



ROCK GOES POP: THE MUSIC IN THE MEDIA

by Gregg Geller

*Radio and TV
Do a lot for me
Lots of times I date my honey
When I'm runnin' short of foldin' money
And the radio and TV are free....*

*It's nice to sit and say the things that lovers have to say
While the good guys chase the bad guys
And the top 10 records play*

“Radio And TV”
--Felice and Boudleaux Bryant
as recorded by The Everly Brothers, 1960

I was 8-years old in the Winter of 1956, growing up in a small town beyond suburbia on the North Shore of Long Island, about 50 miles from New York City. My family went out to dinner every Saturday night without fail but, like all good Americans that year, we made certain to be at home in front of the television by 8:30 in time for *The Honeymooners* starring Jackie Gleason. We would frequently catch some portion of the program that preceded it, *Stage Show*, which is how I first saw Elvis Presley sing “Tutti Frutti.” I’d heard of Rock’n’Roll before that; in fact, the teenage son of some family friends had a 45 r.p.m copy of “Rock Around The Clock,” which I’d heard more than a few times. But if seeing is believing, then I became a true believer on February 4, 1956, when we turned on the TV and came face-to-face with the life-altering force that was Elvis Presley—riveting, magnetic, exhilarating, astonishing, explosive Elvis.

You might say that “video” made the radio star. Like me, Americans *saw* the rise of Rock’n’Roll during the decade of the 1950s. We witnessed the development of this uniquely American form of popular music, its style rooted in strains of Big Band Jazz, Country-Western, Gospel, Pop and, especially, Rhythm & Blues, through the media—radio, TV, and the movies. The media brought what had been a minority music to the masses, and in the process influenced its sound and shape. Not only



was Rock'n'Roll something radically new and different musically, but it would have a profound and lasting impact on American culture and the world in the years to come.

At the dawn of the decade Rhythm & Blues was a music confined to a handful of stations at the far end of the radio dial aimed at an African-American audience. In hindsight it is apparent that, as this music morphed into the phenomenon named Rock'n'Roll, it was radio that introduced it to mainstream America and television that spread it nationwide. But it was a motion picture, *Blackboard Jungle*, aided and abetted by radio and TV to be sure, that lit the spark, sped the process, and truly changed the course of musical history.

Bill Haley and His Comets recorded “(We’re Gonna) Rock Around The Clock” on April 12, 1954 under the guidance of Milt Gabler. In the 1940s Gabler had been the producer responsible for a long string of jump blues hits by Louis Jordan and His Tympany Five that were a prototype for Rock'n'Roll, especially the music of Chuck Berry and Ray Charles. Newly-signed to Decca Records, Jordan’s label, Haley and the band entered New York’s Pythian Temple, an upper West Side dancehall which had been converted into a recording studio, intent on making a song entitled “Thirteen Women (And Only One Man In Town)” their first major label release. After spending virtually an entire three-hour session perfecting “Thirteen Women,” they hurriedly recorded “Rock Around The Clock,” a failed 1953 R&B single on the obscure Philadelphia-based Arcade label by Sonny Dae and His Knights for its B-side.

That B-side might have remained the final resting place of “Rock Around The Clock” had not fate, in the form of a movie, intervened. Released one month after it was recorded, “Thirteen Women” made so little impact that Haley and the Comets were back in the studio two months later to try again, this time with a version of Big Joe Turner’s current Rhythm & Blues hit “Shake, Rattle & Roll.” The Turner single had been released on the same day that Haley’s “Thirteen Women” and “Rock Around The Clock” had been recorded. It was such an immediate and enormous success in the African-American market that, with little opportunity for an R&B record to enter the Pop field at that time, it had run its course by the time Haley’s cover was released. R&B hits like “Gee” by The Crows and “Sh-Boom” by The Chords, battling the competition of inferior cover versions by white acts like the Canadian vocal group The Crew Cuts, had only recently begun to crossover.

Perhaps it was its lyrics that precluded Big Joe’s version of “Shake, Rattle & Roll” from Pop radio play in mid-1954. Haley’s new recording of the song sanitized those lyrics for mass consumption, changing writer Jesse Stone’s opening lines, for instance, from



“Get out of that bed
And wash your face and hands”

to:

“Get out in that kitchen
And rattle those pots and pans.”

And later:

“Well you wear those dresses
The sun comes shining through...
I can’t believe my eyes
All that mess belongs to you”

became:

“Wearing those dresses
Your hair done up so nice...
You look so warm
But your heart is cold as ice.”

Its transition from the bedroom to the kitchen complete, Bill Haley and His Comets’ “Shake, Rattle & Roll” entered the Pop charts in August of 1954 for a 27-week run, peaking in the top 10.

Meanwhile, a copy of Haley’s “Rock Around The Clock” had found its way to Richard Brooks, the director of *Blackboard Jungle*, a B-movie about troubled teenagers and their put-upon teachers in a New York City high school starring Glenn Ford and Sidney Poitier. Coincidentally M-G-M had announced its acquisition of the rights to the Evan Hunter novel upon which the film was based on the very day that “Rock Around The Clock” had been recorded. Now Brooks selected Bill Haley’s old B-side to play over the opening and closing credits of his new film. *Blackboard Jungle* opened on March 19, 1955 to enthusiastic reviews and over-enthusiastic crowds. Reports of unruly teens dancing



in the aisles (and tearing up the seats) to “Rock Around The Clock” made for sensational headlines—and great publicity. The movie was a resounding success.

Decca Records responded to the new-found notoriety of “Rock Around The Clock” by reissuing it, this time as the A-side of the single. By mid-May it had entered the charts and within two months it had reached No. 1 for the first of eight weeks. And whereas Big Joe Turner’s “Shake, Rattle & Roll” was unable to cross over to the Pop audience only a year earlier, “Rock Around The Clock” now achieved this feat in reverse, reaching No. 3 on the Rhythm & Blues chart as well. It was during this period of time that Bill Haley and His Comets appeared on Ed Sullivan’s popular Sunday night television variety hour, *Toast Of The Town*, to promote their single. Thus did the motion picture *Blackboard Jungle* generate the first Rock’n’Roll record to top the charts.

That record, “Rock Around The Clock,” in turn, inspired a new kind of film, the Rock’n’Roll movie. Countering its association with juvenile delinquency in *Blackboard Jungle*, the Rock’n’Roll movies that followed generally attempted to portray the music and its fans in a more favorable, even wholesome, light. Haley and his band were featured in the first of these films, a low-budget, black and white quickie called *Rock Around The Clock*, which premiered in March of 1956. By the time they appeared in their second, *Don’t Knock The Rock*, the field was crowded—*Rock, Rock, Rock* and *Shake, Rattle And Rock* and, in glorious color, the Frank Tashlin-directed spoof *The Girl Can’t Help It* (starring sex symbol Jayne Mansfield), all opened in December of 1956 too.

This quartet of Christmas releases incorporated performances by the biggest stars to have emerged during the previous, seminal year in the history of Rock’n’Roll, many of them African-American: Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Fats Domino, Bo Diddley, Gene Vincent, Eddie Cochran, The Platters and Frankie Lymon & The Teenagers, among others. No longer was it deemed necessary for genuine Rock’n’Roll to be diluted by whitewashed cover versions before it was presented to the mass American public.

The film *Rock Around The Clock* was very loosely based on the real-life rise of Bill Haley. Just five years earlier, Haley had been a struggling, journeyman Philadelphia-area Country & Western bandleader fronting a group named The Saddlemen, which worked in a style reminiscent of the preeminent Country music act of the day, Hank Williams and His Drifting Cowboys. Asked by Dave Miller of Holiday Records to record a cover version of the then-current Rhythm & Blues hit “Rocket 88” by Jackie Brenston & His Delta Cats—one of several post-war R&B hits frequently cited as the “first” Rock’n’Roll record—Haley and The Saddlemen came up with a somewhat tentative country boogie hybrid of the song replete with honking horn and other automotive sound effects.



“Rocket 88” became enough of a local favorite in eastern Pennsylvania and south New Jersey that Miller, moving the group to his Essex Records label, requested that Haley follow it with “Rock The Joint,” a song The Saddlemen had been working up in live performances throughout the region. The song had been a top 10 R&B hit for another local act, Jimmy Preston and His Prestonians, on Gotham Records in 1949, but Haley and his musicians took the song to another place entirely. Their “Rock The Joint,” anchored by the prominent sound of Marshall Lytle’s slap-back bass, featured an electrifying solo that guitarist Danny Cedrone, on loan for the session from his own group, The Esquire Boys, would replicate note-for-note two years later on “Rock Around The Clock.” *

On the strength of the strong regional sales of “Rock The Joint” and with the subsequent success in 1953 of “Crazy Man, Crazy,” his first single to crack the national best-seller lists, Bill Haley and his band (now known as the Comets) were signed to Decca Records. And the rest is history—a history reflected in, or perhaps refracted by, the plot of the film *Rock Around The Clock*.

In the film Haley and his band are discovered at a small-town dance by a has-been big band promoter who, with the support of a group of clean-cut local kids and the timely assistance of disc jockey Alan Freed, sets the Rock’n’Rollers on their way to fame and fortune. In the process a great many classic recordings by Bill Haley and His Comets are performed, of course.

*Tragically, Cedrone didn’t live to enjoy any recognition for what is arguably the first great Rock’n’Roll guitar solo. Three months after the session that produced “Rock Around The Clock,” he broke his neck in a fall and died instantly.

Moondog’s Ball

On June 11, 1951, just three days before the real-life 25-year old Bill Haley recorded “Rocket 88,” the real-life 29-year old Alan Freed had made his debut on Cleveland radio station WJW, where he proceeded to make his mark as a white disc jockey by playing Rhythm & Blues music, recorded for the African-American market, to a racially mixed audience. In March of the following year Freed, who had taken to calling himself “The Moondog,” promoted a dance, the Moondog



Coronation Ball starring Billy Ward and The Dominos--their "Sixty Minute Man" was another "first" Rock'n'Roll record. The event attracted huge, predominantly Black crowds and had to be shut down when the overflow throng grew violent. Tightening up on security Freed held similar promotions over the next couple of years in Cleveland, throughout the surrounding territory, and eventually as far East as Newark, New Jersey. Increasingly, white teenagers were in attendance at the dances and shows he promoted.

It was during this period that Freed began to refer to the music he was playing and championing as Rock'n'Roll, perhaps to enhance its appeal to his growing white audience by detaching it from any negative racial association with Rhythm & Blues. By September of 1954 he'd moved his radio show to WINS in New York City (where he was forced to abandon the "Moondog" moniker when challenged by a blind street musician named Louis Hardin who had adopted the same pseudonym years earlier) and consolidated his position as the leading purveyor and defender of the new music. In the meantime comrades had begun to emerge--George "Hound Dog" Lorenz in Buffalo, Dewey Phillips in Memphis, John Richbourg in Nashville, Zenas Sears in Atlanta, Hunter Hancock in Los Angeles, and a host of others, each one a white disc jockey playing Rhythm & Blues, or Rock'n'Roll, for a white listenership.

Bandstand Begins

Even as Alan Freed and his contemporaries were developing Rock'n'Roll as a radio format, Bob Horn, a veteran 37-year old disc jockey in Philadelphia had another idea. On October 6, 1952, he moved his popular WFIL radio show, *Bandstand*, to the station's television affiliate. From the start, *Bob Horn's Bandstand* borrowed liberally from *TV-Teen Club*, a Philadelphia-based Saturday night dance program hosted since 1949 by 1920s bandleader Paul Whiteman, the self-styled "King of Jazz." (A fresh-faced 22-year old named Dick Clark was serving as the announcer on *TV-Teen Club* in 1952.) Both Horn and Whiteman featured teenagers dancing to the hits of the day and participating in rate-the-record contests, and welcomed guest entertainers passing through town such as the singers Patti Page, Frankie Laine, Joni James, Tony Bennett, and even Rudy Vallee and the comedian Phil Silvers.

As a local act on the rise Bill Haley and His Comets made several appearances on *Bob Horn's Bandstand*, but typically the music featured on the show was the bland, white Pop epitomized by Philadelphia's own Eddie Fisher, the top teen idol of the early 1950s. Occasionally such harbingers of



things to come as histrionic balladeer Johnnie Ray (of “Cry” fame) or the duo of virtuoso guitar pioneer Les Paul and his wife, singer Mary Ford (“How High The Moon”), might make an appearance, but it was several years before Rhythm & Blues gained any significant foothold on *Bandstand*.

The mid-afternoon program quickly became a hit, turning away thousands of teenagers hoping to gain entry to a set that held no more than 250. It soon became apparent that a record played on the show might expect to enjoy an upsurge in sales. *Bob Horn’s Bandstand* is even credited with kicking off a dance craze—Ray Anthony’s Capitol recording of “Bunny Hop” became a hit, first in Philadelphia and then nationwide, in late 1952. It was a first hint of things to come on its successor show, *American Bandstand*, where dances such as the Stroll, the Chalypso, the Twist, and the Mashed Potatoes were introduced to a national audience.

Bob Horn was riding high by 1956 when he was brought down by a web of scandals including an arrest for drunk driving, a conviction on income tax evasion, and morals charges. He was replaced as host of *Bandstand* by the clean-cut announcer Dick Clark, who WFIL had been grooming for bigger things. Clark had taken over Horn’s radio slot in 1952, playing easy listening fare on his *Caravan Of Music* and now, four years later, was enlisted to safeguard the image of WFIL’s flagship show which, on August 5, 1957, was rechristened *American Bandstand*, picked up by ABC-TV, and broadcast nationally.

The Triumph Of Elvis Presley

By the time Dick Clark took the reins in mid-1956, the *Bandstand* “regulars” were dancing to a Rhythm & Blues beat (though relatively few African-Americans ever got to actually dance on the show) and Rock’n’Roll, largely in the person of 21-year old Elvis Presley, was ascendant. Presley, accompanied by Scotty Moore on guitar and Bill Black on bass, had recorded his first side for Sam Phillips’ Sun Records in Memphis on July 5, 1954 (two days before Bill Haley and His Comets cut “Shake, Rattle And Roll” in New York), a reworking of bluesman Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup’s 1946 RCA Victor R&B hit “That’s All Right.”

When, three days later, WHBQ, Memphis, disc jockey Dewey Phillips (no relation to Sam Phillips) debuted the recording on his *Red, Hot And Blue* show he made sure to elicit from Elvis, in an on-air interview, that the singer had attended Humes High School in Memphis. Occurring less than two months after the Supreme Court’s *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision banning segregation in the



public schools, that information was sufficient to indicate that the vocalist on this radical new record was, in fact, a local white boy. Dewey Phillips played “That’s All Right” repeatedly and the reaction was so positive that Sam Phillips rushed Elvis, Scotty, and Bill back into his little studio at 706 Union Avenue to cut a B-side—a similarly reworked rendering of “Blue Moon Of Kentucky,” a song by the father of bluegrass, Bill Monroe, like “That’s All Right” from 1946-- in order that a single might be released.

That first record established a pattern. On each of the five singles that Sun Records released by Elvis Presley over the course of the next 13 months, a Rhythm & Blues song was coupled with a more Country-oriented number. This is not to say that any of the ten recordings adhered strictly to the conventions of either genre. Instead the sound of those early Sun records was something fresh, neither Country nor Rhythm & Blues, but an exciting breakthrough in a new style.

This new style, informed by African-American culture, was reflected not only by his music but in the outrageous way Elvis dressed (in clothes fashioned by Lansky Brothers of Beale Street) and the unrestrained performances he gave on-stage. But the fervor that he would evoke in his personal appearances was not immediately appreciated by many in the more conservative sectors of the music business. In a letter to Marvin Lieber, his Miami distributor, just three weeks after the release of “That’s All Right,” Sam Phillips claimed that his Memphis distributor reported “that it is being bought by operators for ALL locations, white and colored... everybody from white teenagers to old colored people are buying it with equal zest.” But, responding to Phillips six weeks later, Lieber painted a less positive and more typical picture in describing the reaction of jukebox operators in northern Florida to the single: “They won’t touch it as they consider it too racy.”

Elvis appeared on *The Grand Ole Opry* on October 2, singing “Blue Moon Of Kentucky” but was not invited to return. Two weeks later he debuted on *The Louisiana Hayride* out of Shreveport, Louisiana. The *Hayride*, less tradition-bound than its Nashville radio forebear, had offered asylum to Hank Williams a few years earlier and now proved to be a congenial base of operations for another unconventional, controversial singer on the rise.

By mid-1955 Elvis Presley was a sensation across the southern United States and had attracted the attention of “Colonel” Tom Parker, a veteran of the 1930s carnival circuit who, in more recent years, had turned to booking and managing Country acts, among them such RCA Victor stars as Eddy Arnold and Hank Snow. On August 15 of that year, one week after Bill Haley and His Comets appeared on *Toast Of The Town* promoting “Rock Around The Clock,” Elvis Presley signed a contract naming Col. Parker his “special advisor.” A month later he ventured north to play Cleveland, Ohio



with Haley, where the two were filmed in performance for a documentary about disc jockey Bill Randle entitled *The Pied Piper Of Cleveland*, which, mysteriously, disappeared and has never been found.

On November 21, 1955, in a deal negotiated by Col. Parker, Elvis Presley's Sun Records contract and master recordings were acquired by RCA Victor Records. A month later the Colonel announced that Elvis would make a series of appearances on *Stage Show*, the half-hour lead-in to Jackie Gleason's popular CBS-TV comedy show hosted by bandleaders Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey. And early in January of 1956, in Nashville, he recorded "Heartbreak Hotel," the song that would become his first single for his new label.

Introduced by Bill Randle, Elvis Presley made his national television debut on January 28, just one day after the release of "Heartbreak Hotel," performing Ray Charles "I Got A Woman" and a medley of Joe Turner's "Shake, Rattle And Roll" and "Flip, Flop And Fly" but, interestingly, not his new single. In fact, he didn't get around to plugging it on TV until his third *Stage Show* appearance, on February 11, and then not again until his fifth and sixth shows on March 17 and 24. Although that first performance of "Heartbreak Hotel" on February 11 was a particularly leaden affair, with Elvis constrained by the backing of the Dorsey Brothers' big band, the single was starting to sell nationally and by March 31, one week after his final appearance on *Stage Show*, nearing one million copies sold, it became only the second record to appear on the *Billboard* Pop, Rhythm & Blues, and Country-Western charts simultaneously. ("Blue Suede Shoes," by Sam Phillips' latest discovery Carl Perkins, was the first, achieving the distinction three weeks earlier.)

The day after his last *Stage Show* performance Presley flew to California for a Hollywood screen test, but for the immediate future Col. Parker would concentrate on building Elvis' record sales through a steady regimen of guest shots on the most popular television variety shows of the day. On April 3, still on the West Coast after his screen test, he made the first of these, singing "Heartbreak Hotel" and Perkins' "Blue Suede Shoes" on *The Milton Berle Show*, broadcast from the deck of the U.S.S. Hancock at the San Diego Naval Station by NBC.

Three weeks later, billed as "The Atomic-Powered Singer," he kicked off a two-week engagement at The Venus Room of The New Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas, perhaps the only misstep in his year-long march to the top. On a bill with 1930s and '40s orchestra leader (and fellow RCA Victor recording artist) Freddy Martin and comedian Shecky Greene, the Vegas crowd failed to fully appreciate the young star and his new music. Presley's time in the desert would prove well-spent, however, when he caught the performance of a lounge act named Freddie Bell & The Bell Boys (who had appeared in the



recently released film *Rock Around The Clock*). They performed a revved-up version of Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton’s “Hound Dog.” Elvis, no doubt familiar with Big Mama’s 1953 R&B smash, written by the young, white songwriters Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, filed Bell’s treatment away for future reference. In fact, he began working the number into his live set almost immediately thereafter.

Sure enough, by the time Elvis made his second, and final, appearance on *The Milton Berle Show* on June 5 “Hound Dog” was the highlight of his act. His performance of the song on that program engendered a nationwide storm of outrage, the critics lambasting his suggestive, “bump and grind” pelvic thrusts as obscene, an affront to public decency. The protests did not deter him, however, from his next scheduled TV booking, a July 1 date on *The Steve Allen Show*, which had recently been introduced by NBC to compete with CBS’ entry, now known as simply *The Ed Sullivan Show*, on Sunday nights. Allen had arranged for a manifestly uncomfortable Elvis, in white tie and tails, to sing “Hound Dog” to an actual basset hound, in top hat. The necessity of holding the dog’s attention on live television required Elvis to remain relatively immobile and the show proceeded without incident. With this lone, subdued performance, Elvis Presley enabled Steve Allen, for the first time, to surpass the long-established Ed Sullivan in the weekly ratings.

Ever since Bo Diddley’s appearance the previous November, Ed Sullivan had sworn off Rock’n’Roll. Expected to perform the current Tennessee Ernie Ford hit, “Sixteen Tons,” Diddley had instead launched into his own self-referential “Bo Diddley,” much to the consternation of Sullivan, a rigid, conservative newspaper columnist-turned TV impresario for whom surprises on live television were anathema. But with Steve Allen’s Sunday night ratings coup, it must have become clear to Sullivan that he would avoid booking the next big musical thing at his own peril. The Platters, a restrained R&B vocal group riding a wave of crossover hits, were scheduled to appear on August 12, while Sullivan initiated negotiations with the Colonel.

Elvis, meanwhile, was back in a recording studio the day after the Steve Allen show, this time at RCA in New York where he cut three songs. Two of them, “Hound Dog” and a new composition by Otis Blackwell (the writer of Little Willie John’s then-current R&B hit “Fever”) named “Don’t Be Cruel,” would comprise his next RCA Victor single and mark a turning point in his recording career. The incendiary, striptease-styled stop-time coda of “Hound Dog” that had inspired such controversy was gone, as was its rhumba-like rhythm. It was replaced with a rapid-fire intensity unlike anything he (or anyone else, for that matter) had ever recorded. As for “Don’t Be Cruel,” vocals by his backing group, The Jordanaires, were more prominent in the mix and Elvis’ lead vocal more premeditated, more self-conscious, at times approaching self-parody. “Hound Dog,” initially the best known of the two songs due



to its recent notoriety, was soon overtaken by “Don’t Be Cruel” in popularity (though both sides, ranked in tandem by *Billboard*, would become Elvis’ longest running No. 1 hits, spending eleven weeks at the top of the charts). It was the mid-tempo, smoother, more “produced” “Don’t Be Cruel” that established a style for many of the biggest hits that Elvis Presley would record in the future, from “All Shook Up” to “Stuck On You” to “Return To Sender,” not to mention the young singers who sought to supplant him. There were many fine records yet to come from Elvis Presley, but few of them would display the spontaneity and the experimentation that had made the Sun sessions so significant.

Col. Parker had struck a deal with Ed Sullivan which called for Elvis to make three appearances on Sullivan’s show during the coming months. In the first of these on September 9 he performed, in addition to the requisite “Hound Dog” and “Don’t Be Cruel,” an adaptation of the gentle 19th century ballad “Aura Lee” entitled “Love Me Tender,” which he introduced as the title song of his forthcoming movie debut. An enormous audience, estimated at 50 to 60 million, viewed the performance and advance orders for the new movie theme went through the roof, forcing RCA to release it as a single well in advance of the film’s mid-November premiere. By the time he reprised the song during his second Sullivan show performance on October 28 it was climbing the charts, headed for No. 1, and building anticipation for the movie.

Love Me Tender was not a Rock’n’Roll movie but rather a Civil War romance with Elvis in a supporting role, his four musical numbers grafted onto the dramatic story line. It was a success nonetheless and the other three films he was to make in the 1950s would incorporate music more organically into their plots. Much like *Rock Around The Clock* each recounted the rise of a young singer who, in varying degrees, resembled the real-life star of the film. *Loving You*, *Jailhouse Rock*, and *King Creole* all featured movie themes and other original songs by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, the team responsible for “Hound Dog,” and generated substantial record sales and box office receipts. Because of the elaborate production number choreographed around its title song, *Jailhouse Rock* has since been credited as a precursor of the rock video.

When Elvis made his final appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in early January 1957 he sang seven songs, among them his greatest hits of the year just ended, the newly-released single “Too Much,” and a sacred number, “(There’ll Be) Peace In The Valley (For Me).” In an additional concession to respectability, this was the performance in which he was famously shot “from the waist up,” after which Sullivan praised him as “a real decent, fine boy”—the ultimate seal of show business approval.

By now the television hagiography of Elvis Presley was getting underway. On January 30 the *Kraft Television Theater* presented *The Singing Idol* on NBC. Originally written with Elvis in mind for the



lead role, it starred Tommy Sands, who introduced the song “Teen-Age Crush” in the production. Sands, a onetime client of Col. Parker, scored a No. 2 hit with the song, then encored with a similar role in the motion picture *Sing Boy Sing*. Not to be outdone, CBS countered on March 5 with *Rock’n’Roll Rookie*, an episode of the popular sitcom *You’ll Never Get Rich* in which teenage idol “Elvin Pelvin” is drafted by the U.S. Army and finds himself under the sway of the conniving motor pool master sergeant Ernest G. Bilko, played by Phil Silvers. (Mad Magazine had already satirized “Elvis Pelvis” in its December 1956 issue.)

Decline And Fall Of Rock’n’Roll

However, by the time that *Rock’n’Roll Rookie* aired Elvis Presley had passed an actual Army physical and was awaiting his draft notice. His induction into the U.S. Army on March 24, 1958, was only the most prominent in a sequence of events that took many of the first generation of Rock’n’Roll stars out of commission. The litany is familiar by now. On October 1 of the preceding year, while on tour in Australia, Little Richard had announced that he would forsake Rock’n’Roll for religion and, in January, he entered Oakwood Theological Seminary in Huntsville, Alabama. In May, Jerry Lee Lewis’ tour of England would be consumed by scandal, then cancelled, when it was learned that the new bride who accompanied him was also his 13-year old cousin. On February 3, 1959, a small plane carrying Buddy Holly, as well as Ritchie Valens and J.P. “The Big Bopper” Richardson, crashed outside of Clear Lake, Iowa, killing all three and their pilot. In late December of that year Chuck Berry was arrested and charged with violating the Mann Act, or transporting a minor over state lines for immoral purposes, and would ultimately serve two years in prison. And four months later, while on tour of Great Britain, Eddie Cochran was killed in an automobile accident in which his friend, the expatriate Gene Vincent, was seriously injured.

Concurrently Alan Freed was encountering troubles of his own. In August of 1957 his WABC-TV, New York, teen dance show *Big Beat* was cancelled shortly after Frankie Lymon of The Teenagers was seen dancing with a white girl on the program, but it was picked up by WNEW. In May of the following year violence broke out at the Boston date on *Alan Freed’s Big Beat Spring 1958* tour and Freed was charged with anarchy and inciting a riot. Though the charges were later dropped, he was forced to resign his WINS radio position, switching to WABC in its stead. Finally, towards the end of 1959 the U.S. House of Representatives announced its intention to investigate allegations that radio station



personnel were accepting bribes in return for airplay. Freed and several other disc jockeys were swept up in the ensuing “payola” scandal. When he refused to sign a statement indicating that he had never accepted gifts or funds in return for promoting or playing records, Alan Freed was dismissed by WABC radio. And when WNEW-TV followed suit his career, and the first, great Rock’n’Roll era, was effectively over.

The Rise Of The Teen Idols

One effect of the payola scandal was to speed the ascent of the Top 40 radio format, in which the selection of which records were played was taken out of the hands of individual “personality” disk jockeys, who might seek out new sounds with which to lend their shows an air of excitement and originality, and given over to anonymous (and voiceless) programming executives, who were more inclined to play it safe musically. Now the entirety of the broadcast—news, weather, station i.d.’s, and commercials—assumed the tone and intensity of the music. The establishment of a more formal and limited play list meant the increased repetition of each individual record played, a result of which was a faster burnout and turnover of the hits and a greater need for new records to take their place. Perhaps it was inevitable that under these new circumstances those new records were made by a new kind of recording artist—the teen idol.

It is not true however, as received wisdom would have it, that the teen idol was a plot hatched by the major record companies (RCA-Victor, Columbia, Decca, Capitol) to reclaim the music business from the independent labels (Specialty, Sun, Atlantic, Imperial, Chess et al) where most of the great first generation stars of Rock’n’Roll had recorded (though both Bill Haley and Elvis Presley hadn’t broken through nationally until joining the majors). Virtually all of the most successful teen idols were developed by independent labels too, RCA’s Neil Sedaka being the exception that proves the rule.

There was no shortage of would-be Rock’n’Roll stars waiting in the wings to supplant the fallen first generation. 16-year old Ricky Nelson was already a veteran radio and television actor, having appeared, as himself, with his older brother David on their parents’ show, *The Adventures Of Ozzie And Harriet*, since 1949 when, on April 10, 1957, he sang his first single, a rather wooden version of Fats Domino’s “I’m Walkin’,” on the program. Taking note of the positive reaction to this performance, his father Ozzie, a former bandleader (Harriet had been his band’s vocalist), made sure to regularly feature his son’s latest recording in a set piece to close the show. With a stellar band behind him, featuring either Joe



Maphis or James Burton on guitar, and excellent professional songwriters such as Jerry Fuller, Baker Knight, and the Burnette brothers, Dorsey and Johnny, supplying his material, Ricky Nelson's Imperial recordings, among them "Travelin' Man," "Believe What You Say" and "Lonesome Town," would improve greatly and he would enjoy a long run of commercial success.

The positive impact that television exposure had on the sales of records by Elvis Presley and, now, Ricky Nelson was not lost on the music industry's movers and shakers. New stars like The Everly Brothers and Sam Cooke began to show up with greater frequency on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Dick Clark's *American Bandstand* had spawned a host of emulators in cities across the United States. Now Clark himself, on February 15, 1958, inaugurated a weekly Rock'n'Roll showcase, *The Dick Clark Show*, broadcast nationally over the ABC network on Saturday nights from The Little Theater in New York City, presenting the hottest hits of the day, performed by the artists who had recorded them. This was in marked contrast to the format of an earlier popular music series, *Your Hit Parade*, in which a regular cast of vocalists performed other artist's hits. And Rock'n'Roll movies continued apace, among them during this period *Mister Rock And Roll*, *Jamboree*, and *The Big Beat* in 1957, and *Go Johnny Go* in 1958. *Jamboree* managed to include cameo appearances by no fewer than 19 disk jockeys, including Dick Clark, Joe Smith from Boston, Milt Grant from Washington, D.C., Robin Seymour from Detroit, Zenas Sears from Atlanta, and Jocko Henderson (in outlandish "spaceman" garb) from New York City.

There was a need for young, good-looking, telegenic new stars to fill the pipeline and the music business went to work creating them. The Frank Sinatra of the 1940s bobby sox era provided one early model, but as a big band singer he had sung the same "Hit Parade" songs as all the other adult big band singers. Pat Boone was a better template for the new age. Marketed as the Ivy League (he attended Columbia University) alternative to Elvis Presley in the mid-1950s, his trademark white buck shoes were perhaps emblematic of his specialty—recording pale Pop cover versions of the emerging R&B hits of the day for Dot Records of Nashville. His take on the likes of Fats Domino, Little Richard, The Flamingos, The El Dorados and Ivory Joe Hunter, while sometimes risible in retrospect, served to introduce a vast audience to songs it might not otherwise have heard at that time. When the originators of that music began to overtake the cover versions of their hits, Boone retreated to recording movie themes and reviving hit ballads of the pre-Rock'n'Roll era, having made his contribution to the emergence of the new music.

Some of the new pop stars had more authentic talent. Dion DiMucci came up from the New York City streets, fronting his group Dion and The Belmonts on the doo-wop classic "I Wonder Why" in 1958. Subsequent hits for Laurie Records such as "A Teenager In Love" and "Lonely Teenager" capitalized on



his ability to project youthful frustration and alienation; later he would adopt a more macho persona on solo hits like “Runaround Sue” and “The Wanderer.” In either guise he was completely credible, his primary attribute being a keening vocal approach which he would later characterize as the “Bronx blues.”

Where Dion resisted the natural inclination of his managers to emulate Sinatra and establish him as a nightclub entertainer, Bobby Darin leaped at the chance. Born Walden Robert Cassotto, Darin, a Bronx contemporary of Dion, also broke through in 1958 with the novelty rocker “Splish Splash,” then followed it up with the teen anthems “Queen Of The Hop” and “Dream Lover” on Atco Records. Within a year however, he was topping the charts with such adult fare as “Mack The Knife” (written by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht for their *The Threepenny Opera* in 1928) and “Beyond The Sea” (adapted from the 1945 French chanson “La Mer” by Charles Trenet), setting the pattern for a restless career that saw him conquer Las Vegas and the movies (even capturing an Academy Award nomination) and tackle country, folk, and R&B too, until his death from heart disease at 37 in 1973.

Then there was Neil Sedaka. The Brooklyn-born Sedaka was a Julliard-trained pianist. He teamed with his high school classmate Howard Greenfield to pen songs for Connie Francis, Clyde McPhatter, LaVern Baker and others, but ultimately, and most successfully, for himself—among them “Happy Birthday Sweet Sixteen,” “Calendar Girl” and “Breaking Up Is Hard To Do.” Sedaka and Greenfield were charter members of the “Brill Building” stable of writers, including Gerry Goffin and Carole King, and Barry Mann and Cynthia Weill, that was assembled by music publisher Don Kirschner, an early collaborator of Bobby Darin. Kirschner’s Aldon Music writers generated many of the hits recorded during this period.

Bobby Vee was one teen idol who benefited from the material supplied by Kirschner’s crew, principally Goffin and King. Born Robert Velline in Fargo, North Dakota, he was leading a Rock’n’Roll combo named The Shadows when summoned to replace Buddy Holly at the concert Holly was booked to play the night after the plane crash that took his life. Though his vocals resembled Holly’s (and he would later record with Holly’s band, The Crickets) the records he made with producer Snuff Garrett for Liberty Records in Hollywood resembled such softer Holly hits as “Everyday” and “It Doesn’t Matter Anymore” more so than they did the harder rocking “That’ll Be The Day” and “Oh, Boy!” Among them were such Aldon chart-toppers as “Take Good Care Of Baby,” “Run To Him,” “Sharing You” and “Walkin’ With My Angel.”

Snuff Garrett produced records by Johnny Burnette for Liberty at the same time he was working with Bobby Vee. Burnette, a Memphis contemporary of Elvis Presley, had formed one of the earliest



rockabilly bands in the mid-1950s, The Rock'n'Roll Trio, with his older brother Dorsey and guitarist Paul Burlison. Though never a particularly successful recording act in its day, the threesome somehow managed to land an appearance in the film *Rock, Rock, Rock*, and their rendition of R&B bandleader Tiny Bradshaw's "The Train Kept A-Rollin'" inspired versions by The Yardbirds in the 1960s and Aerosmith in the 1970s, its influence felt to his day. By the late 1950s both Burnette brothers were ensconced in Los Angeles, writing hit songs for Ricky Nelson and attempting to launch careers as solo artists. Johnny was the more successful of the two, scoring with such favorites as "Dreamin'," "You're Sixteen" and "God, Country And My Baby" until his 1964 death in a boating accident at the age of 30.

Not all the new breed of pop star were natural born New Yorkers (Dion, Darin, Sedaka) or transplanted Angelenos (Vee, Burnette). Paul Anka, who hailed from Ottawa, Canada, wasn't quite 16-years old when his self-penned "Diana" entered the charts, ultimately ascending to the No. 1 position in both the Pop and R&B fields in 1957. "Diana," its puerile lyric set to a sort of cha cha beat, was soon followed by a series of lachrymose top 10 ballads on ABC-Paramount like "Lonely Boy," "Put Your Head On My Shoulder" and "Puppy Love," all again written by Anka himself. He would later achieve a measure of respectability as the lyricist of "My Way" by Frank Sinatra and the composer of the theme music for Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* and enjoy renewed popularity as a Pop vocalist in the 1970s with such hits as "You're Having My Baby" and "Times Of Your Life."

Jimmy Clanton was from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and recorded for Ace Records of Jackson, Mississippi utilizing the cream of New Orleans' session players. His first hit, "Just A Dream," was launched by an appearance on *American Bandstand* and exhibited a modicum of the swampy sound that characterized the Louisiana music of that time, but later hits like "Venus In Blue Jeans" and "Go, Jimmy, Go" (its title inspired by the Rock'n'Roll movie in which he had starred, *Go Johnny Go*) revealed very little of his musical pedigree.

The teen idols of the late 1950s and early 1960s were primarily male, intended to appeal to the teenage girls who raced home from school every afternoon so as not to miss even one of *American Bandstand's* ninety minutes. There were many who landed a few hits, then faded away—names like Ral Donner ("The Girl Of My Best Friend"), Terry Stafford (Suspicion"), Johnny Tillotson ("Poetry In Motion"), Mike Clifford ("Close To Cathy"), Johnny Restivo ("The Shape I'm In"), and Troy Shondell ("This Time"). Both Donner and Stafford, in fact, scored with songs originally recorded by Elvis Presley that RCA Victor hadn't seen fit to release as singles. Relatively few attempts were made to promote a female equivalent. RCA had tried, in 1956, with Janis Martin who was actually marketed as "the female Elvis" but, in spite of a handful of good records, she failed to catch on. JoAnn Campbell, the "Blonde



Bombshell,” never quite managed to make a record that lived up to her sobriquet. Connie Francis and Brenda Lee each had an impressive list of hits to their credit but their success was never based on, or limited to, their teen appeal.

Annette Funicello was perhaps as close a thing to a female teen idol as there was during this period. A star of Walt Disney’s *Mickey Mouse Club* (which conveniently followed *American Bandstand* on ABC-TV every afternoon) since the age of 12, Annette had grown up on TV (much like Ricky Nelson before her) and was 16-years old in 1959 when Disney decided to take advantage of her television popularity (and her maturing physique) by recording her on their Vista label. A few of her singles, “Tall Paul,” “First Name Initial” and “O Dio Mio,” sold well, but her career as a record-seller was short-lived, overtaken by her starring roles in a string of teenage “Beach Party” movies in the 1960s.

Still, Annette’s success as a recording artist was sufficient enough to inspire other actors to take the plunge. Popular stars like Ed “Kookie” Byrnes of *77 Sunset Strip*, Connie Stevens of *Hawaiian Eye*, Johnny Crawford of *The Rifleman*, *The Donna Reed Show*’s Shelley Fabares and Paul Petersen, and James Darren of the “Gidget” movies all had top 10 hits during the next few years. The Warner Bros. Records label was, in fact, established in the late 1950s to capitalize on the appeal of its film and television stars like Byrnes and Stevens. Columbia Pictures followed suit with its own Colpix label, for which Fabares, Petersen and Darren recorded.

The Philadelphia Story

When he took command of *Bandstand* in 1956 Dick Clark knew very little about Rock’n’Roll and the music business in general. The radio show he had inherited from Bob Horn had been a Pop music show and continued to be during his time as host. But he was a quick study. When *American Bandstand* went national the following year he set his sights on establishing himself at the center of a business empire based in Philadelphia. Before long he was involved in local record labels, pressing plants, music publishing, talent management, merchandising, and tour promotion. The local music business, in turn, seized the opportunities afforded it by its new-found proximity to a daily, national showcase for its talent and product. The potential for conflict of interest was inescapable.



Dick Clark had first met Bernie Lowe years earlier when Lowe served as music director of Paul Whiteman's *TV-Teen Club*. Lowe had subsequently joined with a songwriting partner, Kal Mann, to found a record company, Cameo Records; the duo would later write one of Elvis Presley's post-"Don't Be Cruel" hits, the very similar "(Let Me Be Your) Teddy Bear." The Cameo label's first five singles were met with indifference but the sixth, "Butterfly" by Charlie Gracie of south Philadelphia (who had earlier appeared on *TV-Teen Club*), went all the way to No. 1, thanks in no small part to its regular exposure on *Bandstand*. It was revealed a few years later that, in order to stave off competition from a cover version by Andy Williams, Lowe had offered Dick Clark a percentage of the song's publishing royalties. Clark's response to this offer is unclear. What is clear is that the record, and Gracie himself, were promoted heavily by Clark, both on *Bandstand* and in conversations with disc jockeys around the country in which its (legitimate) local success was touted.

"Butterfly" and its follow-up single, "Fabulous" (each one, like "Teddy Bear," written by Mann and Lowe in a style highly reminiscent of "Don't Be Cruel") established Cameo Records as a force to be reckoned with, and for the next ten years the hits kept coming. The label had success with one-offs like "Silhouettes" by The Rays and "Dinner With Drac" by John Zacherle-- "The Cool Ghoul," a Philadelphia television personality--and a string of dance records such as "The Bristol Stomp" by The Dovells, "Mashed Potato Time" by Dee Dee Sharp, and "The Wah-Watusi" by The Orlons (each of which reached No. 2 on the national charts). This mania for dance music reached its apex in a succession of singles on Cameo's sister label, Parkway Records, by Philadelphia's own Chubby Checker (born Ernest Evans, his new name was inspired by Fats Domino). Starting with a cover of Hank Ballard's "The Twist" (still the only single to climb to the No. 1 position on the charts twice, in 1960 and 1961), Checker scored with "The Hucklebuck," "Pony Time," "Let's Twist Again," "The Fly," "Slow Twistin'," "Limbo Rock," "Popeye The Hitchhiker" and "Let's Limbo Some More" over the course of the next three years, each of them demonstrated to a national viewing audience by *American Bandstand*'s teenage dancers.

In the midst of the dance craze Chubby Checker took a breather to record a revival of the 1950s seasonal favorite "Jingle Bell Rock" in duet with Cameo's entry in the teen idol sweepstakes, Bobby Rydell. Rydell, who as Robert Ridarelli was yet another veteran of *TV-Teen Club*, signed to the label at age 16. His first couple of releases in early 1959 were doo wop-inflected ballads that failed to make much of an impression. But by later that same year Mann and Lowe, in collaboration with their talented A&R man Dave Appell, had confected a setting in which Rydell could flourish. Where Chuck Berry had commented on teenage life and styles from the vantage point of a bemused, somewhat older observer, Rydell would deliver first-hand reports from the scene by an insider, a participant. In songs like "Kissin'



Time,” “I Dig Girls,” “Wild One” and “Swingin’ School” his breezy vocals were accompanied by a rocking band, blaring horns, and a chanting female chorus. Of course, unlike Berry he didn’t write his own material and when this first rush of hit records had run its course, Rydell reverted to his more natural métier, reviving earlier Dean Martin hits like “Volare” and “Sway,” and a version of “That Old Black Magic” that was equal parts New Orleans and Sammy Davis Jr. All the while his career was boosted by frequent guest shots on *American Bandstand*. He was also featured in *Bye Bye Birdie*, the film adaptation of a Broadway musical that had lampooned the Elvis phenomenon.

Prior to signing with Cameo Records, Bobby Rydell was the drummer in a Philadelphia dance band, Rocco and The Saints, whose trumpet player was one Francis Avallone. Avallone, or Frankie Avalon as he preferred to be known, urged local songwriter-record producers Bob Marcucci and Peter DeAngelis to audition the band’s lead singer. But Marcucci and DeAngelis found Avalon, still one more graduate of *TV-Teen Club*, to be the more promising prospect and persuaded him to join their fledgling Chancellor Records label. His first few singles failed to connect with record buyers but after appearances in the Rock’n’Roll movie *Jamboree* (both Bob Marcucci and Dick Clark were investors) and on *Bandstand*, Frankie Avalon hit paydirt with “De De Dinah” in early 1958. Both it and his next hit, “Ginger Bread,” featured his pinched, nasal vocals and were precursors of the “bubblegum” music that was to come a decade later. It was a style that would not wear well and Avalon and his producers wisely transitioned to a softer sound, his sometimes flat singing voice enveloped by gauzy backing vocals in No. 1 hits like “Venus” and “Why.” He would go on to co-star with Annette in the 1960s’ *Beach Party* movies once his time as a hitmaker was up.

Frankie Avalon’s vocals may have been weak but, by all accounts, his label mate Fabian couldn’t really sing at all. Fabiano Forte was discovered at 14 by Bob Marcucci on the streets of the same south Philadelphia neighborhood from which, Eddie Fisher, Charlie Gracie, Bobby Rydell, Frankie Avalon, and Marcucci himself had all emerged. Convinced that Fabian had the look of a star, Marcucci was not dissuaded by either his young discovery’s reluctance or inability to sing and set about to make him a teen idol. As was the case with Frankie Avalon, Fabian’s first couple of Chancellor singles failed to generate any response, but audience reaction to his appearances on *American Bandstand* and *The Dick Clark Show* was so strong that Marcucci persevered, continuing his pursuit of the right vehicle with which to establish his protégé. That vehicle would present itself in the form of a song written by the Brill Building team of Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman, “I’m A Man.” Introduced by Fabian on *American Bandstand* it became his first hit record, followed by another, better, Pomus-Schuman composition “Turn Me Loose,” which became a bigger hit still. Later, the same duo contributed yet another top 10 hit, “Hound Dog



Man,” the title song of Fabian’s screen debut. Its title might have offered some clue as to the inspiration for Pomus and Schuman’s songs. The singer they were likely originally written for was stationed in Germany completing his stint in the U.S. Army at the time. Elvis Presley would record many fine Pomus-Schuman songs in the years immediately following his discharge in 1960, including “Little Sister” and “(Marie’s The Name) His Latest Flame” (the two sides of his best two-sided single since “Hound Dog” and “Don’t Be Cruel”); Fabian’s string of hits would quickly come to a conclusion during the same period of time.

The End Of The Era

So it was that the decade that saw Bill Haley and His Comets surpass the likes of Eddie Fisher in popularity and Elvis Presley set the standard for the sound and the style of a Rock’n’Roll star, came to an end. “Why” by Frankie Avalon was ranked No. 1 on the national charts in the last week of 1959. Paul Anka (“It’s Time To Cry”), Bobby Darin (“Mack The Knife”), and Fabian (“Hound Dog Man”) were in the top 10 too, along with Marty Robbins, “Miss” Toni Fisher, Guy Mitchell, Connie Francis, and Steve Lawrence. There was nary a Rock’n’Roll record in the lot except for Freddy Cannon’s contrived, stilted update of Paul Whiteman’s 1923 chestnut “Way Down Yonder In New Orleans” (from yet another Philadelphia label, Swan Records—Dick Clark, proprietor), which bore only a passing resemblance to the vital music of the recent past. And not a single slot in the top 10 was filled by an African-American artist. Only a year earlier there had been three—The Platters, Fats Domino, and Clyde McPhatter.

It was the end of an era. The integration of the airwaves that had accompanied, and accelerated, the rise of Rock’n’Roll had slowed. The same media that had introduced the new music and the new look to a mass audience now served up a homogenized, leavened version of the sound and style that had so electrified teenagers just a few years before.

Haley, with his spit curl and gaudy dinner jackets, had been 30-years of age when “Rock Around The Clock” reached the top of the charts. By the end of the decade his hits had long since stopped (though “Rock Around The Clock” would return to the charts once more, in 1974, thanks to its use in George Lucas’ blockbuster film *American Graffiti* and as the theme for the hit ABC-TV sitcom *Happy Days*). Elvis’ most successful records in the years immediately following his Army service would be ballads like



“Are You Lonesome To-night?” and “Can’t Help Falling In Love” and a couple of adapted Italian songs, “It’s Now Or Never” (“O Sole Mio”) and “Surrender” (“Come Back To Sorrento”).

By the late 1950s and on into the early 1960s image was all-important. The teen idols of the day were modeled after Elvis with their dark hair (Elvis had early-on dyed his sandy brown hair an inky bluish-black) and Italianate good looks. But even Elvis now trimmed his sideburns and dressed more conservatively. The movies he made in the 1960s played it safe too, their formulaic and interchangeable scripts placing him in a variety of scenic locales—Hawaii, Las Vegas, Acapulco, a carnival, a world’s fair—with music that only rarely rose above the banal.

In the aftermath of the payola scandal Dick Clark had been compelled to abandon his conflicting extracurricular music business activities in order to concentrate on *American Bandstand* as well as the filming of his first starring role in a motion picture, *Because They’re Young*. A high school drama (shades of *Blackboard Jungle*) with Clark playing an earnest, altruistic young member of the faculty, the film included James Darren and Duane Eddy in cameo roles. Eddy enjoyed the biggest hit of his career, in 1960, with an instrumental version of the movie’s theme on the Philadelphia-based Jamie Records label.

But the Rock’n’Roll movie had run its course by 1960, only momentarily revived when the twist craze inspired a couple of Chubby Checker vehicles, *Twist Around The Clock* in 1961 and *Don’t Knock The Twist* the following year. Each of the Twist movies was patterned very much after its Bill Haley namesake. Dion was featured in *Twist Around The Clock* but, more often than not, the teen idols made movies that called on them solely to act, sometimes well like Bobby Darin in *Captain Newman, MD* and sometimes less so like Paul Anka in *The Longest Day*, or only incidentally to sing, as Ricky Nelson did in *Rio Bravo*.

The Shape Of Things To Come

Even as the energy and excitement of 1950s Rock’n’Roll was dissipating, forces were gathering that would revitalize the music and propel it through the next decade. In 1959, a young African-American in Detroit named Berry Gordy, who had written a string of hits for singer Jackie Wilson, founded Motown Records, which he proclaimed the “Sound of Young America.” Just two months into 1960, “Money (That’s What I Want)” by Barrett Strong on Gordy’s Anna label debuted on the Pop charts, kicking off his phenomenal, decade-long run of crossover success with such acts as Mary Wells, The Miracles, Marvin



Gaye, The Temptations, The Supremes, The Four Tops, Stevie Wonder. The Jackson 5, and many others—all of them African-American.

At about the same time a southern counterpart that came to be known as Stax Records, specializing in the harder-edged, gospel-based “soul” sound of Otis Redding, Sam & Dave, Memphis disc jockey Rufus Thomas and his daughter Carla, Eddie Floyd, Booker T. & The MG’s, and William Bell was formed by Jim Stewart and his sister Estelle Axton in Memphis. Sometime in early 1961, a Minnesota-born would-be folksinger calling himself Bob Dylan found his way to New York City, insinuating himself into the emerging Greenwich Village scene. Also in 1961, after serving an apprenticeship producing singles by Connie Francis, Gene Pitney, Ray Peterson, and Curtis Lee, Phil Spector established the Philles Records label, and with it his “Wall of Sound.” In 1961 too, Brian Wilson began to chronicle the California teen lifestyle of surf, cars, and girls in the music of The Beach Boys. And in June of 1962 a band that had been honing its skills in far-away Liverpool and Hamburg recorded its first single, “Love Me Do,” in London, England. Within two years The Beatles would make their American television debut on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and star in the film *A Hard Day’s Night*. *Where The Action Is*, *Shindig* and *Hullabaloo*, *The T.A.M.I. Show*, *Don’t Look Back*, *The Monkees*, *Monterrey Pop* and *Woodstock*, *Soul Train*, and FM free-form radio would all follow in the years to come.

During the 1950s a means had been established by which popular music could reach its intended audience. When, in the course of that decade, as television supplanted radio as the focal point of family entertainment, radio was, in turn, forced to abandon its more general approach to programming and attempt to identify and target more specific groups of listeners. It found, in a new style of music, Rock’n’Roll, that had particular appeal to an emerging consumer class, the teenager, the content and format with which it could uniquely thrive. The motion picture business, fearing the threat of television as well, would also capitalize on this new music for a time. And if you somehow managed to miss it on the radio or at the movies, television would deliver Rock’n’Roll directly to your home every weekday afternoon, and sometimes on weekend evenings, too.

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Lieber, Marvin, to Sam C. Phillips, September 24, 1954. Courtesy of Pete Howard.

Phillips, Sam C., to Marvin Lieber, August 10, 1954. Courtesy of Pete Howard