Rock” from otherwise mass-produced popular music. Rock’s essential character seemed, in other words, to have had more to do with taste and the ability to impose those tastes upon the world of the popular than with either historical accuracy or any deeply held loyalty to its canon. Its importance as a cultural phenomenon lie not in its messages and meanings, but in its abilities and capacities for re-articulating the value of art and for defining taste within cultures of difference, popularity, and fun. Essentially, therefore, I am not writing so much to justify my own tastes as to distance myself from them in order to write about taste.

Many accounts of Rock and Roll begin and end with sociological descriptions of youth or class culture, and while I feel that these considerations are indispensable to the story of Rock's emergence in the fifties, they don't always account for technological and industrial events which *allowed* this emergence to occur. For this reason, I have chosen to locate Rock within, rather than apart, from the greater body of American popular music and culture, and to revisit it according to the significant developments in the history of recording. The common thread which ties the early history of popular music with the emergence of Rock and Roll is the ongoing struggle over aesthetic expression and its appropriate use. From its onset, the "popular" was measured against "art" and the ensuing half-century which followed the commercialization of sound recording held many clues as to why the Rock era would inherit its characteristically critical approach to aesthetic valuation.

Certain crucial developments took place in the technology of sound recording with reference to their effects upon the entertainment industry. The proliferation of radio and recordings worked in such a way as to confound the interests of established gatekeepers of musical arts and thus forecast the phonograph record as a primary purveyor of popular taste, and, eventually, Rock and Roll itself. Widespread changes in the recording industry which would not come to fruition until the fifties were also forecast through the decades-long legal battles between publishers and broadcasters. Rock's musical underpinnings must be considered in light of rapidly changing demographic and social arrangements which exposed mainstream consumers of popular entertainment to inflections of African-American derived music.

The Second World War accelerated the pace of change in the music industry in such a way as to tip the balance of power away from established composers, publishers and artists and toward the interests of grass-roots phonograph record companies, consumers and youth. While the timing of the change within the recording industry is shown to be synonymous with the early success of Rock and Roll, I stop short of calling this a musical or cultural revolution, preferring, rather, to focus on the emotions and events which were continuous with the post-war context. The

phenomenal early success of Rock took place in a milieu of economic prosperity and optimism, but yet, the cold war and the threat of nuclear annihilation contributed heavily to the ways in which teenagers felt about themselves and their worlds. The atmosphere of alienation and youth rebellion which is so heavily associated with Rock and Roll came not so much from the music itself, but from the cultural contexts which allowed it to flourish as a new way of differentiating themselves from the world around them.

The phenomenon by which I link aesthetic evaluation with its sociohistorical context is that of repetition. My main point in this regard is that repetition of expressive form seems to diminish, or vulgarize its value as “art” in any traditional sense. It values artistic expression as a function of one’s ability to directly participate in it in ordinary daily life. Through repetition and familiarity, the participant acquires a certain sense of authority in the discourse on what is or is not art, and in the process, tends to discredit the past in the name of art. In the same sense that popular culture has consistently been located as a pro-active resistance to the dominant purveyors of consumer artifacts, Rock and Roll may be viewed as a metaphor of popular music. Essentially, my writing is an understated version of Rock and Roll in America, one which resists the tendency to glorify its power and influence in order to better understand the dynamic of this very same power and influence.

The focus of my thesis is an examination of Rock and Roll’s relationship to the shifting influences that made its emergence possible, and finally, its dissipation into “anti-art.” My central thesis which underlies this narrative is that Rock represented a paradigm shift whose vectors of influence were decades old and not strictly invented by the music culture itself. Rock and Roll’s explosive emergence in the fifties has been exploitatively exaggerated and romanticized. A more materialistic and balanced approach provides a basis for understanding the particular symbiotic relationship between the music and its fans.

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Introduction

Conventional wisdom notes that Rock and Roll music was a revolution. Not only did it replace the contemporary popular music of its day, it ushered in a tidal wave of social and cultural transformations which would resonate through the remainder of the twentieth century. As noted rock historian Robert Palmer states, “mid-fifties rock & roll blew, in one mighty, concentrated blast, the accumulated racial and social proprieties of centuries.” (Palmer 48). Writers such as Reebee Garofalo credit rock as the paradigm which dominated popular music after the 1950s, marking it as clearly distinct from the older Tin Pan Alley tradition of songwriters, composers and singers. (Garofalo 1)

In an attempt to account for rock’s spectacular “success,” standard revisions of American popular music history have regarded the phenomenon as a full and sudden departure from socially acceptable norms of entertainment and behavior. Not only did the music seem to be unmistakably different from all others which came before it, but long-standing racial and social barriers were thought to have been swept away in its very wake. That an even more widely recognized “sixties revolution” had its underpinnings in the fifties often meant the recognition, and in fact canonization of rock music as something which the world had never seen before. It was as if its impacts were so great as to have not simply transformed American society but the world itself. So reckoned both its ardent followers and harshest critics.

Indeed, part of the dynamic of rock was this articulation of “difference” from all that was conventional in the world, and, like popular music itself, its logic was just as much social and political as it was musical. Its “uniqueness” took the form of a departure

from the conventional, the mundane, or the superficial, but it was also thought by some to be a derogation of all respectable values and tastes. Some were reviled by its aggressive attack upon the status quo, whereas others thought it a virtue. No matter what one's opinion of the music might have been, its power and influence seemed incontrovertible and unquestionable. Yet, a question remains as to why these powers and influences were so marked and so pervasive as they seemed to have been in the case of rock and roll.

As a popular movement, the "rock revolution" spanned not one generation, but several, and to examine the phenomenon as a generically consistent entity would be impossible. As new younger generations lay claims to it as "their" music, objective comparisons with pre-existing forms of rock (to say nothing of other popular forms) were laid waste by the fundamental need for audiences to differentiate themselves through currently available rock music. For this reason we do not purport to posit rock as a monolith which can be addressed as a forty-odd year old movement or style with consistently inter-related texts and influences, and we do not accept the mythology of rock as a cultural or musical revolution. But neither do we dismiss out of hand the enormous power and distinctiveness of the music of rock and roll. Our interest in the subject, in the first place, derives from such a first-hand awareness of its influence, but, unlike perpetuators of the myth of rock, we seek more to rediscover its secrets rather than to proselytize about them. Our central thesis is that rock and roll music can be best understood and appreciated in light of its continuities with, rather than its departures from, contemporary American music and culture. Rock was, and continued to be consistent with the mechanisms which created and propelled American popular culture

and, as the following presentation will show, its unique characteristics arose because of, rather than in spite of pre-existing musical traditions.

Instead of focusing on the “mythical” subject of rock, we are distancing ourselves from it in the hope of bringing some of its more salient qualities back into the realms of possibility and recognition. We want to open a space from which the music can be judged on its own terms rather than through smoke-screen of overstatements and hyped cliches. While this approach may seem entirely contrary to that which has characterized rock music and practice over the years, it doesn’t suffer the same arrogance of judgment which largely transformed rock from a taste culture to a “tasteless” culture. It doesn’t claim that rock was art (though its followers may have believed that it was), nor that it was rubbish (which much of it actually was!). We are merely trying to loosen the knots of hyperbole in order that we may allow our subject to live and breathe again. To the extent that we succeed in this, rock's original voices will be allowed to resonate on its own terms, and from its own particular places and times.

Duplication of Sound and the Industry of Popular Music

Early History of Sound Recording

Twentieth century popular music *means* the popular record. The forces which propelled it, while not always apparent to the music fan, are traceable through the course of technological innovation, capitalism, and mass consumption. As part of the industry of capital production, popular music has always been subject to a variety of criticisms on aesthetic grounds, and while this has often been justifiable, in many cases it is not. Aesthetic judgments are often fickle in this regard, such as in the ways in which jazz was variously received as a primitive vulgarity in the twenties but as a quintessential art form in the thirties. The perception of early popular music was, in fact, formulated along these lines of "low-brow" vs. "high" or "serious art." According to Lawrence Levine, jazz and "culture" defined each other as polar opposites along this hierarchy, and popular culture "did not have to be truly *popular* in order to win the title. It merely had to be considered of little value aesthetically," (Levine 174). This notion of the popular began to be challenged in the twentieth century through a politic of industrial technology which sought to meet market demand across social and class boundaries. The industrialization of popular music shows that recorded music was the medium upon which new aesthetic judgments were made possible, and often these judgments contradicted traditional norms of value.

When Edison's technology for sound reproduction became marketable after 1878, it was not thought of as a medium for the dissemination of music. Its use as a dictating machine for business machines proved unprofitable, however, and new developers sought to exploit the public demand for novelty and entertainment. After first exposing the public to recorded sound through coin-operated nickelodeons in arcades, hotels, and railway stations, recording machine manufacturers soon realized that a much greater portion of profits could be made by marketing the discs (or cylinders) themselves. This demand was abetted by factors such as the experience of leisure among the industrial working class and influx of immigrants into the cities. As leaders of the industry began concentrating on perfecting the duplication process, the public's demand for

music was not lost on them. Development of new celluloid materials which could carry greater frequencies of sound enabled *content* to become a primary industry concern over mere duration and quality of sounds (Millard 57). In a broader sense, it meant that *cultural* considerations would come to play a far greater role in the deployment of technological innovation, and functional considerations would be articulated by and through design.

Accordingly, the Victor Talking Machine Company's 1906 Victrola was conceived with the status conscious upper class in mind. Advertised through the imagery of a dalmation dog listening intently to the sound emanations of the machine, the "Victrola" was intended to share domestic space with the piano. To complement the high status appeal of the new product, Victor enlisted the services of the European star Enrico Caruso to record a series of operatic recordings for its pricy new Red Seal label. As the demand for cultural signification grew, so did Victor's profits.

Besides offering a staple of "high class" music, recording companies began rationalizing the audiences for recorded sound. Commercial recording meant appealing not simply to one segment of the buying populace, but to many. Working classes, for instance, preferred novelty and comic songs, especially those remnants of minstrelsy otherwise referred to as "coon" songs. Immigrants generally went for ballad forms which could engage the listener's sentiments of longing and nostalgia. Collectively, these sorts of recordings became relegated to the status of "popular" and sold for a mere fraction of the price of the Red Seals (60).

As the high status recordings of Caruso and other European singers provided the greatest source of profits, the three major record companies (Victor, Columbia, and Edison) began to extend their operations internationally. The outbreak of war in 1914, however, brought about a cessation of this activity, and forced the majors to rely on newly published patriotic songs for their customers. (71). These did well during the years immediately following the war, but as existing patents for phonographs had expired in 1917, new entrants into the recording field began to

compete for the consumer dollar. The war effort at home had also created new audiences for recorded sound by luring southern minorities into the cities of the north while enriching the economies of those who had remained in the south. The musical fare of jazz, blues, and dance music reflected these changes, and soon became the main factor for the success or failure of the industry in general.

In the meantime, the development of radio was taking place at a fast rate. The U.S. government's post-war assignment of its requisite patents into the hands of newly formed Radio Corporation of America made radio sets a domestically viable alternative to phonographs. Early radio offered significant advantages over recorded sound because its amplification devices could deliver louder, more resonant sound. Once purchased, its entertainment benefits were free. The recording industry's response to this perceived threat was to adopt the same technology into their own machines and duplicating processes. Key to this was the vacuum tube's ability to amplify and filter currents and sound analogues, thereby enabling the electrical (as opposed to acoustical) recording of discs. In deference to a public which had already invested in the acoustically recorded discs, Victor marketed a new type of machine in 1925 called "Orthophonic," which could play either type (143). The new technology meant that recordings could be enhanced by means of amplified pick ups and played back through the same enhanced speaker systems as were used for radio. By the end of the decade, manufacturers began combining radio sets into the phonograph cabinets, thus transforming what was once a competition between technologies into a mutually beneficial relationship.

The advance of the electronic amplification affected not only the way in which recordings were made, and the nature of those recordings, but the ways in which music could be used. Acoustic recordings had been mainly limited to the range of frequencies of the human voice, but electrical recordings allowed for the faithful replication of the instrumental music. Also revolutionized were the settings in which recordings could be made. Whereas performers

previously had to assemble in proximity to a single acoustic horn, they could now be cast in various arrangements and with various inputs. These advantages also had the effect of shifting the locus of entertainment away from the home and into public spaces. The implications of this shift were not lost upon the centralized music publishing industry which relied heavily on the sale of sheet music for home piano. Outside venues for popular music entertainment meant increased reliance on phonograph records and the jukebox, and, most importantly, the exposure of "ragtime," jazz, and other dance-oriented musics. These new sources of entertainment fell outside of the domain and control of publishers, and along with radio, posed a threat to their royalty and sheet music incomes.

“Empires of Sound”

Parallel with the events which fused the phonograph industry with radio was the rapid growth of the film industry. Technology which synchronized music with images on a screen induced film makers to expand into the enterprise of music production. The Great Depression hastened this opportunity for a resilient movie industry at a time when both record companies and the musical stage were in precipitous decline. Music publishing houses, located mainly in New York, were bought out by Hollywood giants such as Warner Brothers, Fox, and MGM, and soon, the entire complex of sound production industries began operating as centrally controlled entertainment empires. The new arrangement further aggravated the record companies' relationship with publishers. Popular music connection with Hollywood meant that there would be a glut of recorded movie music which would sell movies and sheet music, but not necessarily the records themselves (Sanjek 111).

After market conditions forced the departure of many smaller record companies (including Edison), enterprising investors acquired their facilities and began offering cheaper platters of popular novelty and country music sung by unknown performers. More resilient companies with

links to the film industry, such as Victor and Columbia (and especially Decca, which was first to offer "name" performers at inexpensive prices), followed suit in search of new markets. As Simon Frith explains, "this wasn't just a matter of rationalization in the recording business itself---failing companies going bankrupt and being taken over---but also involved the surviving companies covering the crisis in record sales by putting together more wide-ranging music interests." (Lull, ed. 59).

These "wide-ranging" interests included music of minority and rural culture as major recording companies established subsidiary labels for the dissemination of these platters. These were generally designated by trade magazines as "race" or "hillbilly" musics. But because record production was dependent upon radio exposure, and network radio was electronically interlocked with film and publishing interests, nearly all of this music was excluded from the public experience. Millard explains that the guardians of entertainment had created a "system of mass production of films and recordings which had to be sold to the largest possible market.... Radio had created mass audience for recorded music but in so doing had to leave out some of the diversity of national culture. The rise of radio networks introduced the commercial consideration of appealing to the many while offending the fewest." (Millard 181).

The empires of sound drew from two primary sources of music during and after the Depression, gradually standardizing them both within the singular domain of popular music. The first was a continuation of the lyrical ballad tradition which had been the mainstay of the publishing industry since the acoustic days. These compositions relied on high profile "stars" of film or stage (such as Bing Crosby or Rudy Vallee), and other artists whose resonant vocal qualities were sufficiently distinctive or recognizable. While this "high profile" popular form filled the network airwaves and was the staple of Hollywood film, but it did not single-handedly revive the recording business from the ashes of the Depression.

The other main vector which became incorporated into the mainstream of mass marketed

entertainment capitalized on the nation's appetite for jazz-inflected rhythm and dance. After jazz had shifted its cultural base from Chicago to New York in the late twenties, many of its prominent bands (Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway and others) were aired via late-night remote national network radio broadcasts. Unlike the funkier improvisational "hot jazz" which had grown out of New Orleans, and Chicago, swing jazz was "more carefully arranged, and band musicians were also more likely to have formal musical training and the ability to read music." (Haskins 86). These characteristics made the idiom more transferable to white musicians who came under the employ of major recording companies following their recovery from the Depression. The spectacular rise to prominence of Benny Goodman, in 1935, ushered in the Swing Era, which according to Millard, "dominated popular culture as completely as the integrated corporations controlled the world of entertainment." (Millard 178).

Millard statement is interesting because it suggests a bifurcation in the ways in which popular culture was being "produced." Indeed, swing's first champion was quite contrary to those captains of industry who sought to exploit and contain the mass market. Unlike many non-blacks who had merely "adopted" the swing, or "sweet jazz" style, Goodman was not about to betray the musical tendencies he had absorbed from his early exposure to Chicago blues and jazz. (Peretti 174). And while he did not stand alone as a masterful white jazz musician, the emissaries which crowned him "King" consistently refused to employ those who had essentially created the music in the first place. As mass marketed entertainment, swing occupied a sort of contradictory middle ground encompassing shallow "commercial pap" and offensive material which "infuriated partisans of polite music (and polite society), who railed at the crudeness, the noise, the incomprehensibility, the danger and degeneracy of the 'Negroid' trash." (Ennis 116).

To its credit, swing did revive the recording industry. By 1939, total record sales had reached 50 million, and 85% of these were swing records (Millard 183). The recording industry boom occurred not simply because of the craze for swing, but because it was integrally related the

recording industry's close association with radio. Although the dominant NBC and CBS radio networks had been reluctant to broadcast pre-recorded discs as part of their formats, they still relied upon recorded-sound technology to disperse programs and advertiser spots to their affiliate stations. This was done by means of transcription, or recordings made *within* the radio studio, which could be shipped to the satellite stations and played back at propitious moments of the broadcast day. These recorded discs (usually 33 RPM) became fundamental to commercial broadcasting networks as more and more stations came into existence and greater audiences were reached.

Radio and the Growing Power of Broadcasters

Although NBC and CBS reached the ears of the vast majority of radio listeners, small regional independent networks were springing up throughout the country, particularly in the south and southwest. These stations relied upon local advertising and pooled contracts similar to those initiated by the Mutual Network (Ennis 61). Unlike the major networks, these independents relied heavily on pre-recorded discs for their programs. This type of strategy forced the broadcaster into a more important role as both entertainment provider and personal promoter of sponsors. It also encouraged the alliance of broadcasters with record companies. These trends were viewed as an obvious threat to composers and publishers whose control over popular music relied so heavily on the homogeneity of their audience and the established networks of sound. The chasm between broadcasters and publishers had been growing with the industrialization of popular music and was, by the late thirties, coming to a head.

The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP), formed in 1914, was a performance rights society which oversaw the collection of royalties from sheet music sales, income from "mechanical" reproduction of songs (such as piano rolls, or phonograph records), and public performances of songs for profit. The advent of radio made this process much more

complicated, since radio plays of ASCAP licensed songs were understandably quite impossible to track. Broadcasters, who relied on records to reach audiences, and publishers, who sought to determine public tastes, had been squaring off over the payment of royalties since the twenties. Abetted by federal court decisions in their favor, the publishers usually held the upper hand over commercially sponsored radio. But as network and independent radio proliferated in the thirties, the popularity of music began to be measured and defined by record sales figures, and this perennial struggle reached critical proportions. Ironically, this new system of tracking popularity by sales would take place through complicity of the publishing firms themselves.

ASCAP composers sought to strengthen the rigidity of popular music and maintain the patronage system by which its members were monetarily rewarded. This meant a continuation of compositions in the Tin Pan Alley tradition which were essentially written with lyrics sung by a celebrity artist. In less complicated times, this approach was felt to be the best vehicle for selling sheet music. In the thirties it became a part of a strategy for exposure of the songs to wide audiences over major network radio (NBC or CBS). Prime time network programming consisted mainly of two types of music dominated shows: the expensive variety program, usually paid for by a single sponsor, and late-night remote broadcasts of recognizable bands performing live from hotel ballrooms (Ennis 65). "Song plugging" was ASCAP's primary strategy for manipulating popular taste and removing it from the service of record companies, and the remote live broadcast provided the ideal medium. These programs enabled audiences to identify a particular song with a prominent singer or band and to familiarize them with the words and melodies through repetition or "plugs." The system not only exposed new songs and enhanced reputations, but removed crucial decisions about music from the influence of radio broadcasters.

The radio broadcast of live remote bands was economically difficult to maintain as song plugging practice became fraught with abuses and conflicts among all the parties involved (69). The commercially sponsored music variety show was simpler to maintain, but it meant that

publishing influences would become reduced to complicity with the interests of advertising sponsors whose orientations were more focused upon commodity than art. Network variety shows such as the popular "Lucky Strike Hit Parade" were usually organized around high profile "resident" performers such as Bing Crosby or Kate Smith who at least relied on song publishers for their choice of suitable new material. In deference to commercial viability these shows sought to whet the appetite of listeners by engaging them in "rules" of the "hit-making game," a parade of constantly upcoming, departed, or current "hits." This system enabled the publishers to continue the manipulation of public taste, but would ultimately work against their interests by sowing the seeds of a completely transformed pop music industry. While the transformation would not become fully realized until the fifties, the shifting emphasis from music as "art" to music as "commodity" was taking place at an increasingly fast pace.

By the early forties, the trade press (magazines such as *Variety* or *Billboard*) had been tracking popular music by means of charts listing the numbers of plugs which songs received on network radio. With the interests of advertisers in mind, these publications shifted their reviews to include actual sales of recordings. This situation alarmed ASCAP publishers because it changed the measuring criterion by which popularity could be defined. By shifting the emphasis from *song* to *record*, the popular music industry was inadvertently aligning itself with the radio broadcasters and recording companies. To make matters worse, the ongoing feud between publishers and broadcasters had finally come to a head with the establishment, in 1939, of a fully independent publishing corporation, Broadcast Music Incorporated.

Given the increasingly commercial scope of popular music and the revitalization of the recording industry, BMI enjoyed potential advantages over ASCAP. Since it operated simply as a collection agency for royalties based on measured units of record sales, BMI was well equipped to function in conjunction with the emerging trends of the hit-making process. It was also fortified and refreshed by new markets and alternative tributaries of recorded music which had been gaining

recognition throughout the thirties. Many of these were indigenous urban and rural blues and hillbilly music which had long been regarded by the New York pop music establishment as inferior "anti-art" folk music, and major network radio continued to ignore the recordings which carried them. As we shall see later, this bias would have catastrophic results for network programming once television began to enter the American home.

The mobilization of human and cultural resources after Pearl Harbor would change all that, and more. The loss network studio musicians to the war effort forced the majors to incorporate phonograph records into their broadcasts. Without the radio exposure provided by late-night remotes and commercial shows, the publishers surrendered control of the hit-making game to advertisers, and record company A&R (Artists and Repertoire) departments who would collectively decide upon programming and new entries into the pop stream. Led by RCA Victor, Columbia, Decca, and Capitol (1942), phonograph records would now become the commercial mainstay of the broadcasting industry.

Effects of War and the New Black Pop Stream

Several performing big bands were also dispersed due to lack of travel resources, and the wartime luxury tax payable by entrepreneurs on booking them. Those members who remained at home sought work in small combo units. Out of necessity, these units, (typically, piano, bass, electric guitar and vocalist), performed without the use of written scores, and represented ever-widening repertoires, from country to jazz. Ennis elaborates: "Working in small listening (not a dancing) space, these groups evolved styles that were to be further developed after the war.... This common thread of small units in different streams educated the industry (record and radio managers particularly) as well as audiences." (Ennis 123).

Fearing the loss of employment brought on by the increased reliance upon phonograph records, the musicians union (the American Federation of Musicians, headed by James Petrillo)

struck against the record companies and demanded new contracts for their membership. The record companies held out for more than a year, but, eventually capitulated, even though they had already stockpiled recordings enough to maintain a public presence throughout the war years. Ultimately, the most important outcomes which resulted from the ordeal were less economic than artistic, manifesting especially in the ascendancy of the pop vocalist.

Because vocalists were not considered as part of the AFM's membership, the strike offered them opportunities not only to record, but establish names for themselves. In many instances, singers who fronted known performing bands would eclipse the notoriety of the bandleaders themselves. Another innovation concerned the singer's role *as* singer. In prior times, softly crooning vocalists served mainly as agents of the Tin Pan Alley publishers whose task it was to familiarize or amuse the public with sentimental sing-along ballads or novelty tunes. And although this source material was still performed, the singers of the forties took liberties with it, improvising and phrasing according to their own interpretations. Audiences became more involved in the personal styles and appearances of their favorite vocalists and idolized them in ways similar to what they had done with film celebrities. Frank Sinatra was foremost among these rising stars and his emergence represented a shifting relationship between audiences and performers. Charlie Gillett explains this more succinctly: "Sinatra's style involved audiences in his singing--and in him--as no previous singer had done, and stimulated devotion comparable to that previously aroused only like film stars like Rudolph Valentino. The audience willingly confused Sinatra's image with his private self, amplifying the character promoted by the singer's public relations, staff and press. Perhaps largely as a result of Sinatra's popularity, a singer's *image* (my italics) became as important to his style and its effectiveness as the words of a song." (Gillett 6). Major record companies would continue to promote new and distinctive vocal acts throughout the post-war era and well into the fifties, although, it must be said, their standardization of the style depleted it of its original quality.

Another consequence of the recording ban of 1942 was to stimulate the cottage industry of black popular music which had previously been ignored by the trade press. Encouraged by the void temporarily provided by the absence of the majors, and the growing trend for small instrumental/vocal combos, many small independent companies came into existence. As the jukebox began playing a greater role in the entertainment lives of average Americans, whites, as well as blacks gained exposure to this particular strain of pop music. *Billboard* began covering these records in its "Harlem Hit Parade" column of top ten best sellers. These listings were based strictly on sales, usually as provided by a few major record stores in large Eastern cities (Whitburn R&B 11). Unlike the "orchestra *with* vocalist" format which Sinatra epitomized, the small combo instrumentalists, themselves, provided the singing. Since many of the musicians had honed their skills through participation in gospel music and blues, vocal parts were often done in a collaborative "call and response" fashion. This arrangement also meant that singers could actually fill the acoustic space otherwise provided by brass or reed instruments (Dave Penny liner notes). Such flexibility afforded an opportunity for the non-professionally trained musician to participate in the cottage industry of small independent radio and record production.

Popular Streams Align and Converge

Targeting the Youth Market

The war had a disruptive influence upon American society in general, mixing people across boundaries of region and class in ways which would otherwise not have breached. Family life was affected by the absence of fathers and the recruitment of mothers into the workplace, and concern abounded that youth would be negatively affected. The main threats seemed to be juvenile delinquency, and the preponderance of "mass culture," the latter which was regarded as nearly synonymous with "popular culture." The problem was further amplified by warnings emanating from FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and the term "teenager" soon found its way into the average American vocabulary. The kids were suddenly seen as distinctly different from adults. They were independent because they had to be, and this characteristic was not lost upon entrepreneurs who began to see them a potential market.

Swing music was in decline by the end of the war, partly because of the departure of the big bands and partly because it had lost its vitality as dance music. Record sales began to fall off in the years after the war, causing major record companies to seek a new formula to attract the mass market. As it did after the WWI, the recording industry benefited from wartime technology. The magnetic tape recorder was first to be advanced but was not quite up to fidelity standard of discs, and the mass production of tape recordings was not yet perfected (Jones 32). Its initial uses were best for radio and film, which could take advantages of its capacity for editing, or splicing unwanted sounds. The first major advance was the vinyl acetate micro-groove record which Columbia was first to market to much fanfare in 1948. These 33 1/3 Long Play discs were much harder and more durable than shellac 78s and had an extended playing time of perhaps 30 minutes per side. Their success was not assured, however, because they were primarily conceived for classical music buyers (Gelatt 293). In order to ensure the dominance of this new format in the marketplace, Columbia had to convince other manufacturers, especially its chief competitor, RCA, to coalesce to it so as to assure the viability of LP speed record players needed to use them.

While most of them did so, RCA refused because it was on the verge of introducing its own format, the 45 RPM disc. These small, 7 inch discs could be played on a small, inexpensive portable player and would revolutionize the pop music industry after 1954. In the meantime, shellac 78s remained the standard, and phonograph players were equipped with four speeds: 78, 33 1/3, 45 and 16--the latter was intended for full length operas, stage plays and books (Millard 207).

RCA's coup against the classical/LP format was symbolic of the transformation in musical tastes and social divisions which had begun to appear during the war. Originally record companies had relied upon the entrepreneurs of stage or classical music in the belief that popular music was merely a useful novelty and that most consumers would be driven to accumulate classical or "serious" record libraries. In the forties, radio's increased reliance upon recorded discs helped create a new division between classical and pop audiences, and record sales of the latter convinced both industries of the necessity of marketing strategies which could best reach the "mass audience." For the recording industry, this meant a commitment to finding new sources of music. For commercial radio, it meant delivering mass audiences for its advertisers. The person most responsible for this change was the disc jockey.

Radio advertising budgets had been increasing sharply since the beginning of the war. Network radio, however, which relied upon centralized advertising inputs, was on the decline. Local radio stations benefited not only from this windfall but from the government's authorization for the establishment of several new stations. In just four years immediately following the war, the number of AM radio stations more than doubled (Ennis 136) and most of these stations filled their broadcasts with music from phonograph records. Because most of these local stations did not possess strong signal strengths, competition heightened between those within a certain locale to reach the limited available audience. In order to do this, stations hired individuals with strong personal and sales skills to attract listeners and advertisers.

The type of format and music aired on radio depended much upon marketing strategy and the roles which the station's deejays played to implement it. As Ennis explains, this boiled down to a matter of which "employer" the disc jockey felt himself most responsible to: whether it was the advertisers, the station itself, or the music industry determined what type of listening audience would be targeted (Ennis 137ff). The broadcast day was formatted around this determination, and the musical content reflected what each deejay felt was most likely to maintain a loyal following. Those beholden to advertisers, for instance, targeted the middle-class housewife who normally controlled spending for products consumed in the home. For this strategy, a daytime format of current popular music and familiar older songs prevailed. The second strategy prioritized the station's ratings in terms of sheer numbers. In order to reach a mass audience, the station management placed a premium on the public persona of the deejay in hopes that listeners would find him at least as entertaining as the music. Part of his appeal came from his ability to expose a diverse variety of music and convince listeners of his close ties with the entertainment industry in general. The third strategy balanced the need for advertiser dollars and mass audiences with the process of actively engaging listeners in the latest "hit" records. It was this strategy which would ultimately not simply prevail, but transform the entire broadcast industry and the face of popular music along with it.

The "hit-making" deejay became the new breed of broadcaster because he recognized that the record buying public was increasingly being dominated by working and middle class youth. With the glut of new recordings from all popular streams of music being produced in the early fifties, these deejays often put their reputations on the line when predicting the next hit. In order to reduce the odds, they encouraged audiences to directly participate in the processes. In many cases they would invite the teenagers into the studio, ask their reactions to new tunes, and provide generous air-time to those selections (140). Another indicator was the teen audiences' preference for dance music.

In large cities across the nation, the vacuum created by the departure of swing was quickly being filled with all types of recordings from the black pop stream. While it was not the first time that serious black artists had received radio air-play, (recordings of the Mills Brothers, Ink Spots and Nat "King" Cole had been included in mainstream popular music for many years), the "new" dance music had been created specifically for black audiences. "Teenagers led the way across racial lines. Bored to death by pop music aimed squarely at adults, they ached for music that could make them feel some kind of emotion; music that could inspire them to *dance* 'slow 'n' dreamy' or 'hot 'n' dreamy.'"(Fong-Torres 21). The pre-eminent feature of this music was not lyrical or melodic, but rhythmic.

New Popular Streams at Mid-Century

"Rhythm and Blues" had been codified by *Billboard* only as recently as 1949 as a replacement term for "race music." By that time, the large number of small independently owned labels recording for the black pop stream had diminished from several hundred to a mere six. Primarily performed by small combos, different regional styles had developed from various combined influences of gospel, jazz, blues, and piano-based boogie-woogie. Many artists from the south and southwest had been recruited by these labels to take advantage of the burgeoning popularity of R & B in the cities. Los Angeles was the leading hotbed with Alladin, Specialty and Imperial tapping the musically fertile region from New Orleans to Texas; Chess, in Chicago, drew from the blues tradition of the Mississippi Delta and Memphis; and Cincinnati's King was the most diverse, mixing R & B musicians with white country artists. New York's dominant label, Atlantic, specialized in featuring vocalists, and especially, vocal groups.

Generally speaking, the vectors of R & B which most influence teens of the early fifties were either from the rolling piano-based dance blues characteristic of Fats Domino or Little Richard, or the slower, gospel-oriented vocal ballad which proliferated in New York, Philadelphia,

Chicago or Detroit. Both of these varieties provided a welcome relief from the sentimentally vapid music of adults, but their popularity derived from more deeply held motivations than could be given over simply by mere preference or taste. While dance music, whether fast or slow, had always occupied a more or less significant place in popular culture, uninhibited "fun" had not always been included as part of the equation. Since the war, the mainstream entertainment industry, (now represented by RCA, Columbia, Decca, Capitol, Mercury and MGM), seemed to have lost sight of this fact.

To white teenagers, the music of R & B was *essentially* different. This can be traced to three primary factors: technology, African-American musical inflection, and new ways of hearing music. Wherein musical notation (sheet music) allowed us to capture music, recording allowed us to capture *sound*. Paul Willis explains, "The ascendancy of pop music marked the decline of sheet music as the main distributed form of popular music.... In the age of pop music, the only text is the actual record. This makes the precise style and intonation of the singer (or instrumentalist) very important." (Willis 8). Much akin to "folk" music, what was most at stake here in terms of "style" was not so much how an artist "interpreted" a piece of music but rather, how sounds expressed and combined in ways which articulated with audiences. Throughout American cultural history, music of blacks had assimilated elements of European-based American music but had always maintained its identity as a "functional" music for communication and social organization. The evolution of sound recording served these purposes increasingly well because they prioritized sounds and rhythms *over* musical composition and compartmentalization. And while rhythm and dance were certainly most outstanding characteristics of R & B, rhythm was not merely a provision for "keeping time," and performance was not simply a call to entertain. Simon Frith expresses this as follows, "The significance of rhythm for African music and culture,... is not in its simplicity and 'directness' but in its flexibility and sophistication, not in its physical expressivity but in its communicative subtlety, its ability to make coherent *all* the movements of the body." (Frith 135).

For urban teenagers of the early fifties, the music's visceral effects were inescapable, and part of its appeal was that one didn't have to "understand" the music in order to enjoy it.

Concurrent with these developments in the northern cities, the country music field was starting to become recognized as a serious commercial source. Because many diverse strains of country music existed throughout the south and southwest, *Billboard* changed its designation for it from "Folk" to Country and Western. The major recording companies of the early fifties adamantly clung to the belief that the "buying public" would prefer not to patronize the "crude" folk music of uneducated southerners, but they also believed that, given the proper studio arrangement, a raw hillbilly song could be remade into a pop novelty. Producers may also have been convinced that the rapid growth of television could serve to replace network radio as an effective medium to plug songs and introduce singers. Television offered a visual relationship with celebrity, making it possible for audiences to identify with singers and styles in ways which radio could not do (or so they thought). Country & Western would come more into alignment with the dominant stream of pop through this mechanism when the TV western became successful with viewers. The early popularity of the TV western elevated the "singing cowboy" to star status, and major companies were quick to include this variety of country music to their catalogues. This practice helped to align country-western with the dominant pop music industry, but for the most part, the majors underestimated the deepening age-based split in audiences, the profound popularity of black dance music, and the ability of radio to survive in the TV age.

Country & Western contained fierce hostilities within its diverse makeup. On one hand, white racism made many of its proponents disdainful of any music which carried the slightest indication of "black" inflection. (So strong was this resistance that the use of drum sets was prohibited in the country music production capital of Nashville until the sixties.) And yet, country shared roots in gospel with black music, and white performers had incorporated elements of blues,

jazz, and swing since the Depression. These latter strains followed a trajectory through the western swing of Bob Wills and the emotion-laden vocal renderings of Hank Williams. As a small combo music, this genre of "hillbilly bop" roughly paralleled the emergence of R & B, was driven by similar technology and commercial practices, and was equally infectious with young adults.

The alignment of white, black and country pop blurred the boundaries between once separate popular streams. This convergence can be clearly traced by examining the direction and flow of records, or "crossovers" which simultaneously occupied two or more of *Billboard's* three popularity charts at a given time. The immediate post-war years had been marked by a noticeable tendency for artists in the R & B or country fields to record "cover" versions of a song once the original song had revealed high sales numbers. For instance, once Patti Page's "Tennessee Waltz" became a number one pop best seller (for Mercury in November, 1950), the same song charted on both R & B, (by Erskine Hawkins), and C & W, (by Pee Wee King) within months of the original. In some cases the crossover records were "direct," as in the instance that Page's version itself charting on the C&W. (Ennis 204). The incidence of crossover songs indicated that a greater range of musical material being was produced for each respective market. It was the *direction* of the flow, however, which was indicative of the dominance which one stream had over another. In 1950, for example the flow went from the dominant pop stream to either black or country pop. (It is also interesting to note that no flow took place between R & B and Country). The direction of flow would shift dramatically, however, as the American economy stabilized and the leading sources for popular tastes shifted inexorably into the hands of the hit-making deejays and youth.

The Age of Crossovers: 1950-55

After 1950, a dramatic increase in the number of pop-to-R&B crossovers was evident, but these were mainly in performance styles already accepted by adult audiences. The vocal-instrumental group Billy Ward & the Dominoes was the first to cross directly from R & B to Pop

with a novelty hit on the Federal (subsidiary of King) label called "Sixty Minute Man." Its double-entendre lyrics made it odd company for the likes of a Rosemary Clooney or Tony Bennett, but the overall quality of the recording may not have seemed all that different from the very popular Mills Brothers or Ink Spots. Nevertheless its commercial success may have stunned major record labels into devising ways of tapping the R & B field. In response to falling record sales, the major subsidiary labels for R & B or country artists (Decca established Coral, and Columbia revived Okeh), but the odds were stacked against them. As Clarke explains, "the product (R & B) was too slick, and the indies had the DJs in their employ, while the big companies were making a late start in radio. In order to do more business they began to cream it off the top, covering R & B hits with white artists." (Clarke 369).

While the practice of covering R & B hits was slow to progress (reaching its apex in 1955), the concept was fueled by the mercurial rise of a 24 year old white singer named Johnny Ray. Okeh had the good fortune of discovering Ray through a local disc jockey. His intense and emotion-laden delivery sounded almost unmistakably black, but the fact that he wasn't bolstered his marketability in the pop field, even while appealing to teenagers. His first release, "Cry" (backed by the Four Lads) sold more than two million copies in 1951-1952, reaching the number one position on both Pop and R & B charts. (Whitburn, Pop). In spite of his rise to celebrity, Ray did not attain to as high a level of adoration with teens as might have been expected. For one thing, he looked much too old, and was embraced by adult audiences. His other "detriment" was that he did not play guitar, a sine qua non for southern white teenagers steeped in the tradition of stringed-instrument led band music.

In their book *What Was The First Rock'n'Roll Record*, Dawson and Propes claim that "Cry" was important for starting an R & B tradition of "crying" records. (Dawson and Propes 96). Among their examples is included a song written by a young white country artist named Darrell Glen called "Crying in the Chapel." The song was covered by a variety of singers, but, most

memorably, by Sonny Til and the Orioles. The group had been wooing young urban audiences since 1948 but when their rendition of Glen's song was released for Jubilee in the summer of 1953, it rose to #11 on the pop chart (#1 R & B). Their original four-part vocal style was seminal to the R & B/vocal tradition of the northern cities and it influenced countless young aspiring groups throughout the decade (several of which named themselves after birds). The Orioles secularized vocal strains of gospel into an original style which reflected the attitudes and desires of urban teenagers. Gillett characterized this as a "cool group style" which "presented a new standard by which (teenagers) music was to be judged,..., communicating only with those who understood. The group wore the new clothes and worked out an intricate pattern of movements, around the microphone--bending, straightening up, turning away from the mike, coming back to it, maybe tugging their shirt-cuffs, carefully maintaining movement so that their shiny cufflinks caught the spotlight and reflected back the audience." (Gillett 161). Gillett's description probably could have applied to any number of groups and artists who fused yearnings and passions, particularly romantic ones, with gospel-inspired religiosity.

Although the majors were still dominating the pop chart in 1954, sales numbers seemed to reflect more the vast size of their national distribution networks than actual popular appeal. In order to meet high administrative costs to cover any particular new release, tens of thousands of copies of a record had to be sold. Their market indicators were correspondingly geared toward national, rather than local or regional trends. Small independents, on the other hand, had been operating with much lower overheads since after the war, and had survived mainly on the ingenuity of their owners' decisions at all levels of the scouting, production and distribution. In response to the growing threat posed by the youth market, major companies sought to simultaneously exploit these trends on their own terms, and hope that it would soon go the way of all passing fads. History would prove these overtures to be grossly inadequate.

More seminal crossovers from this burgeoning "doowop" style would appear in 1954. The first was the Crows' original composition "Gee" on George Goldner's New York based Rama label. It was a simple uptempo ditty which liberally used "nonsense syllables" to accentuate and run beneath the lead voice. This embellishment was typical practice for the genre. It enabled members of a group to create sounds otherwise produced by a saxophone or guitar, and became an available device for most any aspiring young singer. "Gee" sold over a million copies (the first doowop to do so), and is sometimes credited as the first rock 'n' roll record (though this is certainly open to debate).

Anyone close to a radio in the summer of 1954 could not have failed to be impressed (positively or negatively) with the novelty "Sh-Boom." Among those most impressed were members of the pop establishment who were now beginning to recognize that the infectiousness of R & B could lead to a #5 Pop hit. The song did seem to speak for widespread feelings of optimism and exuberance that were coming of age in the mid-fifties, and its opening lyric summed this up well: "Life could be a dream (sh-boom) if I could take you up to paradise up above (sh-boom)...." Its popularity infused new life into the practice of "cover" versions as Mercury led the way with a white Canadian "barbershop" styled group called the Crew Cuts. The cover version occupied chart position #1 for nine weeks in late 1954 and signaled the arrival of rock and roll as a legitimate force in the pop music industry. Operations began to percolate between traditional forces and what Ellis refers to as "Mr. Innovation" (which took any number of forms including independent label owners and A&R people, and a host of disc jockeys). Here Ennis depicts what he calls "another founding incident of rocknroll, the beginning of many episodes in which fresh, young, amateur energy met wily old industry practice." (Ennis 218). In a perverse way it may even have been *the* founding moment.

Joel Whitburn's annotation to the Crew Cut's "Sh-boom" credits it as "the first #1 *rock and roll* song." On first view, the comment seems to contradict what we already know of rock's close

strong rhythm and blues heritage (Some might even find the association of the Crew Cuts with rock and roll slightly repugnant). A closer look at the situation seems to somewhat validate Whitburn's claim. Even though the Crew Cut's rendition of "Sh-boom" comes across as blatantly artificial in comparison to the grittier original, the case for its representing "rock and roll" may derive more from its occupying a particular "flash-point," or "moment" in the transformation of the music industry than to its authenticity as an R & B influenced music. Purists may also take solace in the fact that Whitburn does not specifically credit the cover version as the first rock and roll *record*, but merely the first *song*, (the subtle difference being that the originator can at least take credit for a *song*, but not always a *record*).

There were other indications which suggest that the gulf between R & B and traditional pop may not have been as wide as pundits have claimed. The romantic ballad form of black vocal music of the mid-fifties had a strong tendency to depart from the blues' 12-bar structure, lyrics and phrasings, replacing them typically with chordal progressions (especially I-vi-ii-IV) and 8 or 16 bar structures common to the popular Tin Pan Alley songs. The young doowop singers were also confronted with different situations than their predecessors. Unlike blues, through which a singer would often narrate a wide range of personal experiences of the recent or distant past, aspiring doowoppers were concerned mainly with the present, and had a limited range of themes with which to work. Lyrically, they were tied almost exclusively to pressing concerns of unmitigated devotion and/or unrequited love. In standardizing these themes for youth consumption, cliches such as "I love you so,...never let you go...," or "hold me tight, ...with all your might, ...all through the night..." became common currency for the average aspiring young male vocalist. After all, what was truly important in the hallway or on the street corner was not verbal, interpretive skill, but sonic and visual fluidity and "cool." It was not unlike the cliched lyric of the insipid sentimental pop ballad, but differed in terms of the nature and level of emotion invested. What the singers

brought to each other and to their audiences was a shared expression of what Gillett has referred to as "the desperate loneliness of adolescence." (Gillett 167).

Fantasies of the American Dreamworld

While the year 1955 is generally credited as the first year of rock and roll, *Billboard* charts for that year are littered with instances of successful cover versions of R & B hits. In fact, of the twenty best selling singles of the entire year, over a third of them were covers. "Newness" seemed to be the order of the day, whether it was a home, car, or any of a variety of fads to flood the mass market. It was truly a boom year for the economy and dreams of prosperity seemed well within the reach of the average family. What fueled the perceptions of well-being more than anything were the images provided by television. The weekly series *Disneyland*, (and the theme park by the same name, which opened in Orange County, California that year) "resonated to powerful themes in the suburban imagination," writes Karal Ann Marling. "The ranch house, the knotty-pine den, the outdoor bar-b-que, the search for an acre of crabgrass beyond the boundaries of civilization: these facts of American life in the 1950s help to explain why the Western genre accounted for more than a quarter of the movies produced in Hollywood...."(Marling 124). In 1955, it seemed as if space and time were the only barriers separating fantasy and reality. From the fascination with early 19th century folk hero Davy Crockett, (whom *Disneyland* parlayed into a raging phenomenon for frontier merchandise and coon-skin caps), to the preoccupation with outer space, the American imagination was galvanized through images of expanding frontiers, inner, outer, backward and forward. Progress seemed as if a manifestation of life itself, and America dream was its indubitable lord and master.

The central vehicle which enabled the world of fantasy to meet with reality, was just that, and it was not by mere accident that General Motors unveiled its new, powerful Chevy V-8 right around the time that major record companies were covering R & B tunes and Disney was offering

a concentrated look at "real" America. If one of the legacies of twentieth century modern design was that "form follows function," (Liebs 58) then fifties cars after 1955 reversed this formulation to the extent that function was only relevant when it met dreamlike fantasies of consumerism. Unlike their stodgier predecessors, the '55 models were lighter, sleeker, and contained design features which satisfied consumers zest for novelty and movement across the frontiers of open space. Halberstam notes that of the 4,500 parts used in the '55 Chevy, all but 675 were brand new. (Halberstam 494). Everything about the styling details suggested that these new cars were on the "cutting edge of style. The industry understood that, besides design and power, what sold cars was consumer interest in the latest models. A large part of the fun was participating in the breathtaking unveiling of the next year's new model. The practice was initiated by General Motors in late 1954 as a way of creating a demand for the new and a dissatisfaction with the "not-as-new." Generally, the hyped-up ritual would take place as soon as early September, which gave early buyers nearly four months to relish in the self-satisfaction of having a material or cultural edge over their neighbors and peers. Marling compares this industry practice with the fashion industry, "in practice, ... a business once ruled by engineering took on the trappings of a dressmakers salon." (Marling 136).

The car industry's transition from an engineering to a more or less fashion-minded priority was not unlike what the recording industry had been experiencing over the many years. Originally concerned strictly with the machines and devices, leaving all musical concerns to the "art" world, the recording industry eventually took up the scepter as purveyor of popular music, and now, in 1955, was the supreme articulator of the latest fads and fashions. A more convenient way of expressing these latest nuances might have been through the simple, but catchy phrase "rock 'n' roll." Rock 'n' Roll was indeed an amalgam of nifty pop novelties, overwrought traditional ballad singing, new young artists, foreign-inspired music (especially French or Latin-dance), and most of all, those as yet unheralded Afro-American inflected songs which appealed to youth.

What the 1955 *Billboard* charts show for this last category is a growing, though still not dominant, representation of R & B to Pop (that is, originating in black pop and moving to white pop) crossover records. Of the total number of 257 records to place on the Top 100 hits of the year, approximately one-fifth met this criterion, with two placing in the weekly Top 10. The significance of these records was not in their numbers, however, (unless one wishes to consider the thousands of such records which were recorded but did not chart), but rather in the contexts in which they were delivered and "consumed." Young rock 'n' roll buyers were not so different from adults in some respects. They liked to buy new things, were enamored with automobiles, mystified by television, and, like their parents, were given over to utopian idealism. At the same time, teenagers did not seem to fit their expected roles as future propagators of the new prosperity. Not only did they decline to take up its promise, but they seemed to become all the more panicked and alienated whenever in direct contact with it. Their solace was in polarizing themselves from the hegemony through the articulation of codes or styles which only they could understand. Theirs was a mode of consumption which organized not around gadgetry and glamour, but on encapsulation and difference. And it was organized around *their* music, which, by virtue of its having passed the judgments accorded by their exquisitely discriminating tastes, just *had* to be emancipatory, different, and above all, special.

The dawn of 1955 produced one such song on the tiny Los Angeles independent Dootone label. It was the very sound of the record which engendered those primary qualities which made rock 'n' roll work for teenagers. Dootsie Williams, founder of the label, expressed this resonance as follows, "There are two types of hit records. The most common is the promoted hit, and if it's not promoted, it's not a hit. The other is the natural hit. It's a rarity, there's only maybe one a year, and all it needs is a few plays on the radio. It's a once in a lifetime thing. I had only one. It was called 'Earth Angel.'" (Dawson & Propes 159).

Of course, in the free market economy, there were no restrictions on taking a "natural hit" and making it into a "promoted hit." (which the Crew Cuts also did with "Earth Angel"). But as we have learned from "Sh-boom" and Joel Whitburn's remark about it, either the "natural" or "promoted" hit could fall under the generic heading of rock 'n' roll. If this is so, then how do we account for rock's distinctiveness apart from its co-optation by pop? Simon Frith believes that the question of relative values is tied directly to "sociability," that is, "how important it is in defining one's social identity...differences between genres may be less than differences in degrees of or types of commitment." (Frith 90)

Accounting for Rock 'n' Roll

Juvenile Delinquency and Paranoia in the Mainstream

Rock 'n' Roll brought to youth what Lawrence Grossberg refers to as an "affective difference" which refers to "that dimension or plane of our lives that we experience as moods, feelings, desires, and enervation." (Grossberg, quoted in Lull 186). Adults certainly experienced moods, and so on, and were not immune to alienating impacts of the cold war and/or nuclear holocaust, so how then were youth's "affective differences" unlike those of their parents? One obvious answer was that adults did not map their differences with music. They may have danced to it, entertained with it, connected through it, but it was largely inconsequential to them as commodity. Music, for teens was far more important, far more germane to their everyday needs, and it provided them with cultural currency to which only they could evaluate. It may have been as David Riesman once claimed, that "the uncertainty of life explains the refusal of young people to commit themselves to long term goals." (144). Adults, at least, were committed to raising their families and all that went with it. Kids, on the other hand, were committed to differentiating themselves from the status quo, and, through their resistance to it, branded themselves with social identities which seemed almost heroic to their peers.

Why was it that teens found their parents' worlds to be so difficult to bear? Herein seems to lie a paradox of the mid-century family where the "good life," as conceived by one generation, turns out to be oppressive for the next. One of the clues may lie in the fact that long-term family goals, seek out what Richard Sennett refers to as "purified community." which serves to protect class ideals against the random intrusion of others of unlike ethnicity or stature (suburbia being a foremost example). Youth of the fifties were confronted with a kind of society in which "images of communal solidarity are forged in order that men can avoid dealing with each other." (Sennett 35).

One of the ways in which the adult world sought to maintain purified community was by monitoring the incidence of juvenile delinquency. However real the threat, it seemed always to be loosely conjoined with some aspect of mass culture. As such, fears were fueled by dialogues such

as those of Theodor Adorno who, in the 1940s, had warned that industrial capitalism could lead to a diminution of critical taste through the standardization and "pseudo-individualization" afforded by mass production. (Storey 110). To Adorno, these applied not only to functional commodities (automobiles, household appliances, etc.), but to cultural commodities as well. In any case, the connection was easily made between the juvenile delinquent, mass culture (which was crudely equated with popular culture), and popular music or jazz. For those so inclined to believe in such connections, rock 'n' roll music must have fit the mold to a fault, since the youth element was already there. But like so many elements of daily life in 1955, as we shall see, the definitive association between the two showed up along the blurred boundary between Hollywood and real life.

Earlier in the decade, Hollywood's primacy as the dominant purveyor of American cultural values began to weaken. One reason for this was that the U.S. Supreme Court had decreed (in 1948) that movie production companies would have to divest ownership of theater chains throughout the country. As Americans began to move to the suburbs in droves, the outdoor drive-in theater gradually began to replace the urban movie theater as a prime venue for family (and especially, teen) entertainment. Television's capacity for providing fresh new images of American life also made Hollywood portrayals of youth seem out-dated. According to Meyrowitz, "most television viewers, including children, do other things while the television is on, so television merges into everyday life in a manner quite distinct from movie going.... In addition, television's small screen and low quality image demand extensive use of close-ups in television programs.... The grand sweeping action of epics is more suited to the movies than to the screen. Television's subject matter, therefore, tends to be more intimate, personal and 'ordinary'---in other words, more exposing of the cracks in the facade of the traditional image of adulthood (Meyrowitz 252). Legendary TV playwright Rod Serling apparently understood this when he cast the young James Dean, (who later would become, along with Marlon Brando, for the role of a "psyched-out" rebel in

the production *A Long Time Till Dawn* (1953). (Halberstam 482). Dean would go on to represent a prototype for youth rebellion in the fifties.

Hollywood would be slow to catch up with television's use of youth themes, though *Disneyland's* use of its studios may have helped trigger some fresh ideas. The 1955 production *The Blackboard Jungle*, which depicted the violent behavior of rebellious students in a classroom was understandably controversial in a time when conservative stability was the order of the day. What may not have been clear was whether the furor was more about the movie itself, or the fact that the soundtrack was a rousing uptempo R & B flavored tune by Bill Haley and the Comets called "Rock Around the Clock." From this point forward, rock 'n' roll music joined hard bop jazz as *the* music which juvenile delinquents and underclass youth most related to. Whether or not rock music *caused* criminal behavior was yet another matter. Martha Bayles astutely points out that in *The Blackboard Jungle*, it wasn't even Hollywood's intention to make the connection between the two. "Haley's song ("Rock Around the Clock")," she writes, "only plays during the opening and closing credits. In the scene where the JDs smash the teacher's (jazz and swing) records, the soundtrack doesn't throb to rock 'n' roll, it throbs to Beiderbecke's 'Jazz Me Blues.' And the JDs aren't demanding rock 'n' roll; they're demanding *pop*. The dialogue is explicit: it's Sinatra they want, and Joni James. Another minute, and those evil-eyed hoodlums might have demanded Patti Page." (Bayles 117). Bayles point is not that Hollywood was afraid of using rock 'n' roll as part of the screenplay, but that it hadn't yet made the connection between juvenile delinquency and rock. Nevertheless, reactionary audiences were more than willing to do so because, for them, rock signaled the amoral, sexually explicit music of blacks.

Dick Hebdige's account of American youth of the fifties makes an important distinction between two sub-cultures of "delinquents." Although both were organized around shared identity with blacks (primarily through jazz), they differed in terms of their relationship with black culture. The "hipsters" were those working-class whites who shared communal spaces and vital concerns

with ghetto blacks. The more educated "beats" lived outside of direct contact with blacks generally, but nonetheless romanticized their image of him as an heroic figure. "The zoot suits and lightweight 'continentals' of the hipster embodied the traditional aspirations (making out and moving up) of the black street-corner man, whereas the beat, studiously ragged in jeans and sandals, expressed a magical relation to a poverty which constituted in his imagination a divine essence, a state of grace, a sanctuary." (Hebdige 49). This latter apotheosis became widespread among the average affluent suburban teen after "Rock Around the Clock," but it would not be Bill Haley who would carry the banner of youth rebellion.

The image which rock 'n' roller Haley presented to youth was predicated on neither sub-culture, even though his stage act was enlivened by the choreographed "hep" way in which he caricatured himself. Discriminating youth weren't fooled by the zany choreography or plaid jackets which made him appear almost as a mature hillbilly. (Haley's musical career had, in fact, begun in the C & W field). The baton would be passed to a young singer who *was* a hillbilly and who, paradoxically, qualified as more hipster than beat. Elvis Presley seemed, therefore, to be an unlikely candidate for the accolades soon to be bestowed upon him. He was a painfully shy individual, respectful, humble, and religious. He neither drank alcohol, nor smoked, and had an abiding devotion for his mother, and all things American. In spite of this rather conservative ethic, Elvis personified something else--something which the average American felt oddly ambiguous about. Sam Phillips, who first recorded Elvis for Sun Records in Memphis recalls: "[Elvis] tried not to show it, but he felt so *inferior*. He reminded me of a black man in that way; his insecurity was so *markedly* like that of a black person." (Bayles 122, quoted from Guralnick). The way he dressed made him appear all the more so: the over-sized sport coats, loosely fitting trousers, and satin shirts of contrasting colors set him apart from the typical dungaree-clad guitar-playing cowboy-type singer. His hair was an embodiment of contradiction itself. It was neither neatly coifed, nor neglectfully messy, but rather, conceived for the fullest visual effect: greased, combed

sweepingly high off the head with just the right amount of hair hanging over the temples; this look made Elvis appear more as a successor of the James Dean school of beligerance, but without the denim trousers.

Meanwhile, the industrial base for rock 'n' roll had expanded considerably . The mobilization of the independent producers into this expansive market was particularly apparent in the south where local and regional tastes were relatively unfettered by the relatively more heterogeneous sounds of the more complex and populated north. Except for in parts of the south, Elvis' celebrity was still unknown by the time Haley had finished rocking around the clock in the fall of '55. This would all change after RCA Victor bought out Elvis' contract with Sun for what was then the generous sum of \$30,000. Up until that point, most of the hysteria over the new performer had been generated as a result of live stage shows such as *Louisiana Hayride*. It was over this period of time that Presley underwent a dramatic transformation which Colin Escott describes as that of a "painfully shy nineteen-year old kid...into a twenty year old strutting peacock." (Escott 59). Once with RCA, it would be his recordings which would alert audiences of radio across the country to his arrival. During the same 15 minute broadcast segment, a listener might hear Presley's original and haunting *Heartbreak Hotel* juxtaposed by any number of traditional pop melodies from Les Baxter, to Perry Como or Kay Starr, or by the new breed of authentic or "near" rock 'n' roll songs such as the Teenager's "Why Do Fools Fall in Love," Carl Perkins' "Blue Suede Shoes," or Pat Boone's cover, "I'll Be Home." (Billboard Charts, Whitburn). After *Heartbreak Hotel*, the makeup of the charts would swing overwhelmingly in favor of dominance by R & B artists and record sales would skyrocket. To the chagrin of adults, politicians, clergymen, and ASCAP publishers, the momentum behind this turnaround would continue to escalate. "It startled the whole music world," writes Philip Ennis. "Any young black sound, it was thought, had an automatic invitation into the pop stream. The search was on,

accordingly, for every aspiring street corner group of kids and every gospel soloist or quartet." (Ennis 239).

It was not so much that Elvis Presley was the juvenile delinquent which his detractors claimed him to be, but that he seemed to embody those visual cues which adults associated with it. And if Elvis represented *the* central threat to domestic youth, it was only through the medium of television that these visual cues could make sudden and widespread impressions that they did. His 1956 appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show* reputedly were watched by the highest percentage of television audience (82.6 percent) to watch any event in the history of the medium (Pratt 138). If juvenile delinquency had been the domain of a select, misguided few, then rock 'n' roll, it seemed, was making "hoodiness" an acceptable practice. At least such was the opinion of a paternalistic society which suffered the same collective paranoia about intransigent youth as it did about Russian communism. Some even coined it a communist conspiracy to bring down the nation's social and moral infrastructure.

Perhaps the paranoia had to do with the fact that the perceived threat was taking place right in the very suburban neighborhoods which proper society had deemed its fortress against alien (and minority) influences. Leisure trends proliferated through all ages and classes, and again, television viewing seemed most responsible for recasting old images into new ones. A Marlboro cigarette commercial embellished the once wholesome American cowboy with a tattoo in order to suggest his ruggedness and individuality. Similarly, blue-jeans, which that same protean hero had worn, became grafted onto the youthful rebel and signified a serious challenge to the work-ethic. Even this fad was blamed on Elvis. Marling writes that a distinctive new "black" jeans with green stitching and leather patch pocket had been marketed in 1956 inducing the president of Amalgamated Clothing Workers to protest that they could only be of interest to the under-dressed and under-educated, who never bought the finer garments made by his constituents (Marling 175).

The symbolic appeal of the "Elvis jeans" was irrelevant of the fact that Elvis never really wore jeans.

Whatever Elvis' effects on state of popular music and culture, the vitriol he produced in paternalistic society ran deep. Paradoxically, the deeper it ran, the bigger Elvis became. The grounds for the accusations were submerged beneath the repressive mores of American Protestantism and its obsession with overt displays of male heterosexuality. Most particularly it was through the matrix of race, rhythm and sex that white critics came to their conclusions about rock 'n' roll. As they had with jazz, proper whites were quick to assume that the rhythm of black music was a direct expression of primitive, or "natural" culture, and thus was driven by sensuality and orgiastic desires. Black music, for the average white American, came to represent the body devoid of any contemplative or "respectable" activity, and its perceived threat permeated the entire fabric of society.

Besides oversimplifying the case against (or for) black or black-influenced music, such opinions actually fueled rock's legacy as a revolutionary form. Whereas both sides, pro and con, adhered to a notion of the primitivism underlying rock 'n' roll music, neither side went so far as to accept the black idiom simply on its own terms. While young whites may have embraced it, they demanded ever more raucous "tests of blackness" in it performers, that they "embody sensuality, spontaneity, and gritty soulfulness." (Frith 131). In actuality, the deployment of rhythm in African and Afro-American music, as a whole, had little to do with sex at all. "African music" writes jazz scholar Gunther Schuller, is replete with highly 'civilized' concepts.... To be sure, these forms are not abstract artistic forms in the European sense, nor are they intellectually conceived. They are irrevocably linked to everyday work and play functions. Moreover, some observers have confused their very complexity with formlessness. As our examination of rhythm has shown, nothing could be further from the truth." (Schuller 27). Unlike contemplative Euro-based musics which embodies

the meaning of the music within its structural form, Afro-based music engenders active modes of listening and participation which have more to do with bodily control than its absence.

Rock 'n' roll of the fifties was characterized from its inception with a racial bias which distorted its gospel roots. American audiences mechanistically interpreted the enthusiasm of young artists, (both black and white), as obscene, but this was not the primary intention of rock 'n' roll's early movers and shakers. Besides Elvis, whose vocal style had been inspired by southern gospel quartets, early rocker and preacher's son Jerry Lee Lewis honed his musical style through black juke joints around Ferriday, Louisiana. Nick Tosches recounts a story of a fifteen year old Lewis who was called upon to play piano and sing for the Pentecostal Southwestern Bible Institute in Texas. Despite the fact that Lewis was sincere as he pounded out a powerful boogie-woogie rhythm to "My God Is Real," he had somehow crossed over the line between the "sacred" and "profane," and was promptly expelled from the congregation. Lewis' reaction to the expulsion was confused: "I jus' don't understand it, ...I didn't do anything wrong. I played piano jus' like I always have, the way ever'body has always liked it, only this time they didn't like it. 'Shout unto the Lord, all the earth,' says the Bible. 'Serve the Lord with gladness. Come before his presence with singing.' I served him gladly. I sang. I shouted. I didn't mean to break any rules, honest." (Tosches 74). What the young Lewis may not have realized was that while white Pentecostals shared many of the emotional and irrational characteristics of black churches, boogie-woogie was too patently "black" sounding to be regarded as anything other than "the Devil's music."

Revolution and Counter-Revolution Re-visited

Rock 'n' Roll of the fifties played out in the context of this backdrop of puritanical morality, and it may have been that rock's true revolutionary quality had more to do with striking a blow against the institutional hypocrisy which accompanied the matrix of race, rhythm and sex. Martha Bayles views this as a loosening of the tensions of "the blood knot" which involved the color-coded double standard established when black women were exploited by white (mostly southern) white men. This practice not only humiliated the black women, but angered their husbands and the wives of the white perpetrators as well. Bayles speculates that the appearance of a white male who could "sing black" gave white women an opportunity to turn the tables on their husbands. She points out that "one of the biggest problems on Presley's early Southern tours was security. Along with the frantic adulation of his female fans, he was endangered by the frantic resentment of the males, who understood all too well that the Hillbilly Cat was not playing by the rules." (Bayles 141).

This is not, however, to say that rock was a social and cultural revolution in any profound sense. From Bayles' standpoint, rock's limited impact occurred by virtue of its having separated the races (and hence a temporary loosening of the blood knot). And while teens may have been more sympathetic toward the plight of blacks, this did not mean that they interacted with them any more or less. Given the privacy and portability afforded by radio and phonograph records, and the suburban environment of the music, they didn't have to. At the same time, at least from the outset they were color-blind as far as the particular rock 'n' roll records they liked and purchased.

Another problem with the revolutionary mythos of rock is that it tends to overlook the conservative environment which cradled rock's emergence as an economically lucrative business. The fruits did not often fall into the hands of the artists themselves, but into the hands of the label owners, concert promoters, and agents whom they trusted. In their zeal to record, young artists often signed contracts they really didn't understand. Gribin and Schiff estimate that the average

young vocal group could make only \$12,640 on a million selling record after 28% had been taken off the top to cover production and distribution costs. Besides forcing artists to contribute royalties to producers, many had to cede rights to their original songs. (Gribin and Schiff 95f). With the sales of rock 'n' roll records burgeoning, large sums which could be made from royalties on radio plays went directly to the coffers of record label owners and the industry of popular music began to re-centralize in the cities of the north.

The representation of rhythm and blues records on the charts after 1956 seems to obscure this conservative tendency to maintain control of popular tastes. The "big four" majors, (Columbia, RCA Victor, Decca, and Capitol), which placed approximately 75% of the hits on the Pop prior to 1955, were, by 1958, placing only 36%. (Whitburn). The diminution of the majors is, however, over-determined as a sign of rock's revolutionary import as a groundbreaking music. Although major record labels were selling comparatively fewer top-selling records, they were more than willing to do what was necessary to produce records which would appeal to teen buyers. In accordance with the mainstream resistance to the emotional communalism of rhythm and blues, black singers were subject to increasingly greater competition from white singers in the same market. The requisite teen-oriented lyrics and underlying rhythm, the music of rock 'n' roll could be easily simulated by producers who had little interest in its actual cultural and gospel roots but a great deal of interest in profits available from the suddenly lucrative teen market. "Rock 'n' Roll," which supposedly represented the interests of anti-pop, anti-mainstream minorities and teens, was, therefore, no less amenable to homogenization of its forms than had late-night remote swing music been in the forties.

For many chroniclers of rock mythology, the tendency has been to view this co-optation by the popular music industry as a "counter-revolutionary" movement which diluted the original product in an effort to make it somehow less subversive of teen morality. The basis for this opinion rest not only on the re-centralization of the recording industry in the north, but the widespread

belief that rock 'n' roll was, from the start, a music of the rhythms of sex and the body. While it is certainly true that musical emanations from the black world engendered "feelings" in the body, both teens and detractors were more than willing to conflate significance of the music's sexual propriety, exaggerating its raw suggestiveness at the expense of the aesthetic intelligence of its founding performers. The general consensus became, therefore, that the actual sounds of rock 'n' roll were shocking, prurient, and sexually liberating. But, as we have noted in our examination of some earlier R & B/Pop crossover hits, this was not necessarily the case.

Far from being an "explosive" or "revolutionary" pop music, rock 'n' roll was part of a restoration of much earlier and more vibrant dance audience culture which had become moribund in the early fifties. Just as the popularity of swing had been driven by the call to dance in the thirties, rock 'n' roll filled a void for a new leading crowd whose economic clout had been enhanced by music radio and the primacy and portability of the 45 RPM single. The perceived rebelliousness of early rock was an overstatement which benefited both the teens who sought to encapsulate themselves from the adult world, and the enemies of the trend who sought to back up their claims that it was dangerous. Both of these perspectives relied on similar assumptions as to change or advancement in music tradition. For white teens, it meant identity, fun, resistance, and attitude. For adults, it meant the refusal of authority and the subversion of aesthetic principles. In either case, the conventions and practices of the music were not so much an issue to be understood and appreciated on its own terms, as in the case of traditional art, for instance, but rather, as models suitable for repetition and infused with mass-appeal. In a nutshell the early rock 'n' roll era can be characterized as a collision of dissimilar cultural forces wherein the expressiveness engendered in the Afro-American performance squared off against traditional and conservative myths of American freedom which were peaking at mid-decade. But rather than viewing the former as overcoming the latter, as the "revolutionary" rock account would have it, the encounter might more accurately be portrayed as one in which the former collapsed into the latter as a *commodity*

which could be reproduced according to predictable formula with guaranteed results. In other words, the raucous potential embodied in a Little Richard or Jerry Lee Lewis, or even Elvis, represented more the metaphorical sparks generated by the heat collision of cultural forces than it did the overthrow of one set of political, social or economic values by another.

Even during Rock 'n' Roll's most prolific stage of matriculation in 1957, the music which represented it was far less raucous and explosive than mythologizers would have us believe. A closer look at the preferred tastes of a representative group of high school students of that year illustrate this point:

TABLE 8-2

High School Student Music Preferences: 1957

	Percentage*	
	Boys	Girls
<i>Favorite Types of Music</i>		
Rocknroll	55	53
Pop	19	31
Country & Western	7	4
Folk (Calypso)	8	6
Jazz	11	6
	100	100
	Total = (3722)	Total = (3724)
<i>Favorite Singers</i>		
Pat Boone	44	45
Elvis Presley	22	18
Tommy Sands	8	11
Perry Como	11	10
Frank Sinatra	5	7
Harry Belafonte	10	9
	100	100
	Total = (3960)	Total = (4113)

Source: From *The Adolescent Society*, by James S. Coleman, Copyright 1961 By The Free Press, a division of MacMillan, Inc.; copyright renewed 1989 by James S. Coleman. Adapted with the permission of the publisher.

*Figures rounded to whole number; "No answer" removed.

(Ennis, 251)

These statistics, while not necessarily exemplary of all teen groups, are nonetheless startling from the standpoint of the relative popularity of two major, yet contrastingly different teen-idols of the day. While Pat Boone epitomized the lily-white, conservative teen-idol which even a mother could love, his considerable success was eclipsed only by the legendary "hillbilly cat" whose persona was perceived to be either the scourge or salvation of the new pop generation. This view, itself, is supported by sales statistics of the year, but Ennis' chart shows that it was entirely possible that Elvis' popularity did not so much alter teenage musical tastes as much as one might otherwise expect. Had the year 1956 been the music revolution which pundits had credited it as being, we should expect to see these percentages between the two reversed. And yet, teenage tastes, while certainly different from adults in the later half of the decade, remained surprisingly conservative.

Repetition, Novelty, and Second Generation Rock

The collision between music as expressed communally (as blues, or secular gospel, for instance), and music as co-modified consumption has led rock critics to an endless misunderstanding as to the cheapening, or dilution of rock 'n' roll music vis a vis industrial commercialism and standardization. On one hand, these critics are correct insofar as rock 'n' roll did move inexorably away from its roots. Not only did sophisticated technologies of production alter the relationships between performers and listeners, but rhythm and blues music itself underwent a change in the direction of pure mass marketed pop. The other side of the equation was

that from the very beginning, the very nature of rhythm and blues music actually facilitated reproducibility and imitation in the structure of its musical and lyrical forms. Where the confusion lie may have been that rock's co-optation by the forces of centralization in the late fifties was too often misconstrued as the result of a counter-revolution against rock, whereas, in actuality, the conservatism which supposedly opposed it had been an integral part of its emergence from the very beginning. .

One of the reasons for this misunderstanding stems from the old leftist notion that repetition of certain musical formulae was an affront to art (a view which conservatives shared as well), and that the once explosive and provocative "rocknroll" had sold out to the hegemony of mass production and control. This was the same Marxian view which Adorno had advanced in the forties to warn of popular music's potential for cheapening aesthetic and cultural standards. As teens became young adults in the sixties, this battle over the state of art in society became significantly more extenuated and politicized. But if this sort of critique were applicable to the late fifties, it would still not account for the unprecedented boom in record sales from year to year. How, indeed, could standardization and repetition of proven formulae have provided such a widespread form of pure pleasure and fun? After all, could the record buying frenzy have really been a product of mass manipulation of innocent young minds when, in fact, discriminating teen tastes had always functioned as the horse which pulled the cart? Bernard Gendron hints at one possible answer, which is that phonograph records, (7 inch singles, particularly), did not so much *disguise* their interchangeability and dupe buyers into thinking they were getting something new when they weren't, rather, they *accentuated* the very quality of repetition inherent to recorded sound as a way of making repetition itself into a valued art. (Gendron 28). In other words revolution mythologizers of rock who had viewed the late fifties period as generally fallow and co-opted, may have done so based on an inadequate reading of the ways in which late fifties rocknroll

had been practiced and the unique ways in which it fed the teenager's appetite for novelty within the familiar.

It may have been that the apotheosis of rocknroll, (which most astute aficionados and critics would take to have matriculated anytime between the mid to late part of the decade of the fifties), was compelling because of the influence it afforded them in the culture-making process. But, in its own right, rock 'n' roll music was not responsible for this state of empowerment. Whereas the very first wave of rocknroll music appeared to be functioning *against* a prevailing system of mainstream popular culture, in reality, the phenomenon of the transforming function of music vis-à-vis technology had been building throughout the century. The cultural phenomenon wrought by Elvis and those in his wake, functioned within musical and linguistic dialogues which had suddenly become accepted as familiar, repeated, recognized, and most importantly, valued. This latter element of post-emergent rock is what Gendron refers to as "synchronic standardization" or the "formulaic" sound of the late fifties (24) wherein notions of artistic expression were based upon currently evolving dialogues amongst new audiences. As such, Rock 'n' Roll, despite its lack of originality, took on a life of its own.

What occurred as rocknroll began to evolve from its roots was one which not infrequently occurs when an art form begins to acquire an identity through reformulation and repetition. Given that seminal black rock forms retained a link to their gospel, jazz and folk origins, it is easy to look upon their adaptation for mass, white consumption as a sort of imitation, or vulgarization of expressive, unpretentious folk art in the name of a more perverse and completely self-conscious "art" which was generically subsumed under the aegis of "rock." Ernest Borneman's 1946 depiction of jazz music expresses this process as polarization which occurs in popular culture. He writes, "*Awareness* (my italics) wrecks the naïve innocence of a folk culture and divides it, like Cain and Abel, into embodiments of an ever widening conflict between the eclectic upper-class culture of the few and the epigonic cliché culture of the vast masses who have lost the innocence of

a naïve folk art without gaining the awareness of a fully developed aesthetic.”(Borneman 48). Rock itself embodied both ends of these extremes. Wherein the early century had witnessed a clear (though increasingly blurring) distinction between the elite and the bourgeois, rock ‘n’ roll culture inverted these distinctions such that what was once the exclusive domain of the upper crust was now the *necessary* foil against which new articulators of culture could demonstrate their claims to authenticity and difference..

And so, while we are saying that rock ‘n’ roll was more of a continuum than an explosion, or revolution, we are also saying that the way it took the raw material of emergent “art” (that is, as the unique expressions of small Afro-American post-war instrumental and musical combos) to a formulaic, caricatured, mass-marketed commodity made it, and all that had come to pass in the decade, the perfect metaphor for pop music in general. Why, for instance could not the swing era be so regarded? Swing music, like rock 'n' roll, was standardized into a highly polished and formulaic model, and it did appeal to the younger generation, but unlike the latter, it was considered well within the musical mainstream of popular music rather than as a resistance against it. The comparison brings to light the subtle differences between the popular and simply the "pop." While the phonograph record was indeed changing the terrain of popular taste and consumption, it was not until the fifties, and particularly the mid-fifties that the pace of change and interplay between different musical streams began to noticeably *interrupt* dialogues with the past. These dialogues were really interactions which took between or among musicians or audiences, and were fundamental to the ways in which music was produced or received. Black rhythm & blues groups, for instance, founded their unique styles upon traditional Tin Pan Alley or 12-bar blues because they had assimilated these earlier forms as part of their own musical heritage. The interruption of these dialogues was precisely what occurred when the ideology of rock 'n' roll fueled a self-conscious effort to empower a new generation of artists and fans whose debt to the past seemed irrelevant, if not impossible.

Attempts to purge popular music in the name of rock served to detach the latter from its particular social contexts and rewrite them into an ideologically determined body of works. Subsequent generations of rock audiences were informed not by dialogues exemplary of original rock 'n' roll, but rather by political expediency. The canonization of rock which took place in the sixties was a way establishing a sort of arbitrary boundary between youth and other, but, at the same time, it was a way of manufacturing cultural capital as an exclusive domain. This practice of canonization of the rock idiom was ideologically aligned with Adorno's take on popular music, and, even though it took place some twenty or more years after his writings, it suffered from a similar ethnocentric bias. As the rock era endured into the sixties, its primary standard bearers were considered to have been white artists who adopted the Afro-American idiom rather than lesser known performers whose works were truly seminal to rock's underpinnings. And if the starting point for the pop analyst is what Robert Fiske has referred to as the investigation into those popular texts which have escaped from (rather than been acclaimed by) critical attention, (Fiske 106), then the self-proclaimed experts suffered from the same misreading of the dynamics of popular discrimination as Adorno did when he relegated popular music to the confines of industrial standardization.

A certain misplaced logic of authenticity and authority required for such canonization was intrinsic to the recorded artifact itself. Unlike a piece of classical music (whose origins are generally clear, unquestionable and evidenced by notation), recorded, reproduced, or reinterpreted sound brought the matter of authorship into question. While in many cases an original blues song would be revamped for teenage consumption, (Big Mama Thornton's "Hound Dog" as recorded for RCA by Elvis for instance), it was accepted practice among white rock aficionados to credit the later popularized version as *the* definitive one simply because it was located within the loosely structured idiom of rock 'n' roll. If rock generations were particularly keen as to what was or was not "the real deal," they could not have done so by any objective criterion (and even if they could

have, those criteria would have passed into obsolescence as quickly as they had arrived). The basis for this distortion was not simply ethnocentric motivation, but a sense of empowerment which led rock fans to assess authenticity and value *as if* they were the sole arbiters of artistic expression. Overlooked was the fact that standards of progress for assessing value and authenticity in written, classical, or “art” music were qualitatively different from those which valued music as “commodity.”

As we have noted earlier, the history of popular music in America was characterized by a struggle between the traditional gatekeepers of elite art and those who sought to redefine art according to their own systems of valuation. The reversal of fortunes within the recording industry which occurred with the advent of rock ‘n’ roll represented a turning point in this struggle. Twitchell argues that the 45 RPM record conveyed “reproductive rather than artistic rhythms” and that in both the elite and folk American cultures, what popular culture delivered was “familiarity.” (Twitchell 16). The purpose of popular culture was to entertain, (not to enlighten), and prior to around 1960, “taste” was “an aristocratic privilege parceled out to the socially acceptable and aesthetically docile in dollops of art.”(17). Such a process was in practice even as late as the post-war when major record companies began to offer to the masses a wide variety of crooning singers or vivacious songstresses, all of whom took turns recording the compositions of the Tin Pan Alley publishers. Recordings of popular singers offering sentimentally and artistically vapid renditions of Broadway or film compositions continued to be marketed to the “socially acceptable and aesthetically docile,” as it were, throughout the fifties. The rhythms afforded by 7 inch 45 RPM disc, indeed, did offer a fresh take on what was or was not entertaining and the “anti-highbrow” forces were clearly gaining the upper hand. If early rock ‘n’ roll seemed so compelling, perhaps one of the reasons was that the fate of the entertainment industry seemed to have fallen so precariously into the lap of a generation which had no experience with swing. And with that endowment came a sense of release, a “jouissance” or feeling of bodily liberation, as Robert Fiske puts it (Fiske).

Rock 'n' roll mimicked popular culture in that it exemplified this feeling of sexual liberation with the casting off of an entire half-century of authoritarian control.

It has been my contention that this dramatic shifting of popular taste which appeared with the original rock 'n' roll era was more gradual than sudden. Twitchell believes that not until after 1960 was the dominant taste “not highbrow, or even middlebrow, but like decidedly lowbrow.”(Twitchell 37). In light of the fact that social acceptability had already been successfully challenged in conjunction with music and juvenile delinquency by 1955, how can we account for the more than five year time lag between rock's alleged “birth” and its collapse into a discriminatory practice which devalued not just high art, but any art at all? If we are to accept Twitchell's premise we must admit that there were greater forces at work than merely rock 'n' roll music itself. These forces were both technological and social.

It is interesting that the “sacralization and canonization” which Twitchell regards as a sign of a “profound shift in culture”(32) taking place around 1960 did not really occur in the hearts and minds of rock fans *until* well after 1960, particularly once a full generation of teens with had become young adults. Youth had always taken their music quite seriously, but as the cold war raged on and the generation gap became ever more established part of life, music was becoming less pure joy, and more an insulation from the harsher realities of adult life. The essential distinction between the emerging rocknroll of 1955 and the more self-consciously discriminating variety after 1960, may have also been a reflection of the phonograph record's increasingly prolific ability to promote a music culture of repetition, familiarity and novelty and promulgate those very characteristics as anthemic to a cause.

Part of the “cause” was to renounce the ways of the establishment and assert that rock had suffered a fallow period from the co-optation of capitalist greed only to be revived by its “revolutionary” legions of heroes and youth. It was likely, however, that if such a period had any basis in fact, it had more to do with *built-in* operational strategies of re-characterizing standard

motifs in the name of familiarity and repetition than with outside influences counter-revolutionary to rock. While this may seem like splitting hairs, the fact was that it was not only the record moguls but the kids themselves who were demanding music which could be replicated, used for productive pleasures, and then easily disposed of to make room for the next available recording. To put it another way, rock's "reproducibility" made it all the more available to major labels, who, while able to reassert their pre-eminence in the record business, were as much at the mercy of the tastes of consumers as any other industry of pop culture. Rock 'n' roll had not so much been subverted, but rather, it was merely intrinsically tied to the pace of technological change.

The practice of musical disrupting dialogues with the past was no more dramatically illustrated than with the mature rock audiences of the sixties. Insofar as they looked with derision upon the co-opted recording of the late-fifties, they tended to view their current music as heroic and aesthetically better than the teen music of the rock 'n' roll's early heyday. Even though rock occurred because of technological and social conditions of the 1950s, second generation rock fans of the sixties aspired to their own standards of authenticity and taste, and for the most part, this meant the recognition of rock as a primarily guitar-driven, suburban upper-class white art form. In a sense, these claims carried a hypocritical edge to them because it had been these very same suburban white audiences which drove the co-opted music which later fans so categorically disparaged.

A similar disregard for the music's historical legacy occurred in conjunction with the perception of the rhythm and blues trajectory in rock 'n' roll. The standard lament given by second generation rockers of the sixties was that whites (and especially those involved in co-optation) had either stolen from, or "sanitized" black music, making it into a "safe" commodity for "respectable" white teens. In actuality, the eventual trend away from earlier rhythm and blues evolved in a much more subtle way. Simon Frith explains that the real situation was not so much a matter of the "dilution" of the black idiom by whites, but rather, just the opposite. The strategy of teen-oriented

record producers was to “‘blacken up’ gospel, r&b, and doowop (such that) the black artists reached white audiences on if they met tests that embodied sensuality, spontaneity, or gritty soulfulness.”(Frith 131). What Frith refers to here is the same expectation and demand which informed reinforced the black stereotype of In other words, dedication to authenticity did not so much take the form of faithfulness to an original model as to an “ideal” of what the sound should represent. Evidence seems to support Frith’s view.

This interpretation of the conversion of black forms for white consumption is less a condemnation of rock’s co-optation by whites than a testament to the far reaching effect which technology had on popular discrimination. As with other forms of popular culture, rocknroll embodied contradictions. Its social body disdained the prevailing taste conformities of adults, but what it replaced them with was not so much a new or fresh aesthetic, as a redefinition of what is *relevant*. It offered new ways of seeing the world in terms of music, but yet it excluded the culture heritage from the world it was addressing. It prided itself on authenticity, but whereas the idiom had been created by blacks, the criterion for assessing this authenticity was increasingly based upon a pantheon of white artists. As a movement which valued individual expression, it increasingly led to a group mentality in which members sought to do things in the same way. Their forms of dress, behavior, speech, and indeed, their tastes in music, while different from those of the adult world, were indicative of profound change only in the negative sense of being a victory for pop culture over the forces of art culture. As such, it evolved new forms within the contexts which capitalism, technology and musical arguments could provide, but as a resistance to the hegemony, it also was contained by those very forces. As Fiske puts it, “Popular culture is progressive, not revolutionary.” (Fiske 161).

Several critics, (including Simon Frith, James Twitchell and Martha Bayles), observe the tri-parite organization of taste cultures which interacted throughout the century. The bourgeois art world which held fast to real or imagined ties with 19th century “high culture” was, as we have

seen, in a perpetual state of struggle against the forces of the world of commerce which established a new system of valuation based upon unit sales. A third, but independent discriminative set of practices were those of “folk” cultures who understood the value of music in terms of its social function. As with original jazz, the music which evolved into rocknroll arose from folk culture, but as popular music, involved the interplay of all three discourses, all with competing assumptions with regard to value. The proponents of rock’s “distinctiveness” from pop were, in fact, able to do so only by hypocritically pointing out its folk and art values as subterfuges against the homogeneity of commercial tastes. If, as James Fiske suggests, folk culture was characterized by “social consensus rather than social conflict,”(169), then it is dubious whether rocknroll would have qualified as such. Not only was its consensus age-specific, but its social politics were grounded in a resistance to the hegemony.

The view that rocknroll was somehow culturally and artistically exclusive, while shared by its most ardent fans, was never historically accurate. As we have seen in our earlier discussion on the emerging phenomenon, the cross-fertilization of popular with folk forms did not so much yield to a qualitatively different music (even though it may have been “heard” as such), as it encouraged new discursive meanings across previously segregated cultural boundaries. The fact that categories of popular, black pop and country pop were all beginning to collapse into each other in the name of rocknroll did not speak so much to rock’s revolutionary power as it established popular music as a paradox involving both a wider interplay and a pervasive disruption of social discourses. Such an interpretation runs counter to conventional accounts which allege rock’s devaluation by moneyed interests. In Frith’s words, “If the standard line of rocknroll history is that an authentic (or folk) sound is continually corrupted by commerce, it could equally well be argued that what the history actually reveals is a commercial musical form continually being recuperated in the name of art and subculture.”(Frith 42).

Just as rock continually renewed itself throughout the sixties (and beyond), popular music culture reinvented itself as “pop art,” a commodity which demanded immediate gratification, and often, irrational allegiances from its audiences. It may have been that the proliferation of new images outpaced the availability of corresponding meanings attached to them, and in the process, created a taste culture which was no longer able to make distinctions between the artistic and the vulgar. Rather than answering unfounded claims as to rock ‘n’ roll’s vulgarity, it acceded to them in a primitive embrace, which glamorized the prurient at the expense of beauty, expressiveness and meaning.

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