Chapter 8: Rock ‘n’ Roll

1954-1959
Overview/Introduction
Styles once on the margins began to dominate!

Country and R&B: being heard on mainstream pop radio and available to purchase by general public

Rock n Roll:

- Not really a “new” style
- Also not first music to be marketed to/aimed at young people
- “Rock and Roll” more of a marketing term
What was happening in the 50s?

Baby Boom Generation: the New Audience

- Born at end and in years after WWII
- 1950s - relatively stable times
- Grew up with TV as part of their lives

Cold War tensions/anticommunism

- **Blacklisting** of writers, musicians, entertainment personalities
- Fears of atomic bombs
- Racial tension/awareness due to end of segregation in 1954 (Brown v. Board of Education)
“Baby Boomers” as a group

Adolescents in the 1950s IDENTIFIED by larger culture as their own unique generational group

Self-identification as “the boomers”

Q: What generational groups do you know of?

Generations Guide

“Teen Culture”

Not just for “teenagers”

Forms of identity: dance steps, fashions, ways of speaking, music

Q: Can you identify any “youth culture” items of today?

Prosperity = they had $ to buy things

● Many of these “things” were developed for and marketed specifically to them.
● Do you see examples of this today? (Grassroots on up, or big companies on down?)
The Birth of Rock ‘n’ Roll
- Term was coined by Alan Freed, a Cleveland radio DJ
  - His “Moondog Show” featured R&B and what he’d begin to call rock n roll records
  - Promoted diverse concert tours: “Rock and roll revues”

“Rockin” and “Rollin” were terms found in r&b songs and race music dating back to 1920s

Originally, “rock and roll” could be classified as having sexual undertones, but eventually it just meant a type of music. (“Jazz” went through the same thing)

- Freed: moved to NYC and took the term with him
  - Continued to promote African American musicians. Risky...
  - Show canceled after it showed a black artist dancing with a white girl
  - Prosecuted for “payola”
    - Illegal practice of bribing djs to play certain artists records more often.
Who were early “Rock n Roll” artists?

“Rock n Roll” originally referred to any music marketed to young listeners

- Included what would have been R&B/C&W, or even “tin pan alley” style

“Rock and Roll Singers” = those who had records being listened to and purchased by teenagers. Wide variety!

Fats Domino

The Everly Brothers

Pat Boone

Chuck Berry
For teens, purchasing records was a safe way to “rebel”

Parents: Oh no! Rock and roll refers to sex! Kids: hahaha!

1950s invented “the teenager” as a commercial and cultural entity

Rock and roll EXCLUSIVELY marketed to teenagers!

Eventually, as the kids of the 50s got older and moved into the 1960s, they “matured” and called their music simply “rock”

Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers

*Why Do Fools Fall in Love*
Yes, Rock and Roll was very generational, but...

It also helped marketing move away from racial and regional considerations.

If you were young in the 50s, no matter where you lived, no matter what your race or class, Rock n Roll was YOUR music!

Rock and Roll is Here to Stay
Cover Versions

Not a brand new thing, but due to a court case, became MUCH more easy to do legally

Most famous example: “Shake, Rattle, and Roll”

Big Joe Turner

Bill Haley and the Comets
Early Rock Stars on the R&B Side...

Chuck Berry (1926-2017)

Born in CA, grew up in St. Louis

One of first black musicians to really do his OWN style of R&B, and most successful!

Knew country music, and influenced hits like:

- **Maybellene**

  Very fast tempo (compared to most in that time)

Trademarks:

- Fast tempo
- Electric guitar
- Intensity/volume
- Witty lyrics- clear enunciation
- Appeal to lifestyle and aspirations of his listeners (cars, girls, etc)
More Chuck Berry Hits

Roll Over Beethoven 1956

Rock and Roll Music 1957

Johnny B Goode 1958

Influenced SO MANY rock musicians!

Mass admiration went to Elvis, but the biggest influence on musicians was Chuck Berry
Little Richard

Born 1932

Shouting style, falsetto whoops

Nonsense lyrics

Extroverted and outrageous

Visually flamboyant

Sexually ambiguous: paved way for artists such as David Bowie, Elton John, Prince, and Lady Gaga
Fats Domino

Singer, pianist, songwriter

Already had songs on R&B Charts before “crossing over” with *Ain't That a Shame*

Didn’t change his style- mainstream just caught up with what he was already doing

2nd biggest-selling recording artist of the 50s- behind Elvis

Born and lived in New Orleans

Remake of a tin pan alley song: *Blueberry Hill* 1956
Early Rock Stars on the Country Side

Elvis Presley (1935-1977)

Born in Tupelo Mississippi

Inspired by white gospel, radio broadcasts of C&W/R&B, crooners of postwar era

1954- walked into Sun Records in Memphis, TN owned by Sam Phillips

Contract bought out by RCA Victor (a BIG company) in 1955 ($35k):: wanted to make him a mainstream performer

Well known manager: Colonel Tom Parker

Got him TV variety shows, pop-friendly style

First viewed as “vulgar”, he was a HUGE SUCCESS

Dominated charts from 1956-early 1960s
Elvis = Rock as Mainstream

Rock n Roll became an unprecedented mainstream phenomenon

Died in 1977 at age 42

His home, Graceland, now a tourist destination in Memphis

*Don't Be Cruel 1956*
Buddy Holly

1936-1959. Basically the opposite of Elvis

Began in Country, but followed Elvis’ lead and formed a rock band.

Famous (like Berry) as a songwriter

That'll Be the Day 1957

Peggy Sue.

Died in a plane crash in 1959 (age 22), along with Ritchie Valens and the Big Bopper

- Plane crash was the subject of Don McLean’s famous song: American Pie (1971)
Watch these Documentaries

Rock and Roll, the Early Days Documentary

History of Rock and Roll documentary play list