

Teen Idols of the Late 1950s



Dion, *Hi-Teen Magazine*

Rock and Roll evolved from Rhythm and Blues, a sound developed by African-American musicians that by the early 1950s had slowly begun to reach a new audience in young white teenagers. By nature of its association with blackness, many white American adults feared that Rock and Roll was a corrupting influence on their children, promoting socializing between races, juvenile delinquency, even premarital sex.

Music was not the only thing that disturbed conservative grown-ups. In August 1957, pioneer Rock and Roll disc jockey Alan Freed's WABC-TV teen dance show *Big Beat* was cancelled after African-American artist Frankie Lymon was seen dancing with a white girl on the program. Less than a year later, at the Boston date of his *Big Beat Spring 1958* tour, Freed was charged with anarchy and inciting the youths in attendance to riot, though the charges were later dropped.

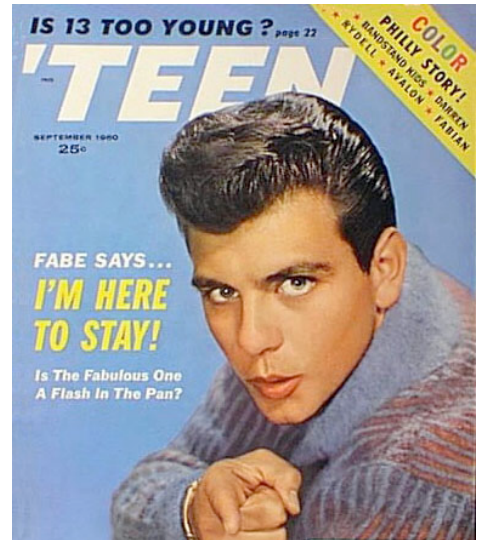
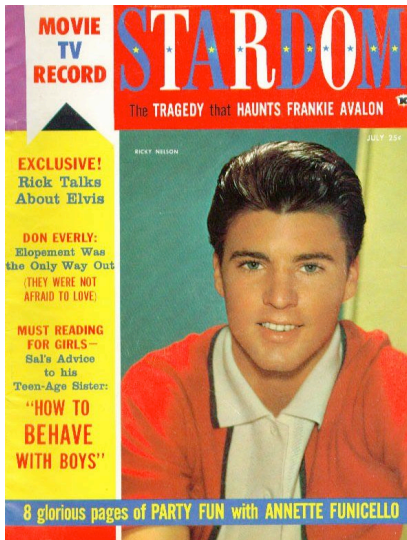
While Freed battled accusations of encouraging miscegenation and delinquent behavior to his teenage audience, many of the early Rock and Roll stars began to disappear from the charts. Between 1957 and 1960, Little Richard gave up secular music for a life in the ministry, Elvis Presley enlisted in the Army, and scandals disrupted the careers of both Jerry Lee Lewis and Chuck Berry. The absence of these original crossover artists created a vacuum that necessitated a new class of performers—the so-called “teen idols”—who were positioned to broaden the teenage Rock and Roll audience while also alleviating adult anxieties over the potential corruption of their children.

These idols—mainly white, mainly male—performed a version of Rock and Roll that was in synch with mainstream American culture of the day. Performers including Frankie Avalon, Pat Boone, Fabian, Connie Francis, Annette Funicello, Ricky Nelson, and Dion, among many others, generally sported a neat, non-threatening appearance, often singing in a Pop style associated as much with Frank Sinatra as it was with Elvis Presley. They seemed to be the kind of earnest young men any father would be happy to have his own daughter go out on a date with, or the kind of young women a son would aspire to marry. Their clean-cut good looks meant that they would play well on television, which was rapidly replacing the radio as the main source of family entertainment.

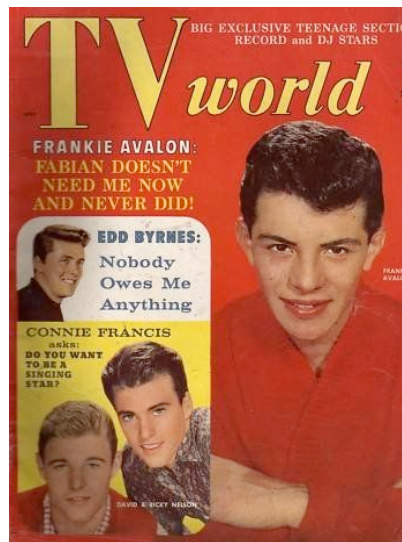
The teen idols brought Rock and Roll where controversial performers like Little Richard or Jerry Lee Lewis could not, at least in the mid-1950s, and in so doing helped ease this fringe culture into the mainstream, securing an ever-expanding fan base for popular music. While many of the idols would never break free of their nonthreatening images, performers including Dion and Ricky Nelson pushed against the boundaries of their early public personas as their careers matured, with varying degrees of success.



The following images are taken from a variety of popular teen-focused magazines from the late 1950s and early 1960s. Take a few minutes to study these magazine covers and discuss the questions below.



Left to Right: Ricky Nelson, *Movie-TV-Record Stardom* (1959); Annette Funicello, *'Teen* (1960); Fabian, *'Teen* (1960)



Left to Right: Pat Boone, *'Teen* (1958); Frankie Avalon, *TV World* (1959); Connie Francis, *TV Radio Mirror* (1961)

Discussion Questions

- 1) How would you describe these “idols”? What do they have in common?
- 2) What characteristics do you think made them popular and acceptable in the late 1950s?
- 3) Beyond teen magazines, what evidence can you find on these covers of other ways these idols were marketed at the time? What does this suggest about the level of popularity for the idols?
- 4) Who are some examples of contemporary celebrities who might be classified as “teen idols”? List a few responses on the board.