

Rock

Introductory Essay

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The music we know as rock and roll emerged in the mid 1950s, although its advent had been on the horizon for at least a decade. A quarter of the American population moved during World War II, and that brought southern, rural, sacred and secular traditions into new contact with urban based music and audiences. The product of many regional musical scenes and independent record labels, rock and roll emerged in Memphis, Los Angeles, Shreveport, New York, Detroit, Baltimore, and dozens of other cities. It was, in historian Charlie Gillett's words, the Sound of the City.

Rock and roll drew on many different styles. Combining the boogie woogie rhythms of R&B, the hillbilly twang of country, the fervor of gospel and the moans of the blues, the new mongrel music excited a worldwide generation of young listeners, while upsetting established social, cultural and musical authorities. The charisma and musical bravado of early rock and roll heroes such as Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry and Little Richard inspired fans and young musicians alike. With the maturing of an unprecedentedly vast and affluent teenage audience, rock and roll music became the sound of young America and soon spread around the world.

It is difficult today to understand the bitter criticism the new music generated. The popular music establishment, anchored in the lucrative venues of Hollywood and Broadway, saw the challenge as both aesthetic and economic. Their spokesmen dismissed the music for its supposed simplicity and crudity; eventually they went so far as to charge, falsely, that rock and roll dominated their airwaves because promoters bribed disc jockeys. Radio stations in turn often refused to play the new music, claiming that its lyrics promoted sex and delinquency. Pallid "cover" versions by mainstream artists copied rock and roll hit songs, while draining them of their musical vitality, energy, and above all, their overt indebtedness to black musical traditions. Moral authorities, black and white, were quick to condemn the music for its supposed sexual references, and they targeted key performers from Elvis Presley to Fats Domino for censorship or ridicule. Finally, columnists, critics, educators and police all feared the overt racial mixing of not only the music, but its audiences. At a time when American race relations were severely tested by massive white Southern resistance to integration, and northern dismissal of black rights, rock and roll remade integration in a cultural form. Sexual, working class and multi-racial, rock and roll transgressed the most fiercely guarded social boundaries of the time.

Within weeks of the national debuts of Bill Haley, Little Richard and Elvis Presley in the 1950s, rock and roll was traveling around the world's airwaves. By the early 1960s, the world had brought its musical response back to the U.S. The Beatles, working class Britons reared on American rock and roll, conquered U.S. and world audiences with their own innovations on rock and a distinctive sense of visual style. Mixing rock and roll, country and R&B in with their own English roots, The Beatles opened the doors to an international migration of bands from the U.K. and elsewhere. They rekindled an appreciation for the music in the U.S. that in turn inspired musicians and listeners in this country.

Among these were folk musicians who had previously shunned commercially driven “pop” music like rock and roll in favor of more ‘authentic’ traditional songs that emanated from American rural life. The folk revival had brought thousands of young people, most of them educated and middle-class, to seek out the sounds of an earlier America that had flourished before the affluent postwar years. Folk music hero Bob Dylan, already a composer as well as troubadour, but also an acolyte of rock and roll, appeared at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival sporting an electric guitar and a loud back-up band. Many declared him a traitor to folk music’s dedication to tradition, history and authenticity. But millions more understood that rock and roll had a new sound that was here to stay.

Inspired by both Dylan and the Beatles, sounds of the city became sounds of the suburbs, as thousands of musical groups plugged in and began writing their own songs. Plugging in gave these musicians the means to communicate easily and powerfully, and guitar driven sounds would dominate American pop for the next two decades. Just as importantly, writing their own material enabled groups to address a range of subjects that had largely been taboo, including politics, social inequality, alienation from American life, personal identity, and the Viet Nam war. In the 1950s, rock and roll sound and style had challenged cultural authority. The rock music of the 1960s often challenged political authority directly and unambiguously.

By the late 1960s, rock music was the accepted musical vocabulary of young people world wide. Rock accompanied and often gave shape to the dissenting and counter-cultural movements that engulfed the world. In the United States, rock music could no longer ignore social conditions, and even musicians who had largely steered clear of commentary were compelled at the least to consider politics as a subject for their work. At the same time the counter-cultural embrace of rock music screened over the deep fissures that were becoming clear in American life. The riots of 1968 revealed a society fundamentally divided over war, race, and equality, and music both engaged and reflected those conflicts. Rock music was forever linked to the ferment of social change and widespread dissent of all generations against American actions and social conditions that violated the nation’s professed beliefs.

Rock musicians not only addressed contemporary events, they pushed the conventional musical boundaries. Led by the Beatles and the Beach Boys, artists experimented with complex instrumentations, elaborate arrangements, and ambitious compositions. By 1969 rock music often featured symphonic orchestras along with electric guitars and tambourines. Multi-track recording meant that musicians could develop densely layered performances unlikely to be duplicated live. Recording and performance became separate styles of rock music.

At the decade’s end, rock music was no longer confined to top 40 radio and short performances. Extended songs, high decibel distortion and spectacular interactions between performers and large crowds were the norm. Beginning with Monterey Pop in 1967, music festivals that featured numerous acts drew thousands to partake as much in the communal atmosphere as the music. The Woodstock International Festival in 1969 drew over 100,000 for three days, featuring acts from folk rockers Crosby Stills and Nash to pyrotechnic guitarist Jimi Hendrix, whose searing version of the “Star Spangled Banner” was branded into national consciousness.

Since 1970 rock music has spawned numerous styles and spin off genres: punk, metal, new wave, and grunge are only the most widely known. While rock no longer dominates popular music, the styles of

the late 1960s still attract the ears of listeners born long after that time. The sheer range of talent, the experimental exuberance and the utopian excitement of rock defines the music of that period, and to this day its sensibility shapes the music we call rock and roll.

Humanities Themes

Rock and roll, folk and authenticity. The debates among folk and rock and roll artists and audiences centered on artistic authenticity. Folk revivalists fought the modern sounds of the electric guitar because they associated that instrument with pop music that was too commercial to be traditional, and too contemporary to be historic.

Artistic freedom and new technologies. For those musicians who did plug in, the electric granted them liberation from playing only in one prescribed manner and allowed them a much wider array of sounds and tonal possibilities than traditional acoustic instruments. It also enabled them to pursue their own compositions instead of simply interpreting the heritage of the past.

Rock and roll and diversity. Rock and roll offered outlets for a wide array of performers from vastly different and disparate social backgrounds. More than even jazz or blues, rock and roll offered men AND women, black, white and Latino members of the working class, stardom without modifying their identities.

Rock and roll and social hopes. One strong strain of rock and roll music emphasizes social mobility, consumer and material pleasure, and community democracy.

Rock and roll as a site of racial and social interaction. The make up of rock and roll audiences and conditions of package tours of rock and performers, and the listening among radio audiences all promoted racial and social integration.

Rock and roll as challenge to cultural authority. The emphasis on unrestrained expression, dance, the relative simplicity of the music and its emphasis on sexuality all made rock and roll a threat to standards of musical respectability and cultural decorum.

Discussion Points

1. Why were those in the folk music revival of the 1960's so invested in the concepts of musical purity and authenticity? How did they measure the authentic? Could electric rock and roll be authentic as well?
2. Bob Dylan is often considered the defining artist of his generation. Do you agree? What lasting changes did his music, his lyrics and his attitude have on the history of rock? Can you think of any current musicians whose work is indebted to his?

3. Why did rock and roll pose such a threat to middle class propriety in its first few decades? What were the greatest threats perceived by the opponents of rock and roll? Who defended the music or the musicians?
4. Discuss the southern influence on American life as expressed in the national and then world wide acceptance of rock and roll.
5. Some musicians have claimed that rock and roll did as much for civil rights as many politicians. Why would they make such a claim, and why would it be true?
6. Rock and roll has often been dismissed as juvenile music, fit only for immature teens. What do you think about this comment? Did the music's history ever disprove such charges?
7. How would you assess the proposition that rock and roll's most memorable innovation was not the music nor any given star, but the creation of a willing teen mass media audience?
8. Do contemporary adult anxieties over hip hop, or other forms of popular culture, replay the conflicts of the rock and roll era?