

Teen Idols of the Late 1950s



Here's Little Richard, Specialty Records, 1957



Dion, Hi-Teen Magazine, 1962

Rock and Roll evolved from Rhythm and Blues, a sound developed by African-American musicians that by the early 1950s had begun to reach a new audience among young white teenagers. By nature of its association with black America, there were those who feared that Rock and Roll was a corrupting influence on American youth, promoting socializing between races and juvenile delinquency.

By mid-decade, pioneer jockey Alan Freed, the man who first attached the term "Rock and Roll" to the latest R&B recordings, was encountering troubles of his own. In August 1957, Freed's ABC teen dance show *Big Beat* was cancelled after African-American artist Frankie Lyman was seen dancing with a white girl on the program, an image that outraged the network's southern affiliates. 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.

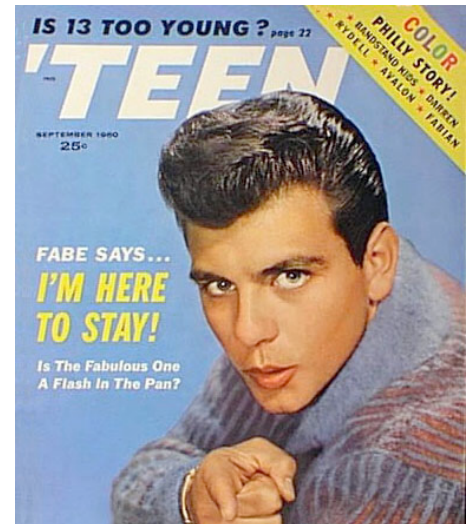
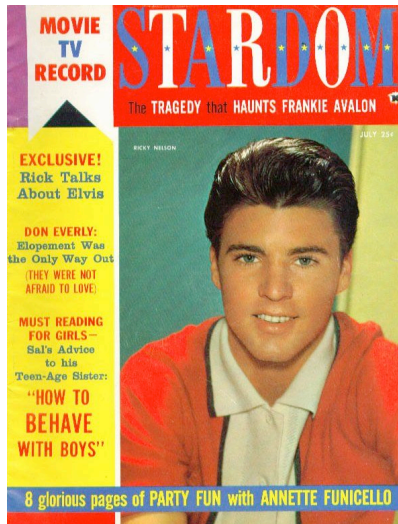
While Freed battled accusations of encouraging miscegenation and delinquent behavior, many of the early Rock and Roll stars coincidentally began to disappear from the charts. Between 1957 and 1960, Little Richard (pictured above, left) gave up secular music for a life in the ministry, Elvis Presley enlisted 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 made room for 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.

The idols—mainly white, mainly male—performed a version of Rock and Roll that was in sync with the mainstream American culture of the day. Unlike the characters portrayed in *The Wild One*, artists including Dion (pictured above, right), Frankie Avalon, and Annette Funicello 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. The idols seemed to be the kind of earnest young men with whom any father would be happy to have his own daughter go out, or the kind of young women a mother would want her son 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.

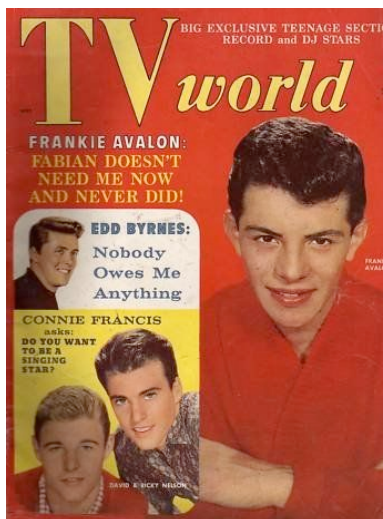
The teen idols brought Rock and Roll where controversial performers like Little Richard or Jerry Lee Lewis could not, at least in the late-1950s, and in so doing helped ease this fringe culture into the mainstream, securing an ever-expanding fan base for popular music. While many of the idols would never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

The summary above is excerpted from the Dion and the Teen Idols lesson overview.

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? How are they different from the image of Little Richard at the top of the handout?
- 2) What characteristics do you think made them popular and acceptable in the late 1950s?
- 3) What evidence can you find on these magazine covers of other ways the idols were marketed? What does this suggest about the popularity of the idols?
- 4) Who are some examples of contemporary celebrities who might be classified as "teen idols"? List a few responses on the board.