ROCKIN' IN TIME
A Social History of Rock-and-Roll

Fourth Edition

DAVID P. SZATMARY
Chapter 1

The Blues, Rock-and-Roll, and Racism

“It used to be called boogie-woogie, it used to be called blues, used to be called rhythm and blues... It's called rock now.”

Chuck Berry

A smoke-filled club, the Macomba Lounge, on the South Side of Chicago, late on a Saturday night in 1950. On a small, dimly lit stage behind the bar in the long, narrow club stood an intense African American dressed in a bright blue suit, baggy pants, a white shirt, and a wide, striped tie. He gripped an oversized electric guitar—an instrument born in the postwar urban environment—caressing, pulling, pushing, and bending the strings until he produced a sorrowful, razor-sharp cry that cut into his listeners, who responded with loud shrieks. With half-closed eyes, the guitarist peered through the smoke and saw a bar jammed with patrons who nursed half-empty beer bottles. Growling out the lyrics of “Rollin’ Stone,” the man's face was contorted in a painful expression that told of cotton fields in Mississippi and the experience of African Americans in Middle America at mid-century. The singer’s name was Muddy Waters, and he was playing a new, electrified music called rhythm and blues (R & B).

The rhythm and blues of Muddy Waters and other urban blues artists served as the foundation for Elvis, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, and most other rock-and-rollers. A subtle blend of African and European traditions, it provided the necessary elements and inspiration for the birth of rock and the success of Chuck Berry and Little Richard. Despite their innovative roles, R & B artists seldom received the recognition or the money they deserved. Established crooners, disc jockeys, and record company executives, watching their share of the market shrink with the increasing popularity of R & B and its rock-and-roll offspring, torpedoed the new music by offering toned-down, white copies of black originals that left many African-American trailblazers bitter and sometimes broken.
THE BIRTH OF THE BLUES

The blues were an indigenous creation of black slaves who adapted their African musical heritage to the American environment. Though taking many forms and undergoing many permutations throughout the years, the blues formed the basis of rock-and-roll.

Torn from their kin, enduring an often fatal journey from their homes in West Africa to the American South, and forced into a servile way of life, Africans retained continuity with their past through music. Their voices glided between the lines of the more rigid European musical scale to create a distinctive new sound. To the plantation owners and overseers, the music seemed to be “rising and falling” and sounded off-key.

The music involved calculated repetitions. In this call-and-response, often used to decrease the monotony of work, one slave would call or play a lead part, and his fellow workers would follow with the same phrase or an embellishment of it until another took the lead. As one observer wrote in 1845, “Our black oarsmen made the woods echo to their song. One of them, taking the lead, first improvised a verse, paying compliments to his master’s family, and to a celebrated black beauty of the neighborhood, who was compared to the ‘red bird.’ The other five then joined in the chorus, always repeating the same words.” Some slaves, especially those from the Bantu tribe, whooped or jumped octaves during the call-and-response, which served as a basis for field hollers.

Probably most important, the slaves, accustomed to dancing and singing to the beat of drums in Africa, emphasized rhythm over harmony. In a single song they clapped, danced, and slapped their bodies in several different rhythms, compensating for the absence of drums, which were outlawed by plantation owners, who feared that the instrument would be used to coordinate slave insurrections. One ex-slave, writing in 1853, called the polyrhythmic practice “pattling jubas.” It was performed by “striking the right shoulder with one hand, the left with the other—all the while keeping time with the feet and singing.” In contrast, noted President John Adams, whites “droned out [Protestant hymns] . . . like the braying of asses in one steady beat.”

African Americans used these African musical traits in African-American religious ceremonies. One writer in the Nation described a “praise-meeting” held in 1867: “At regular intervals one hears the elder ‘deaconing’ a hymn-book hymn which is sung two lines at a time, and whose wailing cadences, borne on the night air, are indescribably melancholy.” The subsequent response from the congregation to the bluesy call of the minister, along with the accompanying instruments, created the rhythmic complexity common in African music.

Such African-inspired church music, later known as gospel, became the basis for the blues, which applied the music to secular themes. Bluesman Big Bill Broonzy, who recorded nearly 200 songs from 1925 to 1952, started as “a preacher—preached in the church. One day I quit and went to music.” Broonzy maintained that “the blues won’t die because spirituals won’t die. Blues—a steal from spirituals. And rock is a steal from the blues. . . . Blues singers start out singing spirituals.”

FROM THE RURAL SOUTH TO THE URBAN NORTH

During and after World War I, many Southern African Americans brought the blues to Northern cities, especially Chicago, the end of the Illinois Central Railroad line, where the African-American population mushroomed from 40,000 in 1910 to 234,000 twenty years later. Many African Americans left the South to escape the boll weevil, a parasitic worm that ravaged the Mississippi Delta cotton fields in 1915 and 1916. Some migrated to break loose from the shackles of crippling racial discrimination in the South. As Delta-born pianist Eddie Boyd told Living Blues, “I thought of coming to Chicago where I could get away from some of that racism and where I would have an opportunity to, well, do something with my talent. . . . It wasn’t peaches and cream [in Chicago], man, but it was a hell of a lot better than down there where I was born.” Once in Chicago, migrating African Americans found jobs in
steel mills, food-processing plants, and stockyards that needed extra hands because of the wartime draft and a sudden cutoff of European immigration. They settled in Chicago's South and West Side neighborhoods.

The migrants to the Windy City included guitarist Tampa Red, who moved from Florida to Chicago in 1925. Pianist Eurrell Wilford ("Little Brother") Montgomery, born in 1907 on the grounds of a Louisiana lumber company, performed at logging camps until he ended up in Chicago. Big Bill Broonzy, an ex-slave's son who worked as a plow hand in Mississippi and laid railroad track in Arkansas, headed for the same destination in 1916, when drought destroyed the crops on his farm. In 1929, pianist Roosevelt Sykes, "The Honeydripper," took the same route. A few years later, harmonica wizard John Lee ("Sonny Boy") Williamson, the first Sonny Boy, migrated from Jackson, Tennessee. And around the same time, guitarist Sleepy John Estes, the son of a Tennessee sharecropper, moved to the Windy City. George Leaneer, who began selling blues discs in Chicago during the 1930s, recalled, "The Illinois Central Railroad brought the blues to Chicago. With the thousands of laborers who came to work in the meat-packing plants and the steel mills came Pee Wee Wheatstraw, Ollie Shepard, Blind Boy Fuller, Washboard Sam, Little Brother Montgomery, Blind Lemon [Jefferson], Memphis Minnie, and Rosetta Howard."

These migrants played different styles of blues. At first, most brought country blues. By the early 1940s, when the urban setting began to influence the music, they recorded a hybrid of blues, vaudeville styles, and newer swing rhythms which included the boogie-woogie, rolling-bass piano, a sound that had been associated with the jump blues band of Louis Jordan. Some dubbed the early Chicago blues the "Bluebird Beat" because many of the blues artists recorded for RCA Victor's Bluebird label, formed in 1933.

Lester Melrose, a white music talent-scout producer, documented the Chicago blues scene during the 1930s and 1940s. As Willie Dixon, bassist, songwriter, and talent scout told Living Blues, "I started goin' up to Tampa Red's house where a lot of the other blues artists was, on 35th and State Street. He had a place up over a pawpaw shop. And a lot of the musicians used to go up there and write songs, lay around in there, and sleep. Lester Melrose always came there when he was in town. That was his kind of headquarters, like. And whenever he was in town, and different people had different songs that they wanted him to hear, they came by Tampa's house. . . . Big Bill Broonzy and a bunch of 'em would hang around there. And we get to singing it and seein' how it sounds. If it sounded like it was alright, then Melrose would say, "Well, looky here, we'll try it out and see what happens."

Melrose himself boasted that "from March 1934 to February 1951 I recorded at least 90 percent of all rhythm-and-blues talent for RCA and Columbia records." He included on his roster Big Bill Broonzy, Tampa Red, Sleepy John Estes, Roosevelt Sykes, Sonny Boy Williamson, and many others. By using several of his artists in one session, Melrose featured vocals, a guitar, and a piano to create a Chicago blues sound more enlivened and sophisticated than the more subdued country blues.

The blues became even more entrenched in Northern urban areas during and after World War II, when thousands of Southerners in search of work streamed into the cities. "World War I started bluesmen up North and No. II made it a mass migration," pointed out Atlantic record executive Jerry Wexler. From 1940 to 1944, estimated Time magazine, more than 50,000 African Americans from Mississippi alone headed for Chicago. They paid about $15 for the trip on the Illinois Central Railroad to the Windy City, the home of The Defender, the widely read, black-owned newspaper that encouraged Southern sharecroppers to migrate to the North. From 1940 to 1950, 214,000 Southern African Americans arrived in Chicago, an increase of 77 percent in just one decade. About half of the migrants came from the Mississippi Delta region which stretched 200 miles from Memphis to Vicksburg.

Many of the Delta migrants had heard a propulsive, acoustic, personalized style of blues on their plantations. On Saturdays, at parties, at picnics, and in juke joints, they listened to the moans, the heavy bass beat, and the bottleneck slide guitar of local musicians. Their favorites included Charley Patton, the king of the Delta blues who played around Will Dockery's plantation during the 1920s, and in 1929 recorded his classics "Pony Blues," "Peach Vine Blues," and "Tom Rushen Blues." He
played with Eddie ("Son") House, a Baptist preacher who taught himself how to play the guitar at age twenty-five and in the 1930s cut such discs as "Preachin' the Blues." Robert Johnson, one of the most celebrated and legendary Delta blues artists, learned his guitar technique from Patton disciple Willie Brown and picked up Delta stylings from Son House. During his brief recording career, which began in 1936, he released such gems as "Dust My Broom," "Sweet Home Chicago," "Crossroads," "Love in Vain," and "Rambling on My Mind."

**Muddy Waters and Chicago R & B**

Muddy Waters (a.k.a. McKinley Morganfield), who grew up in Clarksdale, Mississippi, listening to Johnson, Patton, and Son House, merged his Delta influences with the urban environment of Chicago. He had his first introduction to music in church. "I used to belong to church, I was a good Baptist, singing in church," he recollected. "So I got all of my good moaning and trembling going on for me right out of church."

Muddy bought his first guitar when he was thirteen. "The first one I got," he told writer Robert Palmer, "I sold the last horse we had. Made about fifteen dollars for him, gave my grandmother seven dollars and fifty cents, I kept seven-fifty and paid about two-fifty for that guitar. It was a Stella. The people ordered them from Sears-Roebuck in Chicago." A young Muddy played locally around his home base, a plantation owned by Colonel William Howard Stovall. In 1941, on a trip to the Mississippi Delta in search of Robert Johnson, musicologists Alan Lomax and John Work discovered Waters, then a tenant farmer, and recorded him for the Library of Congress.

Two years later, Muddy moved to Chicago "with a suitase, a suit of clothes, and a guitar," hoping to "get into the big record field." "I wanted to get out of Mississippi in the worst way," Waters told a journalist. "They had such as my mother and the older people brainwashed that people can't make it too good in the city. But I figured if anyone else was living in the city, I could make it there, too." Waters worked in a paper container factory and then as a truck driver by day, playing at parties in the evenings.

In 1944, Muddy bought his first electric guitar, an instrument probably invented and introduced for mass consumption by Leo Fender. Two years later, he formed his first electric combo. Possibly the archetype of Chicago R & B artists, Muddy Waters felt compelled to electrify his sound in Chicago. "When I went into the clubs, the first thing I wanted was an amplifier. Couldn't nobody hear you with an acoustic." At least partly out of necessity, Waters combined his Delta blues with the electric guitar and amplifier, which blasted forth the tension, volume, and confusion of the big-city streets.

By combining the sounds of the country and city into a nitty-gritty, low-down, jumpy sound, Muddy Waters reflected the optimism of postwar African Americans, who had escaped from the seemingly inescapable Southern cotton fields. The urban music contrasted sharply with the more sullen country blues, born in slavery. Willie Dixon, a bassist from Vicksburg, Mississippi, and composer of blues-rock classics such as "Hoochie Coochie Man," "I'm a Man," and "Just Want to Make Love to You," recalled. "There was quite a few people around singin' the blues but most of 'em was singing all sad blues. Muddy was giving his blues a little pep." The penoy blues of artists like Muddy Waters became known as rhythm and blues.

After four years of perfecting his electric sound in Chicago clubs, Muddy signed with Aristocrat Records, owned by Polish immigrant brothers Leonard and Phil Chess, who operated several South Side bars, including the Macomba Lounge. At first, as Muddy told journalist Pete Welding, Leonard Chess "didn't like my style of singing; he wondered who was going to buy that. The lady [Evelyn Aron, a partner of the Chess brothers] said 'You'd be surprised...'. Everybody's records came out before mine. [Macomba house vocalist] Andrew Tibbs had two records before me... But when they released mine, it hit the ceiling. "I had a hot blues out, man," Muddy remembered about his first disc. "I Can't Be Satisfied," backed with "Feel Like Going Home." "I'd be driving my truck and whenever I'd see a neon beer sign, I'd stop, go in, look at the jukebox, and see my record on there... Pretty soon I'd hear it walking along the street. I'd hear it driving along the street."
Encouraged by success and the abandonment of the blues market by RCA and Columbia, in 1950 the Chess brothers bought out their partner Evelyn Aron, changed
the name of the company to Chess, and began to release a series of Muddy Waters
sides that became hits on the “race” charts: They first cut “Rolling Stone” backed
by the Robert Johnson tune “Walking Blues.” They followed the next year with
“Long Distance Call” and “Honey Bee.” By the mid-1950s, Waters had defined the raucous,
urbanized, electric Delta blues, recording “Got My Mojo Working,” the Delta stand-
ard “Rollin’ and Tumblin’,” “Mad Love,” “(I’m Your) Hoochie Coochie Man,” “I Just
Wanna Make Love To You,” and “I’m Ready,” among many others. His group in
the early 1950s, which included Otis Spann on piano, Little Walter on harmonica,
Jimmie Rogers on guitar, and Leroy (“Baby-Face”) Foster on drums, stands out as
one of the most explosive R & B units ever assembled.

**The Wolf**

Chester (“Howlin’ Wolf”) Burnett, another Chess discovery, rivaled Waters with a
ew, electrified Delta blues. A teenaged Burnett, living on Young’s and Morrow’s
plantation near Ruleville, Mississippi, in 1926, met Charley Patton, who lived nearby
on Will Dockery’s plantation. As he told writer Pete Welding, “Charley Patton started
me off playing. He took a liking to me, and I asked him would he learn me, and
at night, after I’d get off work, I’d go and hang around.” A few years later he listened
to the country yodeling of another Mississippian, Jimmie Rodgers, and he decided to
emulate the white singer. Never mastering the yodeling technique with his harsh,
raspy voice, the blues singer earned a series of nicknames for his distinctive style,
which included “Bull Cow,” “Foot,” and “The Wolf.” “I just stuck to Wolf. I could do
no yodelin’ so I turned to howlin,’” remembered Burnett. To perfect his raspy blues,
Howlin’ Wolf traveled across the Delta during the next two decades and played with
the legendary blues artists of the area, including Robert Johnson and Rice Miller
(also known as Sonny Boy Williamson II).

In 1948, at age thirty-eight, the Wolf plugged his Delta blues into an electric
amplifier and in West Memphis formed an electric band, which at times included
harp players James Cotton and Little Junior Parker. The Wolf landed a regular spot on
radio station KWEM and began to attract attention.

Four years later, the Wolf joined the exodus to Chicago. At first, remembered
Burnett’s guitarist Hubert Sumlin, “He stayed at Muddy [Waters’s] house for about
two months. And Muddy introduced him around. Muddy was on the road a good bit
in those days, so he took Wolf and introduced him to Sylvio, Bobby, and Mutt at
the Anzibar, Ray and Ben Gold at the 708 Club. When Muddy went on the road, the
Wolf just stepped in his shoes in [those] three places.”

A competition began to develop between Waters and the Wolf, who quickly
established himself among the Chicago R & B crowd. Sumlin pointed out that, “Ever
since the Wolf came to Chicago and started taking over, Muddy didn’t like him too
well. A kind of rivalry started up between them about who was the boss of the blues.”
Every once in a while [the Wolf] would mention the fact, ‘Hey man, you wrote that
[song] for Muddy. How come you won’t write me one like that?’ But when you write

one for him he wouldn’t like it,” recalled Willie Dixon, whom the Chess brothers
hired in 1950 as a songwriter and talent scout. Dixon “found out that all I could do
was use backward psychology and tell him, ‘Now here’s one I wrote for Muddy,
man.’ ‘Yeah, man, let me hear it. Yeah, that’s the one for me.’ And so, I’d just let him
have it.”

The Wolf scored a series of hits with Dixon’s songs and traditional blues stand-
ards that would influence the course of rock-and-roll. He recorded his calling card,
“Moanin’ at Midnight,” “Killing Ground,” later recorded by Jimi Hendrix; “How
Many More Years,” which became Led Zeppelin’s “How Many More Times”; “I
 Ain’t Superstitious,” covered by Jeff Beck; and “Smokestack Lightnin’,” later popu-
larized by the Yardbirds.

Wolf’s stage performances presaged later rock-and-roll antics. At the end of
one performance, he raced toward a wing of the stage, took a flying leap, and grabbed
onto the stage curtain, still singing into his microphone. As the song built to a climax,
the Wolf scaled the curtain; as the song drew to a close, he slid down the drapery. He
hit the floor just as the song ended, to the screams of the audience. Recalled Sam
Phillips, the genius behind Sun Records who recorded a few Howlin’ Wolf songs and
sold them to Chess, “God, what it would be worth on film to see the fervor in that
man’s face when he sang. His eyes would light up, you’d see the veins come out on his
neck and, buddy, there was nothing on his mind but that song. He sang with his
damn soul.”

**Other Chess Discoveries**

The Chess brothers recorded other hard-driving rhythm-and-blues performers from
the Delta. Born Elias McDaniel in McComb, Mississippi, Bo Diddley moved to the
Windy City with his family. “Oh, I played street corners until I was 19 or 20, from
about 15 on,” he told rock critic and musician Lenny Kaye. “Then I walked the streets
around Chicago for about 12 years, before I got somebody to listen to me.” Eventually,
he landed a job at the 708 Club, and in 1955, he signed with Chess Records, where
reputedly Leonard Chess gave him his stage name, Bo Diddley, “because it meant
‘funny storyteller.’” That year, Diddley hit the charts with “Bo Diddley” and “I’m a
Man,” and subsequently with “Mona,” “You Can’t Judge a Book by Its Cover,” and
“Say Man.” Though sometimes appealing to rock-and-roll fans, Diddley stood firmly
rooted in the electrified Delta sound. The striking similarity between his “I’m a Man”
and Muddy Waters’s “Mannish Boy,” both recorded in 1955, attests to Bo Diddley’s
Delta underpinnings.

Chess also recorded two pioneers of the amplified harmonica. Marion Walter
Jacobs, otherwise known as Little Walter, grew up in the cotton fields of Louisiana.
He learned to play the harmonica (the harp, as he called it) during his teens, pattem-
ing himself after Rice Miller, whom he discovered on “King Biscuit Time,” a daily 15-
minute radio show on station KFFA from Helena, Arkansas. Two years after
World War II, Little Walter left home for Chicago, where he joined the Muddy Waters
band. After impressing the Chess brothers with his talent, Little Walter recorded his
own compositions. In 1952, backed by the Muddy Waters group, he hit the charts

Leonard Chess snagged Rice Miller (Sonny Boy Williamson II), the idol of Little Walter and the undisputed king of the R & B harmonica, when Miller moved to Milwaukee in 1955. His band included the Muddy Waters outfit and, sometimes, Robert Jr. Lockwood, who had learned guitar from Robert Johnson and for two years had played with Williamson on "King Biscuit Time." Though already a popular artist when he signed with Chess in 1955, Sonny Boy cut a number of now-classic singles for the Chicago label, including "One Way Out," covered by the Allman Brothers, and "Eyesight for the Blind," later recorded by the Who.

**THE INDEPENDENT SWEEPSTAKES**

Modern Records and its various subsidiaries, owned by Saul and Jules Bihari of Los Angeles, gave Chess its stiffest competition in the search for R & B talent. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Bihari brothers made numerous scouting trips to the Mississippi Delta. They also commissioned pianist Ike Turner as a talent scout. Turner was then the leader of the Rhythm Kings, and he later gained fame as half of the Ike and Tina Turner duo.

The Biharis signed one of the most successful rhythm-and-blues artists, Riley "Blues Boy" King. Born on a cotton plantation near Indianola, Mississippi, the heart of the Delta, King was forced into the fields at age nine, working for $15 a month. "I guess the earliest sound of blues that I can remember was in the fields while people would be pickin' cotton or choppin' or somethin'," King told Living Blues. "Usually one guy would be plowin' by himself or maybe one guy would take his hoe and chop way out in front of everybody else and usually you would hear this guy sing most of the time. No special lyrics or anything. Just what he felt at the time. When I sing and play now I can hear those same sounds that I used to hear as a kid," he said.

As with many R & B performers, King began his musical career in the church. "Singing was the thing I enjoyed doing, and when I started in school, I sang with a group; a quartet singing spirituals," King told Downbeat. From his father, the fifteen-year-old King received an S8 guitar, which became the boy's constant companion. He continued to "sing gospel music, using the guitar to tune up the group I played with," he related. "When I was introduced into the army at the age of 18, I started playing around little towns, just standing on the corner. People asked me to play gospel tunes and complimented me real nicely: 'Son, if you keep it up, you're going to be real good someday.' But the people who asked me to play the blues tunes normally tipped me, many times getting me beer. So that motivated me to play the blues, you might say."

In 1949, after being discharged from the army, King hitchhiked to Memphis, Tennessee, and moved in with a cousin, Booker T. ("Bukka") White, a renowned Delta blues figure. He found a job at the Newberry Equipment Company, and by the end of 1949, he began singing Peptikon commercials on the black-owned radio station WDIA. The guitarist remembered: "This Peptikon was supposed to be good for whatever ails you, y'know, like a toothache. Anyway, they put me on from 3:30 to 3:40 and my popularity began to grow. I sang and I played by myself and I later got two men with me... Earl Forrest playing drums and Johnny Ace playing piano."

After a year on WDIA, King, now called "Blues Boy," or "B. B." for short, signed a contract with Modern Records and its subsidiaries, RPM, Kent, and Crown. His music, now almost fully developed, fused his Delta influences with a piercing falsetto vocal style and a jazzy, single-note guitar attack borrowed from jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt and Texas bluesman Aaron (T-Bone) Walker, who himself had electrified the technique he had learned from country bluesman Blind Lemon Jefferson. Within a few years, King's new style produced dozens of R & B classics that...
Elmore to Chicago, where he began to record for the Meteor label, another subsidiary of Modern. His output included a number of now-classic tunes such as “Shake Your Moneymaker,” “It Hurts Me Too,” “The Sky Is Crying,” and “Hawaiian Boogie.” As with his fellow Delta performers, Elmore James captured in his music the pain and anguish of three centuries of slavery and tenant farming. As African-American producer Bobby Robinson suggested, listen “to the raw-nerved, spine-tingling picking of the guitar and the agonized screams and the soul-stirring of Elmore James. Close your eyes, you’ll see the slave ships, the auction blocks, the cotton fields, the bare backs straining, tootin’ that barge and liftin’ that bale. You will smell the sweat, feel the lash, taste the tears and see the blood, and relive 300 years of the Blues.”

The Biharis also recorded John Lee Hooker, the Delta-born guitarist who traveled north to Detroit during the postwar era. Hooker learned guitar from his stepfather Will Moore, who had performed with Charley Patton on Dockery’s plantation. He sang with various gospel groups in the Delta, left home by age fourteen, and in 1943 moved to Detroit. “At that time jobs weren’t hard to get, it was during the war,” recalled Hooker. “Good money, too. You could go anywhere any day and get a job, nothing to worry about too much.” In the Motor City, Hooker worked by day as an orderly, and as a janitor at the Dodge automobile factory and Comco Steel, and at night played in various Detroit nightclubs. After a few years, he boasted, “I became the talk of the town around at the house parties. Finally I met this very, very great musician, who I loved so much, I treasured him like I would a piece of gold, the great T-Bone Walker. He was the first person to get me my electric guitar.”

In 1948, John Lee was spotted by record distributor Bernie Besman, who recorded Hooker on his Sensation label. For his first single, he recorded “Boogie Chillin’,” an electric, chantlike, dark, superstitious-sounding stomp that vividly described black Detroit’s main thoroughfare, Hastings Street. According to Hooker, the single “caught fire. It was ringin’ all around the country. When it came out, every juke box you went to, every place you went to, every drug store you went, everywhere you went, department stores, they were playin’ it in there.” Hooker followed with such rhythm-and-blues chart climbers as “Hobo Blues,” “Crawling Kingsnake Blues,” “Sally Mae,” “Boom! Boom!”, and “I’m in the Mood,” which label owner Besman leased to Modern Records.

African-American disc jockey Vivian Carter and her husband James Bracken, founding Vee Jay Records of Chicago in 1953, noticed the success that Chess and Modern had achieved with the electrified Delta blues, so they jumped into the R & B field with Jimmy Reed. Born on a plantation near Dunleith, Mississippi, Reed discovered the guitar with friend and later backup musician Eddie Taylor, whose style derived from Charley Patton and Robert Johnson. He learned harmonica by “listening to Sonny Boy Williamson [Rice Miller]. . . . I’d slip out of the fields and go up to the house to listen to them do the 15 minutes he had to do over the radio show. He was broadcastin’ for King Biscuit flour out of Helena, Arkansas.” In 1941, Reed headed toward Chicago, where he worked at various steel mills and foundries. During his breaks and lunch hours, he practiced one-chord, Delta guitar shuffles and a laid-back vocal style that masked the biting lyrics of songs like “Big Boss Man.” In
1953, after being rejected by Leonard Chess, who “was too tied up with Little Walter and Muddy Waters and Wolf and them, till he didn’t have no time for me,” Reed signed with the newly organized Vee Jay Records. He first topped the R & B charts in 1955 with “You Don’t Have to Go,” and followed with a series of hits that included “Ain’t That Loving You Baby,” “Hush-Hush,” “Honest I Do,” and “Take Out Some Insurance on Me Baby,” the last covered by the Beatles in their early years.

Small, independent record companies in Los Angeles, the new home of thousands of African Americans who had migrated to the city during World War II to secure jobs, specialized in different styles of the new R & B music. Aladdin Records, begun by brothers Leo and Edward Mesner, recorded a postwar sound that spanned the relaxed vocal stylings of Charles Brown and the more jumpy blues of Amos Milburn, who hit the charts in the early 1950s with songs about alcohol: “Bad, Bad Whiskey,” “One Scotch, One Bourbon, One Beer,” “Let Me Go Home, Whiskey,” and “Thinking and Drinking.” In 1956, the company released Shirley and Lee’s “Let the Good Times Roll,” which became a rallying cry for rock-and-rollers.

In 1945, Lew Chudd established Imperial Records in Los Angeles and achieved success with the barrelhouse, rolling piano of Antoine “Fats” Domino. Born in New Orleans, Domino learned to play piano at age nine, and as a teenager worked in a bedspring factory by day and in local bars at night. He quickly mastered the New Orleans piano style, and in 1949 signed with Imperial. He debuted with the single “Fat Man,” which sold 1 million copies. Domino followed with a string of hits, including: “Ain’t That A Shame,” “Blueberry Hill,” “Blue Monday,” and “I’m Walking.” From 1949 to 1962, Fats had forty-three records that made the Billboard charts, twenty-three gold records, and record sales of 65 million units.

R & B record companies arose in cities other than Chicago and Los Angeles. In Cincinnati, Syd Nathan set up King Records in an abandoned ice house and recorded the jump blues of Bill Doggett and big-band-influenced vocalists such as Lonnie Johnson, Ivory Joe Hunter, and Wynonie “Mr. Blues” Harris. In 1952, African-American entrepreneur Don Robey bought the Memphis-based Duke Records and scored hits with the smooth-voiced, gospel-influenced Bobby Blue Bland and teen star Johnny Ace, a former member of the B. B. King band. In Newark, New Jersey, Herman Lubinsky jumped into the R & B field, adding rhythm-and-blues vocalists like Nappy Brown and Big Maybelle to his jazz record label, Savoy. By the mid-1950s, dozens of independent companies in major urban areas of the United States had begun to produce R & B records.

**The R & B Market**

The market for the new sound expanded with the number of African Americans who flooded into Northern and Western cities during and after World War II. The migrants, some of them having extra cash for the first time, looked for entertainment but faced a number of obstacles. “Harlem folks couldn’t go downtown to the Broadway theaters and movie houses,” recalled Ahmet Ertegun, co-founder of Atlantic Records. “Downtown clubs had their ropes up when they came to the door. They weren’t even welcome on Fifty-Second Street where all the big performers were black… Even radio was white-oriented. You couldn’t find a black performer on network radio. And when it came to disc jockeys on the big wattage stations, they wouldn’t play a black record. We had a real tough time getting our records played—even Ruth Brown, who didn’t sound particularly black.”

For their leisure, some African Americans in urban areas frequented segregated clubs, for example, the Roosevelt in Pittsburgh, the Lincoln in Los Angeles, the Royal in Baltimore, Chicago’s Regal, the Howard in Washington, and the now-famous Apollo Theater in New York City. The owners of Town Hall, the only large dance hall in Philadelphia that admitted African Americans, claimed that “swollen Negro paychecks at local war plants and shipyards” helped increase their profits. Other African Americans went to segregated taverns and demanded music by African-American artists on the jukeboxes.

The majority of migrants, bound closer to home by their families, found entertainment through the record. As Ahmet Ertegun suggested, most “black people had to find entertainment in their homes—and the record was it.” They bought 78-rpm discs by their favorite artists in furniture stores, pharmacies, shoe shine stands, and other local businesses.

Most favored the electrified R & B sound. “The black people, particularly the black people I knew,” Art Rupe, the owner of Specialty Records, recalled of the late 1940s, “looked down on country music. Among themselves, the blacks called country blues ‘field nigger’ music. They wanted to beicitified.”

At first, only African Americans bought R & B discs. Johnny Otis, a white bandleader who grew up in a black section of Berkeley and later helped many African-American artists rise to stardom, noticed the trend: “As far as black music was concerned we had what was known as race music. Race music was Big Bill Broonzy, Peechie Wheatstraw, and things like that. Now, these things were very much part of the black community but they didn’t occur anywhere else and these cats could hardly make a living plying their trade.” A successful rhythm and blues recording generally sold only 400,000 copies, and, according to Jerry Wexler of Atlantic Records, “Sales were localized in ghetto markets. There was no white sale, and no white radio play.”

But during the early 1950s, more and more white teenagers began to become aware of R & B. At first, young Southern whites started to buy records by African-American artists. As Jerry Wexler observed about his experience in the early 1950s, “We became aware that Southern whites were buying our records, white kids in high school and college.” In California, at the same time, Johnny Otis saw the changing demographics of the R & B audience, which was becoming dotted with white faces. In 1952, the Dolphin Record store in Los Angeles, which specialized in R & B records, reflected the trend by reporting 40 percent of its sales to whites. Eventually, white teens in all parts of the country turned to rhythm and blues. In April 1955, Mitch Miller, then head of Columbia Records and later famous for the sing-along craze he masterminded, complained that “rhythm and blues songs are riding high.” This “rock and roll” began among Negro people, was first recorded by Negro performers
and had its following among Negroes in the South and also Negro urban areas in the North.” But Miller noticed that “suddenly millions of white teenagers who buy most of the ‘pop’ records in America have latched onto rhythm and blues.”

**FROM R & B TO ROCK-AND-ROLL:**
**LITTLE RICHARD AND CHUCK BERRY**

The white teens who bought R & B records favored a few showmen who delivered the most frenetic, hard-driving version of an already spirited rhythm and blues that became known as rock-and-roll. They especially idolized young R & B performers with whom they could identify. By 1955, Muddy Waters had turned forty, Howlin’ Wolf was forty-five, Sonny Boy Williamson was fifty-seven, John Lee Hooker was thirty-eight, B. B. King was thirty, and Elmore James was thirty-seven.

Little Richard and Chuck Berry, significantly younger and wilder than most R & B performers, became heroes to white teens who had discovered rhythm and blues. Little Richard, born Richard Penniman in Macon, Georgia, on December 5, 1932, sang in a Baptist church choir as a youth and traveled with his family gospel troupe, the Penniman Family. He joined various circuses and traveling shows, and in the Broadway Follies met gospel/R & B shouter Billy Wright, who secured a recording contract from Camden Records for the eighteen-year-old Little Richard. In 1951, Richard cut eight sides for Camden, which featured boogie-woogie and urban blues numbers in the style of Billy Wright.

The next year a local tough shot and killed Little Richard’s father, the owner of the Tip In Inn. To support the family, Richard washed dishes in the Macon Greyhound Bus station by day, and at night sang with his group, the Upsetters, at local theaters for $15 a show. “We were playing some of Roy Brown’s tunes, a lot of Fats Domino tunes, some B. B. King tunes and I believe a couple of Little Walter’s and a few things by Billy Wright,” remembered Little Richard.

After a few years of one-night stands in Southern nightclubs, Penniman began to change his style. He transformed himself from a traditional R & B singer into a wild-eyed, pompadoured madman who crashed the piano keys and screamed nonsensical lyrics at breakneck speed. Richard later recalled that “it was funny. I’d sing the songs I sing now in clubs, but the black audiences just didn’t respond. They wanted blues stuff like B. B. King sings. That’s what they were used to. I’d sing ‘Tutti Frutti’ and nothing. Then someone would get up and sing an old blues song and everyone would go wild.”

On the advice of rhythm-and-blues singer Lloyd Price of “Lawdy Miss Clawdy” fame, Richard sent a demo tape of two rather subdued blues tunes to Art Rupe at Specialty Records in Los Angeles, which had recorded Price as well as R & B artists like Roy Milton. The tape, according to Specialty’s musical director Bumps Blackwell, was “wrapped in a piece of paper looking as though someone had eaten off it.” Blackwell opened the wrapper, played the tape, and recommended that Rupe sign Little Richard.

Richard arrived in New Orleans during late 1955 for his first Specialty recording session. Little Richard reminisced: “I cut some blues songs. During a break in the session, someone heard me playing ‘Tutti Frutti’ on the piano and asked about the song. We ended up recording it and it sold 200,000 copies in a week and a half.” And a legend was born. During the next four years, Richard cut a wealth of rock standards, which defined the new music: “Long Tall Sally,” “Slippin’ and slidin’,” “Rip It Up,” “Ready Teddy,” “The Girl Can’t Help It,” “Good Golly Miss Molly,” “Jenny, Jenny,” “Keep a Knockin’,” and “Lucille.”
Little Richard, dressed in flamboyant clothing and with a pompadour hairstyle and makeup, delivered his music in a wild stage show. His band “the Upsetters wasn’t just a name; when we’d go into a place, we’d upset it! We were the first band on the road to wear pancake makeup and eye shadow, have an earring hanging out of our ear and have our hair curled in process,” said drummer Charles Conner. “Richard was the only guy in the band that was actually like that, but he wanted us to be different and exciting.”

If anyone besides Little Richard could claim to be the father of rock-and-roll, it would be Chuck Berry. Berry, unlike almost all other R & B musicians, spent his youth in a sturdy brick house on a tree-lined street in the middle-class outskirts of St. Louis. He first sang gospel at home with his family. As he wrote in his autobiography, “Our family lived a block and a half from our church, and singing became a major tradition in the Berry family. As far back as I can remember, mother’s household chanting of those gospel tunes rang through my childhood. The members of the family, regardless of what they were doing at the time, had a habit of joining with another member who would start singing, following along and harmonizing. Looking back I’m sure that my musical roots were planted, then and there.”

The young Berry soon heard a different music on the radio. “The beautiful harmony of the country music that KMOK radio station played was almost irresistible,” recalled Berry. By his teens, Berry also had become a fan of Tampa Red, Arthur Crudup, and, especially, Muddy Waters.

After a stay in reform school and having held various odd jobs, which included work as a cosmetologist and an assembler at the General Motors Fisher Body plant, Berry turned to rhythm and blues. He obtained his first guitar from St. Louis R & B performer Joe Sherman and, in the early 1950s, formed a rhythm-and-blues trio with Johnny Johnson on piano and Eddy Harding on drums that played “backyards, barbecues, house parties” and at St. Louis bars such as the Cosmopolitan Club.

In the spring of 1955, a twenty-four-year-old Berry and a friend traveled to Chicago, then the mecca of urban blues. He watched the shows of Howlin’ Wolf, Elmore James, and his idol, Muddy Waters. After a late-night set, Berry approached Waters for his autograph and got “the feeling I suppose one would get from having a word with the president of the pope.” When Berry asked Muddy about his chances of making a record, Waters replied, “Yeah, see Leonard Chess, yeah. Chess Records over on Forty-seventh and Cottage.” To Berry, Waters “was the godfather of the blues. He was perhaps the greatest inspiration in the launching of my career.”

Chuck Berry took Muddy Waters’s advice. The next day he rushed to the Chess offices and talked with Leonard Chess, who asked for a demo tape of original songs within a week. Berry returned with a tape that included a country song, “Ida May,” Chess, recalled Berry, “couldn’t believe that a country tune (he called it a ‘hillbilly song’) could be written by a black guy. He wanted us to record that particular song.”

In the studio, on the advice of Willie Dixon, Berry added “a little blues” to the tune, renamed it “Maybelline,” after the trade name on a mascara box in the corner of the studio, and backed it with the slow blues, “Wee Wee Hours.”

Berry convinced Chess to release “Maybelline,” a country song adapted to a boogie-woogie beat, which hinted at the marriage between country and R & B that would reach full fruition with the rockabilities. Within weeks, Berry’s up-tempo song had received national airplay. The guitarist-songwriter followed with “Roll Over Beethoven (Dig These Rhythm and Blues),” “School Days,” “Rock and Roll Music,” “Sweet Little Sixteen,” “Johnny Be Good,” “Rockin’ and Rollin’,” and an almost endless list of other songs. He embarked upon a whirlwind tour of the country, playing 101 engagements in 101 nights, during which he perfected antics such as the duck walk.

By 1956, Chuck Berry and Little Richard had bridged the short gap between rhythm and blues and what became known as rock-and-roll, originally an African-American euphemism for sexual intercourse. They delivered a frantic, blues-based sound to teens, who claimed the music as their own.

SOCIAL CHANGE AND ROCK-AND-ROLL

The popularity of a wild, teen-oriented rock-and-roll can be attributed to a number of social changes that occurred during the 1950s. Television made radio space available to more recording artists. Before the 1950s, network radio shows, many of them broadcast live, dominated the airwaves and, as Johnny Otis argued, “in the thirties and forties, black music was summarily cut off the radio.” Music by African Americans “simply was not played, black music of any kind—even a Louis Armstrong was not played on the air.”

After World War II, television became more popular and affordable. By 1953, more than 300 television stations in the United States broadcast to more than 27 million television sets. By absorbing the network radio shows to fill a programming void, television created airtime for a greater variety of records, including discs by African-American artists.

Many of the disc jockeys who spun R & B records became die-hard advocates of the music. B. Mitchell Reed, who jockeyed on the leading Los Angeles rock station KFWB-AM, became “enthralled with rock” during the 1950s and convinced the management to switch from a jazz format to rock when he “realized that the roots of the stuff that I was playing—the rock—had come from the jazz and blues I’d been playing before.” Even earlier than Reed’s conversion to rock, the Los Angeles “dean of the DJs,” Al Jarvis, “wanted the black artists to be heard” and introduced them on his show.

Rock-and-roll’s superpromoter was Alan Freed. Freed, a student of trombone and music theory, began his broadcasting career in New Castle, Pennsylvania on the classical station WKST. After a stint on a station in Akron, Ohio, in 1951, he landed a job in Cleveland on the independent station WJW. Convinced by record store owner Leo Miniz, Freed began to play R & B records on his program. He picked the howling “Blues for the Red Boy,” a release by Todd Rhodes on King Records, for his theme song and named his show “The Moondog Rock & Roll House Party.”

Freed ceaselessly marketed the new music. In 1952 and 1953, the disc jockey organized increasingly racially integrated rock-and-roll concerts in the Cleveland area that met with enthusiastic responses. For the first, the “Moondog Coronation Ball,” he attracted 18,000 teens to an auditorium that seated 9,000 and was forced to cancel the show. By late 1954, the successful Freed landed a key nighttime spot on
New York station WINS. While there, the DJ introduced thousands of young whites on the East Coast to African-American music, consistently befriending African-American artists who recorded on the small, independent labels. Freed also managed several R & B acts and appeared in movies such as Don't Knock the Rock, Rock, Rock, Rock, and the now-famous Rock Around the Clock, which caused riots in the United States and Europe and further familiarized white youths with R & B, now being called rock-and-roll by Freed.

Young teens listened to disc jockeys such as Freed on a new gadget, the portable transistor radio. First developed in 1947 at the Bell Laboratory in New Jersey, it reached the general public by 1953. Within a decade, more than 12 million consumers, many of them teens, bought the hand-held radios each year. It offered teens on the move an inexpensive means of experiencing the exciting new music called rock-and-roll.

The car radio served the same purpose as the portable transistor model. Marketed initially in the 1950s, it became standard equipment within a few years. By 1963, music blasted forth from the dashboards of more than 50 million automobiles speeding down the highways and back roads of the country. The car radio introduced rock-and-roll to many teens who used the automobile in such rites of passage as the school prom and the first date. In 1956 a nervous, clammy-palmed youth, sitting next to his girlfriend and behind the wheel of his father's El Dorado, could hear Chuck Berry detail his exploits with Maybelline that occurred in a similar car. The car radio helped deliver rock-and-roll to a mobile, young, car-crazy generation.

The civil rights movement helped make possible the acceptance of African-American-inspired music by white teens. In 1954, at the advent of rock-and-roll, the Supreme Court handed down Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka. Convinced by the arguments of Thurgood Marshall, counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and later a Supreme Court justice himself, the Court unanimously banned segregation in public schools and ordered school districts to desegregate. “In the field of public education,” Chief Justice Earl Warren contended, “the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” By overturning the “separate but equal” doctrine of the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson case, the Court had strongly endorsed African-American rights and had helped start a civil rights movement that would foster an awareness and acceptance of African-American culture, including the African-American-based rock-and-roll.

The number of youths who would feel the impact of the Brown decision was growing rapidly. In 1946, about 5.6 million teenagers attended American high schools. Ten years later, the number climbed to 6.8 million; and in 1960, the number of teens increased to 11.8 million. Observers called it the “wattage baby boom.” “No decrease is in sight this century,” predicted a U.S. Census Bureau official in 1955. “We have come to consider it routine to report new all-time high records.”

Many of these teens, living during prosperous times, had money in their pockets to spend on records. Between 1940 and 1954, the U.S. gross national product (GNP) rose from $200 billion to $360 billion, and the average yearly family income increased from about $5,000 to $6,200. Having more leisure time than during the war, most Americans spent much of this extra money on consumer items such as paperback novels, television sets, cameras, and electrical appliances. Teenagers received sizable allowances totaling more than $9 billion in 1957 and $10.5 billion in 1963, some of which was spent on records. In a 1960 survey of 4,500 teenaged girls conducted by Seventeen magazine, the average teen had “a weekly income of $9.53, gets up at 7:43 A.M., and listens to the radio two hours a day.” Wanting to own the songs they heard, more than 70 percent of the girls bought records with their allowances. Along with other factors, an increasingly affluent society paved the way for the mass consumption of rock-and-roll.

By 1954, rock-and-roll was beginning to achieve a general popularity among white youths. Teens bought discs by Chuck Berry and Little Richard and soon started to dance to the music. When Ralph Bass, a producer for Chess Records, went on the road with African-American acts during the late 1940s and early 1950s, “they didn’t let whites into the clubs. Then they got ‘white spectator tickets’ for the worst corner of the joint. They had to keep the white kids out, so they’d have white nights sometimes, or they’d put a rope across the middle of the floor. The blacks on one side, whites on the other, digging how the blacks were dancing and copying them. Then, hell, the rope would come down, and they’d all be dancing together.” Touring with Fats Domino, Chuck Berry also saw audiences beginning to integrate: “Salt and pepper all mixed together, and we’d say, ‘Well, look what’s happening.’”

RACIST BACKLASH

The integration of white and black youths elicited a racist response from many white adults. In 1956, as white Southerners lashed out against desegregation and attacked civil rights workers, a spokesman for the White Citizens Council of Birmingham, Alabama, charged that rock-and-roll—“the basic, heavy-beat music of the Negroes”—appealed to “the base in man, brings out animalism and vulgarity” and, most important, represented a “plot to mongrelize America.”

Other whites expressed their fear of race mixing by complaining about the sexual overtones of rock. Testifying before a Senate subcommittee in 1958, Vance Packard—author of Hidden Persuaders—cautioned that rock-and-roll stirred “the animal instinct in modern teenagers” by its “raw savage tone.” “What are we talking about?” Packard concluded, quoting an article from a 1955 issue of Variety. “We are talking about rock ‘n’ roll, about ‘hug’ and ‘squeeze’ and kindred euphemisms which are attempting a total breakdown of all reticences about sex.” Cash Box similarly editorialized that “really dirty records” had been “getting airtime,” and suggested that companies “stop making dirty R & B records.” Russ Sanjek, later vice president of Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI), which initially licensed most rock songs, explained the white fear of possible white and African-American sexual relations: “It was a time when many a mother ripped pictures of Fats Domino off her daughter’s bedroom wall. She remembered what she felt toward her Bing Crosby pinup, and she didn’t want her daughter dreaming for Fats.”
A few adults defended the music of their children. In 1958, one mother from Fort Edward, New York, found that rock eased the boredom of her housework: “After all, how much pep can you put into mopping the floor to ‘Some Enchanted Evening,’ but try it to ‘Sweet Little Sixteen’ by Chuck Berry and see how fast the work gets done. (I know the above is silly, but I just had to write it because it really is true, you know.)” “Rock and roll has a good beat and a jolly approach that keeps you on your toes,” she added.

To jazz innovator Count Basie, the uproar over rock reminded him of the racist slurs hurled at his music two decades earlier. After living through the “swing era of the late 1930s when there was a lot of screaming, pretty much like the furor being stirred up today,” he remembered “one comment in the 1930s, which said ‘jam sessions, jitterbugs, and cannibalistic rhythm orgies are wooing our youth along the primrose path to hell.’ The funny thing is, a lot of the kids who used to crowd around the bandstand while we played in the 1930s are still coming around today to catch us. A lot of them are parents in the PTA, and leading citizens.”

Many whites refused to accept the Count’s logic. To waylay expected integration, they tried to outlaw rock-and-roll. The Houston Juvenile Delinquency and Crime Commission blacklisted thirty songs that it considered obscene, all of them by African-American artists, which included “Honey Love” by the Drifters, “Too Much Lovin” by the Five Royales, “Work With Me Annie” by Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, and Ray Charles’s “I Got a Woman.” R & B singer Jimmy Witherspoon, living in Houston at the time, felt that “the blacks were starting a thing in America for equality. The radio stations and the people in the South were fighting us. And they were hiring program directors to program the tunes.... They banned Little Richard’s tune ("Long Tall Sally") in Houston.” In Memphis, station WDIA, the station that B. B. King had helped to popularize, banned the recordings of thirty African-American rock-and-roll singers.

In some areas, violence erupted in response to the new music. In April 1956, at a Nat King Cole concert, the White Citizens Council of Birmingham, equating jazz with R & B, jumped on the stage and beat the performer. Explaining the incident, Ray Charles said it happened because “the young white girls run up and say, ‘Oh, Nat!’ and they say, ‘No, we can’t have that!’ Come on man, shit, that’s where it is.” At other rock-and-roll shows, Bo Diddley reminded interviewer Lou Cohen that “we used to have funny things like bomb scares and stuff like that because we were in South Carolina where the K. K. K. didn’t want us performing.”

THE MUSIC INDUSTRY VERSUS ROCK-AND-ROLL

The music industry also organized against rock-and-roll. Crooners whose careers had taken nosedives because of the new music bitterly condemned it. Testifying before Congress in 1958, Frank Sinatra called rock “the most brutal, ugly, desperate, vicious form of expression it has been my misfortune to hear.” He labeled rock-and-rollers “cretinous goons” who lured teenagers by “almost imbecilic repetitions and sly—liew—in plain fact dirty—lyrics.” By such devious means, he concluded, rock managed “to be the martial music of every sideburned delinquent on the face of the earth.” A year earlier, Sammy Davis Jr., an African American who had achieved success with a smooth crooning style, put it more succinctly: “If rock ‘n’ roll is here to stay I might commit suicide.” At the same time, crooner Dean Martin cryptically ascribed the rise of rock to “unnatural forces.”

Disc jockeys who lost listeners from their pop and classical programs to rock-and-roll stations similarly spoke out against their competition. In 1955, Bob Milton of WFMY in Madison, Wisconsin, called for “some records for adults that don’t rock, roll, whom, bam, or fade to flat tones.” To Chuck Blower of KTFT in Tucson, the year 1955, “with the tremendous upsurge of R & B into the pop crop—the almost complete absence of good taste, to say nothing of good grammar—this has been the worst and certainly the most frustrating pop year I have ever known.” A Billboard survey in the same year indicated that “many jockeys believe the quality of the pop platter has seriously deteriorated in the past year.... Several jockeys are strongly opposed to the rhythm and blues influence in pop music.”

Songwriters in the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) exhibited an equal disdain for rock. Because the new music was written by the performers themselves, professional songwriters began to scramble for work and soon complained. Lyricist Billy Rose, then a board member of ASCAP, labeled rock-and-roll songs “junk,” and “in many cases they are accurate junk much on the level with dirty comic magazines.” Meredith Wilson, the songwriter of Music Man fame, charged that “rock and roll is dull, ugly, amateurish, immature, trite, banal and stale. It glorifies the mediocre, the nasty, the bawdy, the cheap, the tasteless.” Mrs. Barbara Lehrman, a listener from Brooklyn, New York, supported Wilson’s contention: “Let’s give the music business back to the music men,” she demanded in a letter to Senator John Pastore. “Let’s clear the air of ear-splitting claptrap.” To ressient their control, in November 1953, ASCAP songwriters initiated a $150 million antitrust lawsuit against the three major broadcasting networks, Columbia Records, RCA, and Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI), a song performance/licensing competitor that had been formed in 1941 by broadcasters and catered to R & B country music, and the new rock-and-roll. The battle eventually ended in a congressional subcommittee, but it did little to squelch the popularity of rock music.

THE BLANCHING OF ROCK

Many record executives complained about and successfully undermined African-American rockers and their music. Some leaders of the music industry personally disliked rock-and-roll. RCA vice president George Marek did not “happen to like [rock] particularly, but then I like Verdi and I like Brahms and I like Beethoven.” Explained Ahmet Ertegun, who had recorded R & B artists on his Atlantic Records: “You couldn’t expect a man who loved ‘April in Paris’ or who had recorded Hudson DeLange in the 30s when he was beginning in the business, to like lyrics like ‘I Wanna Boogie Your Woogie,’ and ‘Louie, Louie.’ He had always thought race music and hillbilly were corny, and so he thought rock ‘n’ roll was for morons.”
More important than their personal tastes, established record executives feared the economic consequences of a new popular music that they did not control. Outdistanced by new, independent labels that had a virtual monopoly on rock acts by 1955, they worried about their share of the market, especially when white teens started to buy rock-and-roll records.

To reverse this trend, larger companies signed white artists to copy, or “cover,” the songs of African-American artists, sometimes sanitizing the lyrics. Charles “Pat” Boone, a descendent of pioneer Daniel Boone who wore a white sweater and white buck shoes, became the most successful cover artist of the era. After hosting a radio program on Nashville station WSIX, Boone signed with Dot Records in early 1955 and hit the top of the charts with a cover of Fats Domino’s “ Ain’t That A Shame.” He continued to score hits with other covers such as “At My Front Door” by the El Dorados, Big Joe Turner’s “Honey Hush,” “Tutti Frutti” and “Long Tall Sally” by Little Richard, the Flamingos’s “1’ll Be Home,” and Ivory Joe Hunter’s “I Almost Lost My Mind,” among many others. All told, Boone recorded sixty hit singles, six of them reaching the number-1 spot. Boone many times toned down the originals; he reworked T-Bone Walker’s “Stormy Monday,” substituting the phrase “drinkin’ Coca Cola” for “drinkin’ wine.” When covering “ Tutti Frutti,” Boone explained, “I had to change some words, because they seemed too raw for me. I wrote, ‘Pretty little Susie is the girl for me,’ instead of ‘Boys you don’t know what she do to me.’ I had to be selective and change some lyrics, but nobody seemed to care,” the singer recalled. “It made it more vanilla.”

Other white singers covered songs of R & B artists first released by independent labels. The McGuire Sisters copied “Sincerely” by the Moonglows; Dorothy Collins took Clyde McPhatter’s “ Seven Days”; Perry Como stole “ Kokomo” from Gene and Eunice; and the Crewcuts covered the Penguins’ “ Earth Angel” and took their monster hit “Sh-Boom,” from the Chords.

Some of the cover artists believed that their versions furthered the development of rock-and-roll. “R & B is a distinctive kind of music; it doesn’t appeal to everybody,” argued Pat Boone. “So if it hadn’t been for the vanilla versions of the R & B songs in the 50s, you could certainly imagine that rock ’n’ roll, as we think of it, would never have happened.” Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but that kind of flattery I can do without,” countered LaVern Baker, who hit the R & B chart on Atlantic Records in 1955 with “ That’s All I Need” and “Tweedle Dee” and saw her songs covered by white singers.

To sell these imitations, Columbia, Capitol, Decca, and RCA employed new marketing techniques. The companies placed their product on racks in suburban supermarkets, which by 1956 sold $14 million worth of records and by 1957 sold $40 million of records, almost 20 percent of all record sales. In addition, Columbia and then RCA and Capitol started mail-order record clubs to further increase sales.

Many disc jockeys aided the major companies in the purge of the independent labels. Although a few such as Alan Freed refused to spin covers, most DJs gladly played “white” music. “It was a picnic for the majors,” Ahmet Ertegun of Atlantic Records told an interviewer. “They’d copy our records, except that they’d use a white artist. And the white stations would play them while we couldn’t get our records on.

‘Sorry,’ they’d say, ‘It’s too rough for us.’ Or: ‘Sorry, we don’t program that kind of music.’” Danny Kessler of the independent Okeh Records also found that “the odds for a black record to crack through were slim. If the black record began to happen, the chances were that a white artist would cover—and the big stations would play the white records. . . . There was a color line, and it wasn’t easy to cross.”

Industry leaders even succeeded in banning some African-American artists from the airwaves. In one instance, CBS television executives discontinued the popular Rock ‘n’ Roll Dance Party of Alan Freed when the cameras stayed to a shot of African-American singer Frankie Lymon of the Teenagers dancing with a white girl.

The introduction of the 45-rpm record by the major companies helped undermine the power of the independents. Leon Rene of the small Exclusive Records outlined the effects of the new format: “We had things going our way until Victor introduced the seven-inch vinyl, 45-rpm record, which revolutionized the record business and made the breakable, ten-inch 78-rpm obsolete overnight. . . . Competition with the majors, however, forced the independent labels to use the seven-inch 45-rpm records, and they had to reduce the price of R & B records from a dollar five to seventy-five cents, retail. This forced many independent companies out of business.” By 1956, the new 7-inch records accounted for $70 million in sales, mostly to teenagers who preferred the less breakable and the more affordable, more transportable record.

Through all of these efforts, businessmen at the head of the major companies suppressed or at least curtailed the success of the independents and their African-American performers. The McGuire Sisters’s copy of “Sincerely,” for example, sold more than six times as many records as the Moonglows’s original. In 1955 and 1956, the covers by white artists such as Pat Boone climbed to the top of the charts, while most African-American artists received little fame or money for their pioneering efforts. By the early 1960s, Wynonie Harris tended bar; Amos Milburn became a hotel clerk; and Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, and Bo Diddley were forced to tour constantly to make a living. “With me there had to be a copy,” complained Bo Diddley twenty years later. “They wouldn’t buy me, but they would buy a white copy of me. Elvis got me. I don’t even like to talk about it. I was Chess Records along with Muddy Waters, Koko Taylor, Etta James, Chuck Berry, Little Walter, Howlin’ Wolf. Without us there wouldn’t have been no Chess Records. I went through things like, ‘Oh, you got a hit record but we need to break it into the white market. We need to get some guy to cover it.’ And I would say, ‘What do you mean?’ They would never tell me it was a racial problem.” Johnny Otis put the problem succinctly: African-American artists developed the music and got “ripped off and the glory and the money goes to the white artists.”

**The Story of Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup**

The saga of Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup bears testimony to Otis’s charge. Crudup, born in Forrest, Mississippi, worked as a manual laborer in the fields, logging camps, sawmills, and construction projects until his thirties. In 1941, he headed to Chicago and signed a contract with RCA. Between 1941 and 1956, Crudup released more
In 1968, Dick Waterman, an agent and a manager for many blues artists, began the fight for Crudup’s royalties through the American Guild of Authors and Composers. After two years, he reached an agreement for $60,000 in back royalties with Hill and Range Songs, which claimed ownership of Big Boy’s compositions. Crudup and his four children traveled from their home in Virginia to New York City and signed the requisite papers in the Hill and Range office, a converted four-story mansion. John Clark, the Hill and Range attorney, took the papers to Julian Aberbach, head of Hill and Range, for his signature, while Waterman, Crudup, and his children “all patted each other on the back and congratulated Arthur that justice had finally been done.” But, according to Waterman, “The next thing, John Clark comes back in the room, looking stunned and pale, and says that Aberbach refused to sign because he felt that the settlement gave away more than he would lose in legal action. We all waited for the punch line, for him to break out laughing and whip the check out of the folder. But it wasn’t a joke. We sat around and looked at each other.” Crudup, who once said, “I was born poor, I live poor, and I’m going to die poor,” passed away four years later, nearly destitute.

In only a few years, rock-and-roll, recorded and promoted by small independents, had become a major force in popular music: The major record labels, publishing companies, and disc jockeys, though refusing to accord independent labels and their African-American artists the success that they deserved, tried to capture the rock-and-roll teen market. In 1956, they capitalized on a fusion of African-American R & B and white country sounds that would change the face of American popular music.

than eighty sides, which included “Mean Ole Frisco Blues,” “Rock Me Mama,” “She’s Gone,” “That’s All Right, Mama,” and “My Baby Left Me,” which have been subsequently done by Elvis Presley, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Elton John, Rod Stewart, Canned Heat, Johnny Winter, and many others. By the late 1950s, Crudup quit playing. “I realized I was making everybody rich, and here I was poor.”
Chapter 2

Elvis and Rockabilly

"I love the rhythm and beat of good rock and roll music and I think most people like it too. After all, it's a combination of folk or hillbilly music and gospel singing."

Elvis Presley

Rockabilly Roots

Elvis Presley, a kinetic image in white suede shoes, an oversized, white-checkered jacket over a jet-black shirt with an upturned collar and no tie. He violently shook his black zoot-suit pants as he gyrated his hips and legs. A sneering, rebellious expression covered Presley's face, and his greased hair fell over his sweat-drenched forehead. The singer grabbed a microphone as though he were going to wrench it from its metal base, and he barked, snarled, whimpered, and shouted into it. Elvis waved off screaming fans who pulled at his loose pants, his suit, and his shirt, lusting to tear off a piece of the raw energy that burst forth. Swaggering across the stage, he sang a sexually charged music that fused a white country past with African-American sounds.

Elvis Presley, singing to hordes of adoring, frantic teens, delivered a sound called "rockabilly" that would change the direction of popular music.

White teenagers from poor Southern backgrounds, growing up in the border states where black and white cultures stood face to face over a seemingly impassable chasm, concocted the pulsating mixture of African-American-inspired rhythm and blues and country and western known as rockabilly. They were teenagers such as Jerry Lee Lewis, who leapt on his piano, banged the keys with his feet, and heaved his jacket, and sometimes his shredded shirt, to the audience; the more subdued Carl Perkins, writer of "Blue Suede Shoes," "Boppin' the Blues," and many other classics; Johnny Cash, who launched his career with "The Ballad of a Teenage Queen," "Get Rhythm," and "Folsom Prison Blues"; Johnny Burnette, the co-founder of the crazed Rock and Roll Trio with brother Dorsey and Paul Burlison; the quiet, bespectacled Texan, Charles ("Buddy") Holly; and, of course, Elvis Presley, the pacesetter of the new music, whose raw edge drove crowds to a frenzy. Despite the warnings of many horrified adults, these poor Southern whites spread the message of rock-and-roll to millions of clamoring teenage fans and vaulted to the top of the national charts.

Most rockabilly never dreamed of such success. Presley, the king of swagger, the musical embodiment of James Dean's celluloid image, grew up in a 30-foot-long, two-room house in the poor section of Tupelo, Mississippi. His father Vernon shared-cropped and worked odd jobs, while his mother Gladys did piecework as a sewing machine operator. When Elvis was born on January 8, 1935, one neighbor remembered that his parents "didn't have insurance and the doctor didn't believe in carrying his expectant mothers to the hospital, so Gladys stayed at home." During Elvis's childhood in Tupelo, noted a friend, the Presleys "lost their house and moved several times. They lived in several houses this side of the highway, on Kelly Street, then on Barry. Later the house on Barry was condemned. They were real poor. They just got by." In September 1948, the Presley family moved from Mississippi. As Elvis told it: "We were broke, man, broke, and we left Tupelo overnight. Dad packed all our belongings in boxes and put them on the top and in the trunk of a 1939 Plymouth. We just headed to Memphis. Things had to be better."

In Memphis, the standing of the Presleys did not improve initially. Vernon worked for a tool company, as a truck driver, and finally, in 1949, landed a job as a laborer at the United Paint Company. Earning less than $40 a week, he paid the rent on an apartment in the Lauderdale Courts, a federally funded housing project. Elvis attended the nearby L. C. Humes High School, "a lower poverty-type school, one of the lowest in Memphis," according to one of Presley's classmates. After graduating from Humes High in 1953, he did factory work at the Precision Tool Company and then drove a small truck for the Crown Electric Company until he turned to music.

Jane Richardson, one of two home service advisors working for the Memphis Housing Authority, summed up the condition of the Presleys during their first years in Memphis: "They were just poor people."

Other rockabilly stars came from similarly impoverished backgrounds. Jerry Lee Lewis, who scored hits in 1957 with "Great Balls of Fire" and "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On," was born in September 1935 on a farm outside of Ferriday, Louisiana. His father, the gaunt-faced Elmo, eked out a living by doing carpentry work and growing surplus produce on the farm. Johnny Cash was born on February 26, 1932, into a poor country family in Kingland, Arkansas. When Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal came to the South, the Cash family moved to Dyess, Arkansas, as part of a resettlement program for submarginal farmers. Johnny later enlisted in the U.S. Air Force and after his discharge sold refrigerators in Memphis. The boredom of the sales job prompted him to write the classic "I Walk the Line." Carl Perkins grew up only a few miles from Johnny Cash. According to Cash, "he on the Tennessee side of Mississippi, I on the Arkansas side. We both lived on a poor cotton farm." At age six, Perkins began picking cotton and worked in the fields for years until he could fill five 65-pound bags in one day. When writing "Blue Suede Shoes," Perkins recounted, "Me and my wife Valda were living in a government project in Jackson, Tennessee. Had the idea in my head, seeing kids in the bandstand so proud of their"
new city shoes—you gotta be real poor to care about new shoes like I did—and that morning I went downstairs and wrote out the words on a potato sack—we didn’t have reason to have writing paper around.”

THE ROCKABILLY SOUND

These poor youths combined the two indigenous musical forms of the rural American South: the blues and country music. Like the Delmore Brothers in the 1930s and Arthur “Guitar Boogie” Smith in the 1940s, Elvis Presley looked to both African-American and white music for inspiration. A member of the evangelical First Assembly of God Church in Tupelo, Elvis “used to go to these religious singings all the time. There were these singers, perfectly fine singers, but nobody responded to them. Then there was the preachers and they cut up all over the place, jumpin’ on the piano, movin’ ever’ which way. The audience liked ‘em. I guess I learned from them.”

Elvis listened to bluesmen of the Mississippi Delta such as Big Bill Broonzy, B. B. King, John Lee Hooker, and Chester (“Howlin’ Wolf”) Burnett, hearing them on late-night radio and in the clubs along Beale Street in Memphis, one of the main thoroughfares of African-American musical culture in the South. According to blues great B. B. King, “I knew Elvis before he was popular. He used to come around and be around us a lot. There was a place we used to go and hang out on Beale Street. People had like pawn shops there and a lot of us used to hang around in certain of these places and this was where I met him.”

The Presley sound also was steeped in the country-and-western tradition of the South—Roy Acuff, Ernest Tubb, Ted Daffan, Bob Wills, and Jimmie Rodgers. In late 1954, Elvis, then called the King of the Western Bop, played the Bel Air Club in Memphis with bassist Bill Black and guitarist Scotty Moore in Doug Poindexter’s Starlite Wranglers. At that time, recalled Poindexter, “We were strictly a country band. Elvis worked hard at fitting in, but he sure didn’t cause too many riots in them days.”

Presley’s first recordings revealed his dual influences: a “race” number written by Arthur (“Big Boy”) Crudup, “That’s All Right, Mama,” and a Bill Monroe country tune, “Blue Moon of Kentucky.” As Presley indicated at the time, “I love the rhythm and beat of good rock and roll music and I think most people like it too. After all, it’s a combination of folk or hillbilly music and gospel singing.”

Ironically at least to self-righteous Northerners, Southern whites incorporated African-American sounds into their music. “The breakthrough didn’t come, as you might expect, in the North,” observed Atlantic Records co-founder Ahmet Ertegun. “No, it was ‘prejudiced’ white Southerners who began programming R & B. They began playing Fats Domino, Ivory Joe Hunter, Roy Milton, Ruth Brown, Amos Milburn, because young white teenagers heard them on those top-of-the-dial stations and began requesting them. What the hell was Elvis listening to when he was growing up?” Added Jerry Wexler, another force behind Atlantic: “Despite the Ku Klux Klan and bloodshed, the Southern white is a helluva lot closer to the Negro psyche and black soul than your liberal white Northerner.”

Figure 2.1 Million-dollar quartet of Sun Records. From left to right: Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Elvis Presley, and Johnny Cash. Permission by: Sun Entertainment Corporation.

SUN RECORDS AND ELVIS

Many Southern rockabilly recorded their brand of raucous black-and-white blues at the Sun Record Company in Memphis, which was owned by Sam Phillips. Phillips, growing up near Florence, Alabama, and working in the cotton fields as a boy, seldom noticed “white people singing a lot when they were chopping cotton, but the odd part about it is I never heard a black man who couldn’t sing good. Even off-key, it had a spontaneity about it that would grab my ear.” He “got turned on to rock and roll immediately, when it was still rhythm and blues,” he later related. “I always felt that rhythm and blues had a special viability.” During the early 1940s, a young Phillips landed a job as a disc jockey at WLAY in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, moved to WLAC in Nashville, and ended up at WREC in Memphis.

Phillips, earning his certification as a radio engineer through a correspondence program, built his own recording studio in a converted radiator shop on Union Avenue in Memphis to record R & B artists, since, in his words, “There was no place in the South they could go to record. The nearest place they made so-called
race records—which was soon to be called rhythm and blues—was Chicago.” He cut sides for such independent companies as Chess and Modern with such performers as Howlin’ Wolf, Big Walter Horton, Joe Louis Hill, Rosco Gordon (who began to combine R & B and country), B. B. King, and Jackie Brenston, who with the Ike Turner band cut “Rocket 88.”

The R & B orientation of Sun Records began to change during the early 1950s. Many of the best African-American performers in Memphis, such as B. B. King and Howlin’ Wolf, moved to Chicago, the rhythm-and-blues capital of the world, and the artists remaining at Sun sold only a few discs. Phillips, still in his twenties, also sought a younger audience. As he told Rolling Stone magazine, he wanted his records to appeal “most especially to young whites, young blacks, and then thirdly to the older blacks. . . . There was just no music for young people then except for a few little kiddie records put out by the major labels.” Faced with a declining business in R & B, Phillips confided to his secretary that, “If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars.”

Elvis Presley walked into the Sun Records studio and gave Sam Phillips the sound he sought. In 1953, eighteen-year-old Presley recorded the Ink Spots’ “My Happiness” as a present for his mother at the Memphis Recording Service, a section of the Sun Studio where anyone could record a 10-inch acetate for $4. On a Friday in January 1954, he returned and cut his second disc—a ballad, “Casual Love,” and a country tune, “I’ll Never Stand in Your Way.” Marion Keisker, the secretary at the studio, taped the takes and rushed them to her boss.

After several weeks, Phillips telephoned Presley to make arrangements for some recording sessions. Presley, guitarist Scotty Moore, and bass player Bill Black struggled without results until finally a disgusted Phillips “went back to the booth. I left the mike open, and I think that Elvis felt like, ‘What the hell do I have to lose?’ I’m really gonna blow his head off, man. And they cut down on ‘That’s All Right, Mama,’ and, hell, man, they were just as instinctive as they could be.”

Dewey Phillips, the WHBQ disc jockey who hosted the R & B radio show Red Hot and Blue, received the record from the Sun owner the next day. On July 7, 1954, recalled Sam Phillips, Dewey “played that thing, and the phones started ringing. Honey, I’ll tell you, all hell broke loose.” The disc jockey then interviewed the new local sensation. In Dewey’s words, “I asked him where he went to high school and he said Humes. I wanted to get that out, because a lot of people listening thought he was colored.” Within ten days, more than 5,000 orders streamed into the Sun offices for the record that hit the top position in the Memphis charts.

Elvis’s live performances contributed to the hysteria. “In his first public show,” Phillips remembered, “we played him at a little club up here at Summer and Medenhall. I went out there that night and introduced Elvis. Now this was kind of out in the country and way out on the highway, as they say. It was just a joint. Here is a bunch of hard-drinking people, and he ain’t necessarily playing rhythm and blues, and he didn’t look conventional like they did. He looked a little greasy, as they called it then. And the reaction was just incredible.”

The wild reaction over Presley intensified during Elvis's tour of the South in the summer of 1955. In Jacksonville, Florida, at the Gator Bowl on May 13, rabid fans chased Elvis backstage and cornered him. According to Mae Axton, a concert promoter, substitute English teacher, and co-writer of “Heartbreak Hotel,” “at least 50 girls were tearing at Elvis. They’d pull off his coat and shirt and ripped them to shreds. They all wanted a souvenir. Elvis started running and climbed on top of the shower stall. They pulled his shoes and socks off and were even trying to get his pants off when I finally arrived with the security guard.” Afterward, Presley told country singer Faron Young, who also appeared on the bill at the concert, that “them little girls are strong.” “Yeah,” agreed Young, “one of them you can whip; but 50 of ’em get a hold of your ass, and it’s just like a vacuum cleaner sucking on you. You can’t get away.” “From then on,” remembered Faron Young, “that was the thing to do—just to get him, tear his clothes off, pull out his hair, or something.”

As Faron Young suggested, the Presley mania continued unabated. On July 4, 1955, in DeLeon, Texas, fans shredded Presley’s pink shirt—a trademark by now—and tore the shoes from his feet. One female admirer from Amarillo, Texas, suffered a gash in her leg at the concert. “But who cares if it left a scar,” she told a Newsweek reporter. “I got it trying to see Elvis and I’m proud of it. This must be what memories are made of.”

Country singer Bob Luman recalled a similar scene at Kilgore, Texas. “The cat came out in red pants and a green coat and a pink shirt and socks,” he told writer Paul Hemphill, “and he had this sneer on his face and he stood behind the mike for five minutes, I’ll bet, before he made a move. Then he hit his guitar a lick, and he broke two strings. So there he was, these two strings dangling, and he hadn’t done anything yet, and these high school girls were screaming and fainting and running up to the stage, and then he started to move his hips real slow like he had a thing for his guitar. That was Elvis Presley when he was about nineteen, playing Kilgore, Texas.”

The extreme reaction to Presley came from teens, especially teenage girls, born during and immediately after World War II, who had just reached adolescence. They perceived Elvis’s stage act as a sexual call to arms. “The girls went crazy!” remembered guitarist Scotty Moore. “Elvis didn’t know why; none of us knew why. When we came off the stage, somebody told Elvis it was because he was shaking his leg. That was the natural thing for him. It wasn’t planned. . . . Naturally, once he found out what was happening, he started embellishing on that real quick.” To the adolescent girls in the audience, like one screaming, teary-eyed Florida fan, Elvis became “just a great big, beautiful hunk of forbidden fruit.”

Presley, attracting wild-eyed, teenaged fans, began to climb the charts. In early 1955, the singer had a local hit with “Good Rockin’ Tonight.” On October 16, 1955, he started a thirteen-month-long stint on the influential Louisiana Hayride show. Broadcast on KWTH in Shreveport, Louisiana, to listeners as far away as California and sometimes televised locally, the Hayride helped propel Presley’s “Baby, Let’s Play House” to number 10 and “Mystery Train” to the top slot on the national country-and-western chart.
"THE KILLER"

Sam Phillips, buoyed by his success with Presley, began to record other young Southerners who had the same gritty, jumpy sound. A persistent Jerry Lee Lewis, nicknamed "The Killer" in high school, joined Sun in 1956. Influenced both by the gospel sound and country singer Jimmie Rodgers, Lewis first played piano publicly at age fourteen with a local country band in a Ford dealership parking lot. Five years later, a determined Jerry Lee headed for Memphis and met Jack Clement, the producer at the Sun studio. According to Lewis, Clement "told me he didn't have time to make a tape with me, but I told him he was going to do it or I'd whip him. I had driven up to Memphis from Ferriday, Louisiana—286 miles. I sold 9 dozen eggs to pay for the gas. I said, 'You've got the time. I'm going to play the piano and you're going to put it on tape for Sam Phillips.'" He said, "Well, if you feel that strongly about it, you must be good."

When Phillips returned from a long-deserved vacation in Daytona Beach, Clement put Lewis's "Crazy Arms" on the sound system, and the Sun owner screamed, "Where the hell did that man come from? He played that piano with abandon," Phillips later remembered. "A lot of people do that, but I could hear between the stuff that he played and he didn't play, that spiritual thing. Jerry is very spiritual."

In December 1956, Sun released Lewis's "Crazy Arms," which entered the lower reaches of the charts. For the next year, Jerry Lee backed a few lesser-known Sun acts and added drummer James Van Eaton and guitarist Roland James to his band. In 1957, Sam Phillips recorded Jerry Lee Lewis and his new band ripping through an earth-shattering version of "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On" for his second Sun disc, which sold 60,000 copies regionally soon after its release.

Phillips, in dire financial straits, decided to put Sun's efforts behind the single. "I knew the only hope to make Sun a successful and big company was that we take Jerry Lee Lewis and put everything behind him and use his talent to create all the other Sun personalities," remarked Judd Phillips, Sam's brother and a Sun executive. The promotion package included a spot on the popular Steve Allen Show—the close rival of the Ed Sullivan Show—which showcased Lewis frantically banging the keys, kicking the piano stool into the audience, and shaking his mop of curly blonde locks until he looked like Lucifer's incarnation. The teens in the audience erupted, while the stage crew peered in disbelief. After the performance, the switchboard lit up: scandalized voices screamed their dissatisfaction, and shaky-voiced teenagers called to find out more about their new idol. In an uncharacteristic understatement, Lewis related: "Then I got on the Steve Allen Show and it busted wide open." His followed with "Great Balls of Fire," "Breathless," and "High School Confidential."

"BLUE SUEDE SHOES"

Lewis's success was matched by a steady stream of Sun rockabilly talents, among them guitarist-songwriter Carl Lee Perkins. Born near Tiptonville, Tennessee, on April 9, 1932, Perkins and his family moved near Jackson, Mississippi, where young

Carl found work at a battery factory. Eight years later, in 1953, he bought his first guitar and began to perfect a unique style. Since he seldom had the cash for new strings, he once told a reporter, "I'd slide along to where I'd had to tie a knot and push up on a string 'cause I couldn't jump over the knot. Maybe if I'd been wealthy and could have
bought new strings, I'd have slid down it and not developed the pulling up on the strings and I'd have sounded like everyone else."

Carl produced a sound that resembled the music of other rockabilly artists. He "liked Bill Monroe's fast stuff and also the colored guys, John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, their electric stuff. Even back then, I liked to do Hooker's thing: Monroe style, blues with a country beat and my own lyrics" and began to play music that sounded very much like Presley's. Bob Neal, then a disc jockey at Memphis radio station WMPS and later Presley's manager, recalled that he and Elvis saw Perkins perform "in the fall of 1954 and we were both struck by the sound Perkins was getting. It was very similar to Elvis's own." After hearing Presley's first Sun recording, Perkins himself felt that "it was identical to what our band was doing and I just knew that we could make it in the record business after that."

Perkins and his band, which included his brothers Clayton and Jay as well as W.S. (Fluke) Holland, signed with Sun in 1955 and began touring from the back of a truck, charging $1 to watch the show. That year, the Perkins band released three singles for Sun: "Movie Magg," backed by "Turn Around"; "Let the Jukebox Keep Playing," with the hard-bopping "Gone, Gone, Gone"; and in December 1955, Perkins' smash "Blue Suede Shoes," which by April 1956 topped country-and-western and R & B charts and reached the number-3 slot on the pop chart.

As he vied for the rockabilly crown, Perkins faced tragedy on March 21, 1956. On the way to New York City for an appearance on The Perry Como Hour, outside of Delaware, he was involved in a car crash that nearly killed his brother Jay and hospitalized him with a broken collarbone. "I was a poor farm boy, and with 'Shoes' I felt I had a chance but suddenly there I was in the hospital," Carl recalled bitterly.

Perkins never attained the stardom of Presley who, according to Perkins, "had everything. He had the looks, the moves, the manager, and the talent. And he didn't look like Mr. Ed, like a lot of us did." "Elvis was hitting them with sideburns, flashy clothes, and no ring on the finger. I had three kids," added Carl. After Presley hit the charts with his version of "Blue Suede Shoes," Perkins became known more for his songwriting than for his performing and worked in the shadow of the King.

Johnny Cash

Johnny Cash was the other important Sun rockabilly beside Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Carl Perkins. The son of a sharecropper, Cash joined the U.S. Air Force when, in his words, "I started writing songs. I wrote 'Folsom Prison Blues' in the Air Force in 1953. I played with a little group of musicians in my barracks. I was singing Hank Snow and Hank Williams songs with them before I ever tried to sing my own songs."

Cash also was attracted to the blues. "My favorite music," he recalled, "is people like Pink Anderson, Robert Johnson, the king of the Delta blues singers, Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters.... Those are my influences in music, those are the ones I really loved."

The songwriter signed with Sun Records in 1955 and developed his own sound. As Cash told Musician magazine, "I kind of found myself in those first months working in the studio at Sun. I discovered, let it flow." He first hit the charts with "Cry, Cry, Cry." Convincing Sam Phillips that he should record it rather than baritone singer Tennessee Ernie Ford, Cash followed with "Folsom Prison Blues." The next year, he recalled, "Elvis asked me to write him a song.... I just told a story about a shoeshine boy. I put it down and Elvis loved ['Get Rhythm']. But it came time for my next single release and Sam said, 'Elvis can't have that!'... So Sam released it with the 'Ballad of a Teenage Queen,' which got the most play for a long time." Later in 1956, Cash recorded his signature song "I Walk the Line," which eventually sold more than 1 million copies.

THE SUN ROCKABILLY STABLE

The Big Four of Sun—Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Perkins, and Johnny Cash—supported a battalion of lesser-known but nonetheless hell-bent rockabilly artists. Billy Lee Riley was probably the most promising. The wild Riley, a part-Native American who played guitar, harmonica, drums, and bass, formed the Little Green Men in 1955. He scored hits with "Flying Saucers Rock and Roll" and "Red Hot" and drove crowds to a frenzied pitch with his onstage antics. During one memorable performance, he hung from the water pipes near the stage with one hand and clutched the microphone with the other, screaming the lyrics of a song until his face turned bright pink. Though the fans went berserk, Riley never achieved major recognition. He believed that his failure stemmed from the "distribution of Sun discs. They sent out a batch of discs all together and when there was a Perkins release, a Cash release, and later Jerry Lee Lewis, the dee jays didn't want to be bothered with the rest of the bunch. The public could only afford so many at one time anyway."

Sonny Burgess, another slightly crazed rockabilly in the Sun fold, produced raw rock that attracted a local audience. A farm boy from Newport, Arkansas, Burgess heard of Sun's growing reputation and traveled to Memphis in 1955. His music, best exemplified by his minor hit "Red-Headed Woman," which sold 90,000 copies, combined a country Arkansas heritage and African-American rhythm and blues: "Yes, I really liked R & B, Fats Domino, Jimmy Reed, Muddy Waters," Burgess told a reporter. Burgess's gritty, R & B-inspired voice possessed the demonic quality of the true rockabilly. Authors Colin Escott and Martin Hawkins called Sonny's music "loosely organized chaos."

Ray Harris, who cut "Come On Little Mama" for Sun in 1956, exhibited a similar intensity. Bill Cantrell, then a Sun employee, felt that "Ray wanted to be another Elvis. He couldn't sing and he wasn't good to look at but he didn't care. Man, he was crazy. You would go to visit him and hear him practicing there on Ogden from two blocks away. He would open the door wearing nothing but his overalls and dripping with sweat. He had an old portable tape recorder and he'd go back to singing and playing and sweating. In the studio he would throw himself around with his arms like windmills. That record 'Come On Little Mama' was a triumph for the guitar man Wayne Powers and drummer Joe Riesenthal. They had to keep up with the guy." In an understatement, Billboard referred to the single as "excitable."
Not all Sun rockabillyies possessed the passion of Ray Harris. Some such as Roy Orbison were forced by Sam Phillips into the Sun mold. Orbison, raised in Wink, Texas, formed the Wink Westerners, later renamed the Teen Kings, while in high school. After a year of college, the singer remembered, “I met a couple of guys who had written ‘Ooby Dooby’ and what convinced me I was in the wrong place at the wrong time was I heard a record by a young fellow on the jukebox called ‘That’s All Right.’” Orbison headed for Memphis and in March 1956 recorded the Sun-issued “Ooby Dooby.” It sold nearly a half million copies and reached number 59 on the Billboard singles chart, which was the best chart position of a Sun disc other than hits by the Big Four of Sun. The singer, identifiable by his sunglasses, black clothes, and a near-operatic, high-pitched, ethereal voice, followed with “Rockhouse,” but only reluctantly. Said Jack Clement: “The first artist Sam gave me to record was Roy Orbison. I recorded ‘Rockhouse’ with Roy and it was good but Roy was not into what the Sun studio was capable of back then.” “I was writing more ballads then [1957],” confirmed Roy, “but I didn’t bother to ask Sam to release them. He was the boss and there was no arguing. I made some demos of things like ‘Claudette’ but that was about it. I would never have made it big with Sun. They just didn’t have the ways to get into the audience I wanted to go for.” Orbison eventually signed with Monument Records and in the early 1960s achieved popularity with a series of songs that built to powerful, dramatic, emotional crescendos: “Only the Lonely,” “Running Scared,” “Crying,” and “Ooh, Pretty Woman.”

Roy Orbison, however, proved to be the exception to the Sun rule. By late 1956, Sam Phillips had groomed a stable of white country boys who willingly sang with the feeling of black men and the intensity of whirling devishes, driving white, teenaged girls to hysteria.

THE DECCA CHALLENGE

The major record companies competed with Sun for the rockabilly market. Decca Records took the lead, signing Bill Haley and the Comets. Born in Michigan, Haley, in 1949 formed a band, the Four Aces of Western Swing, for a radio show that he hosted on station WPWA in Chester, Pennsylvania. As the Ramblin’ Yodeler, he recorded country music with the Four Aces and subsequently with the Down Homers and the Saddlemen. “My mother was a piano teacher,” he told an interviewer. “My dad, who was from Kentucky, played mandolin. And I suppose that was where the country influence came from.”

In 1950, Haley released a cover version of Jackie Brenston’s “Rocket 88,” which convinced him to combine country swing music with the R & B boogie-woogie, jump beat of Louis Jordan. “We’d begin with Jordan’s shuffle rhythm,” said Milt Gabler, the Comets’ producer at Decca. “You know, dotted eighth notes and sixteenths and we’d build on it. I’d sing Jordan riffs to the group that would be picked up by the electric guitar and tenor sax, Rudy Pompilli. They had a song that had the drive of [Jordan’s] ‘Tympany Five and the color of country and western. Rockabilly was what it was called back then.”

“We started out as a country western group, then we added a touch of rhythm and blues,” Haley recalled. “It wasn’t something we planned, it just evolved. We got to where we weren’t accepted as country western or rhythm and blues. It was hard to get bookings for a while. We were something new. We didn’t call it that at that time, but we were playing rock-and-roll.”

After a minor success with “Crazy Man Crazy” in 1952, Haley and the Comets signed with Decca in 1954. They first released “Rock Around the Clock,” a song originally cut two years earlier by Sunny Dae, who scored only a minor hit with it. The group followed with a remake of Joe Turner’s “Shake, Rattle, and Roll,” which hit the Top 10 in both the United States and Britain. In 1955, the Comets rereleased “Rock Around the Clock,” which hit the top of the charts and caused riots worldwide when it was included on the soundtrack of Blackboard Jungle, a movie that captured the spirit of teenage rebellion embodied by rock during the mid-1950s. According to rock critic Lillian Roxon, the furor over “Rock Around the Clock” was the first inkling teenagers had that they might be a force to be reckoned with, in numbers alone. If there could be one song, there could be others; there could be a whole world of songs and, then, a whole world.

Haley continued to churn out hits. During 1955 and 1956, he scored with twelve Top 40 records, including “See You Later Alligator,” “Burn That Candle,” “Dim, Dim the Lights,” “Razzle-Dazzle,” and “R-O-C-K.” In 1957, he appeared in two movies, Rock Around the Clock and Don’t Knock the Rock, which featured his music.

Though predating Elvis and laying claim to the first rockabilly success, Haley never wrestled the rock crown from Presley. He delivered a smoother sound than the jagged-edged music of Presley. The singer and his Comets also offered a tamer stage show. In 1956, Haley warned that “a lot depends on the entertainer and how he controls the crowd. The music is stimulating enough without creating additional excitement,” an apparent jab at Elvis. Just as important, Haley’s age and appearance—pudgy, balding, and thirty-two years old in 1957—compared unfavorably to that of the young, virile, swivel-hipped Elvis in the eyes of teenaged rock-and-rollers driven by raging hormones.

Decca hoping for a larger share of the teen market, signed the Rock ’n’ Roll Trio to its Coral subsidiary. Growing up in Memphis, Johnny and Dorsey Burnette met Paul Burlison in 1953 at the Crown Electric factory, the same company that employed Presley as a truck driver. Initially they played in a Hank Williams style. But when Burlison backed Howlin’ Wolf on a radio broadcast in West Memphis, the group started to blend country music with electric blues.

Beale Street in Memphis “was really happening in those days, and my dad and his friends would go down there a lot and listen to the blues guys,” remembered Billy Burnette, the son of Dorsey, who continued the rockabilly tradition of his father. “They’d buy their clothes on Beale Street, at Lanskys Brothers, where all the black people shopped. Right outside Memphis, there was a voodoo village, all black—real mystic kind of people. People who were into music would go over there and get charms and things like that. You know, a lot of real old line Southern people called my dad and my uncle white niggers. Nobody was doing rock-and-roll in those days...
except people they called white trash. When my dad and uncle started doin’ it, they were just about the first.”

The path-breaking Trio caused disturbances throughout the South with “The Train Kept a Rollin’,” “Rock Billy Boogie,” “Tear It Up,” and “Rock Therapy.” In one incident, reported the Evansville, Indiana, Courier in late 1956, “All during Burnett’s performance, the crowd of about two thousand persons kept up a continuous howl that all but drowned out the singer’s voice.” When Johnny Burnett tried to leave the stage, hundreds of wild-eyed girls attacked him and “tore his shirt to bits for souvenirs.” According to the Courier, “the singer, who had all but exhausted himself in the performance, was in sad shape when he reached the car. I shoulda laid off that last ‘Hound Dog,’” he panted. In 1956, the Trio decided to quit their jobs and move to New York City with hopes of national success. After winning first prize on Ted Mack’s Amateur Hour, the Rock ’n’ Roll Trio signed with Decca Records and recorded one seminal album before disbANDING.

That same year, Decca discovered Charles “Buddy” Holly, a skinny teenager from Lubbock, Texas, who wore thick-rimmed glasses and a shy grin. Holly had heard R & B through records and on radio programs such as Stan’s Record Rack, broadcast from Shreveport, Louisiana. As Holly’s friend Bob Montgomery explained, “Blues to us was Muddy Waters, Little Walter, and Lightnin’ Hopkins.”

As with other rockabilly, Holly also was influenced by white country music, especially bluegrass and western swing. He listened to performers such as Hank Snow and Hank Williams and, in 1953, with friends Bob Montgomery and Larry Welborn, formed a country music trio that performed at the Big D Jamboree in Dallas and regularly played on the radio as The Buddy and Bob Show. By his sixteenth birthday, Buddy already had “thought about making a career out of western music if I am good enough but I will just have to wait and see how that turns out.”

The new music of rock-and-roll changed Buddy’s plans. In early 1955, when Elvis arrived in Lubbock for an engagement at the Cotton Club, Holly and Bob Montgomery drove the new sensation around town. Later that night at the concert, recalled a Lubbock local, Buddy and Bob “went over to talk to Elvis. Later, Buddy said to me, ‘You know, he’s a real nice, friendly fellow.’ I guess Buddy was surprised that Elvis was so normal and would talk to him so easily, because Buddy thought of Elvis as a big star and really admired him.” The next day, Holly and his group backed Elvis at the grand opening of a local Pontiac dealership. “And when the next KDVA Sunday Party rolled around, Buddy was singing Elvis songs.” Added Larry Holly, Buddy’s brother. “He was on an Elvis Presley kick—he just idolized the guy. And, I mean, he sounded exactly like him. Did Elvis Presley things on the Jamboree.” Holly, interested in leather work at the time, even crafted a wallet with “ELVIS” emblazoned in pink letters on it, and in early 1956 he left the wallet at Sun Studios as a present for Presley.

Holly incorporated Presley’s style to create a unique sound. By 1957, when he formed the Crickets with Joe B. Mauldin on stand-up bass and Jerry Allison on drums, he had perfected a light, bouncy, bright rockabilly that bore traces of the unique Presley sound.

Holly took his distinctive music to the small studio of producer Norman Petty, who had already recorded hits for the Rhythm Orchids—“Party Doll” and “Stickin’ with You,” released under the names of singer Buddy Knox and bassist Jimmy Bowen. With Petty’s help, the Crickets hit the charts in 1957 with “That’ll Be the Day,” the title taken from a John Wayne line in the movie The Searchers. They followed with a series of fresh rockabilly tunes that became rock-and-roll classics: “Peggy Sue,” “Maybe Baby,” “Not Fade Away,” “Rave On,” and “Oh Boy!”
by belting out a song at the sock hop of his television high school. When Verve Records withheld royalties, Nelson signed with Imperial Records and racked up a series of hits such as “Be-Bop Baby,” “Stood Up,” “Travelin’ Man,” “Poor Little Fool,” “Lonesome Town,” and “Hello Mary Lou.” He also scored with songs written by Johnny and Dorsey Burnette, such as “Waiting in School,” “Believe What You Say,” and “A Little Too Much.” Promoted by his parents’ television show until 1966, helped by such songwriters as the Burnetts, and supported by guitarist James Burton, who would back Elvis, Ricky Nelson became a rockabilly sensation.

Liberty Records jumped into the rockabilly field with Eddie Cochran. The son of two Oklahoma City country-western fans, in 1949 Eddie moved with his family to Bell Gardens, California. While thumbing through the racks of a local record store, Cochran met Jerry Capehart, who would become his songwriter-collaborator throughout his career. In 1955, the duo traveled to Nashville, signed with American Music, and recorded “Skinny Jim,” which flopped. Trying to secure better distribution for their discs, Capehart flew to Los Angeles and convinced Si Waronker, president of Liberty Records, to invest in the rockabilly talent of his partner. After releasing a few unsuccessful singles, in late 1958, Cochran alternated between an Elvis-like whimper and a gravel-voiced growl in an anthem of teenage frustration, “Summertime Blues.” Cochran’s bopping call to arms, nearing the top of the charts, struck a chord among teenagers, who were gaining increasing power through their numbers.

**THE SELLING OF ELVIS PRESLEY**

RCA Victor lured to its label the performer who became known as the king of rock-and-roll. In 1955, amid a competitive bidding war for Presley, Steve Sholes, who produced country-and-western acts for RCA, convinced his company to offer Sun Records $35,000 for the rights to Elvis Presley’s recorded material. Sam Phillips accepted the money and surrendered all of the Presley tapes that Sun had produced. “I looked at everything for how I could take a little extra money and get myself out of a real bind,” explained Phillips. “I mean I wasn’t broke, but man, it was hand-to-mouth.”

Elvis had been sold to RCA by a new manager, Colonel Tom Parker. Born in 1910 in the Netherlands, Parker got his start in carnivals. Since the circus life, according to the Colonel, “was a day-to-day living,” he used his ingenuity to make money. For one of his ploys, he rented a cow pasture adjacent to the circus grounds and during the night herded the cows on the only road through the field, which served as the sole exit from the carnival. When unsuspecting circus goers reached the exit the next day, they could either walk through ankle-deep manure or pay the Colonel a nickel for a pony ride through it.

By the 1950s, Parker had abandoned the circus and applied his ingenious techniques to the careers of such country singers as Roy Acuff, Minnie Pearl, Eddy Arnold, and Hank Snow. In August 1955, Presley’s manager, Bob Neal, hired Parker as a special consultant. Neal eventually offered Parker the Presley management contract because, as he told Mae Axton, “I really feel that I have taken him as far as I can
As part of his media strategy, Parker tried to sell Presley on the powerful new medium of national television. Developed during the 1920s, televised images had first been offered to the public at the end of the 1930s. In 1948, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) and National Broadcasting Company (NBC) began to offer regular television programming, soon followed by the American Broadcast Company (ABC). By 1950, more than 7.3 million Americans had bought television sets, prodded by the lure of short-term consumer credit, which had increased from $8.4 billion in 1946 to more than $45 billion twelve years later. In 1953, 328 stations broadcast to nearly 27 million sets in the United States. By the time Colonel Parker began to manage Presley, the number of TV sets in American homes had increased to 37 million, and the number of stations had nearly doubled to 620, televising many programs that previously had been aired on radio. Americans could feast on TV dinners, introduced in 1954, and read about their favorite programs in the six-year-old magazine TV Guide.

Parker immediately attempted to slot the photogenic Elvis on television. After being rejected by every other variety show on national television, Presley landed a spot on the January 28, 1956, airing of Stage Show, a half-hour variety program hosted by jazz band leaders Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey and produced by Jackie Gleason as a lead-in to his popular Honeymooners comedy show. Though some organizers of the show objected to the rock-and-roller, Jackie Gleason backed Elvis. “The only person that liked Elvis—besides the public—was Jackie Gleason,” recalled Bill Randle, the influential disc jockey who helped secure the appearance for Presley and introduced the singer on the show. Supported by Gleason, Presley appeared five more times on Stage Show, last appearing on March 24, 1956. On April 3, as a favor to his manager who knew Colonel Tom Parker, comedian Milton Berle scheduled the singer for his program in the first of two appearances. On July 1, impressed with the reaction to Presley on The Milton Berle Show, Steve Allen featured Presley on his prime-time program.

Ed Sullivan, who earlier had condemned Presley as “unfit for a family audience,” noticed the reaction to Presley on The Steve Allen Show, his prime-time competitor. He agreed to pay the new rock star $50,000 for three appearances on his show, one of the two most popular television programs in America at the time. Sullivan booked Presley for his first appearance on September 9, 1956. Fearing a backlash from his usual viewers and prodded by the publicity-hungry Colonel Parker, the television host ordered that Elvis be filmed from the waist up, allowing the teenaged television audience to only imagine the pelvic gyrations that took place off screen. Creating one of the most legendary moments in television history, Sullivan attracted nearly 54 million viewers, or almost 83 percent of the television audience, to his show and helped lift Presley into national prominence.

Presley’s televised appearances exemplified the power of national television. “Presley is riding high right now with network TV appearances,” observed Billboard in February, and the release of “Heartbreak Hotel” on January 17 “should benefit from all the special plugging.” By the time he finished his six appearances on Stage Show in March, Presley had sold nearly 1 million copies of “Heartbreak Hotel” and
more than 300,000 copies of his first, self-named album, released on March 13. On April 21, eighteen days after appearing on the influential Milton Berle Show, which attracted 25 percent of the viewing public, “Heartbreak Hotel” became Presley’s first number-1 single. A few weeks after singing “Hound Dog” and “I Want You, I Need You, I Love You” on The Milton Berle Show and The Steve Allen Show, Presley again hit the top of the singles chart with both songs. After Elvis debuted “Love Me Tender” on his first Ed Sullivan show, RCA was forced to advance ship the single to demanding fans who made the record another number-1 smash.

During the next few months, Presley continued his domination of the singles chart with a number of songs, many of which he had sung during his television appearances: “Too Much,” “Don’t Be Cruel,” and “All Shook Up,” the last two written by African-American songwriter Otis Blackwell, who had penned “Great Balls of Fire” for Jerry Lee Lewis. “It was television that made Elvis’s success possible,” related Steve Allen. “What his millions of young fans responded to was obviously not his voice but Elvis himself. His face, his body, his hair, his gyrations, his cute, country-boy persona.”

Film became another medium to plug Presley, as it had for other male singers, from Rudy Vallee to Frank Sinatra. In August 1956, less than a year after Elvis signed with Colonel Parker and RCA, Elvis began production on his first feature-length film Love Me Tender. Director and co-writer Hal Kanter expanded a role to fit Presley and included songs to help sell the picture. On November 15, 1956 the film opened in 550 theaters across the country to enthusiastic crowds, despite poor reviews of Elvis’s performance.

A new Top 40 format on radio also helped promote Presley. It was pioneered in 1954 by radio chain owners Todd Storz and Gordon McLendon to rescue radio from a five-year decline caused by the popularity of television. Top 40 radio involved an instant news concept, disc jockey gags and patter, and a limited play list of roughly 40 hits that disc jockeys spun in a constant rotation.

Top 40 radio, promoting the songs of only a few artists, fueled the meteoric rise of Elvis. “There was a huge change overnight,” recalled Russ Solomon, founder of the Tower Records chain. “Everybody was interested [in Presley]. At the same moment, Top Forty radio came into play. As a result there was a very dramatic change in the way you perceived selling records. Your hit titles became more and more important.”

In mid-1956, Hank Saperstein joined Tom Parker in the Presley media blitz. Saperstein had become successful in the advertising industry through his marketing efforts for television creations such as Lassie, Wyatt Earp, Ding Dong School, and The Lone Ranger. Not to be outdone by his competitors, he had even stuffed plastic blowguns in cereal boxes to increase the sales of Kellogg’s Cornflakes. Saperstein recognized the “universality” of the Presley appeal and began to plaster Elvis’s name and picture on all types of products. “We wanted to manufacture a phenomenon,” said Saperstein. “My mission was to create someone whose name and image flashes in your mind without having to think. If you have to ask, ‘Who?’ then we did not do our job.” By 1957, Saperstein and Parker had saturated the American market.

If a loyal fan so desired, she could put on some Elvis Presley bobby socks, Elvis Presley shoes, skirt, blouse, and sweater, hang an Elvis Presley charm bracelet on one wrist, and with the other hand smear on some Elvis Presley lipstick—either Hound Dog Orange, Heartbreak Hotel Pink, or Tutti Frutti Red. She might put an Elvis Presley handkerchief in her Elvis Presley purse and head for school. Once in the classroom, she could write with her green Elvis Presley pencil, inscribed “Sincerely Yours,” and sip an Elvis Presley soft drink between class periods. After school, she could change into Elvis Presley Bermuda shorts, blue jeans, or toreador pants, write to an Elvis Presley pen pal, or play an Elvis Presley game, and fall asleep in her Elvis Presley pajamas on her Elvis Presley pillow. Her last waking memory of the day could be the Elvis Presley fluorescent portrait that hung on her wall. All told, the fan could buy seventy-eight different Elvis Presley products that grossed about $55 million by December 1957. In addition to 25 percent of Elvis’s performance royalties, Colonel Parker received a percentage of the manufacturer’s wholesale price on each item.

**Reactions Against the Presley Mania**

Many adults criticized the Presley mania. In one review, Jack Gould, television critic for the *New York Times*, wrote: “Mr. Presley has no discernible singing ability. His specialty is rhythm, songs which he renders in an undistinguished whine; his phrasing, if it can be called that, consists of the stereotyped variations that go with a beginner’s aria in a bathtub. . . . His one specialty is an accentuated movement of the body that hereetofore has been primarily identified with the repertoire of the blonde bombshells of the burlesque runway. The gyration never had anything to do with the world of popular music and still doesn’t.” Jack O’Brien of the New York *Journal-American* agreed that “Elvis Presley wiggled and wiggled with such abdominal gyrations that burlesque bombshell Georgia Southern really deserves equal time to reply in gyrating kind. He can’t sing a lick, makes up for vocal shortcomings with the weirdest and plainly planned, suggestive animation short of an aborigine’s mating dance.”

Others held similar opinions. Jack Mabley of the jazz magazine *Downbeat* did not think “the fad of Elvis Presley is going to last much longer than the fad for swallowing goldfish.” Addressing the House of Representatives, Congressman Robert MacDonald of Massachusetts viewed “with absolute horror” performers “such as Elvis Presley, Little Richard . . . and all the other hundreds of musical illiterates, whose noises presently clutter up our jukeboxes and our airways.” *Time* magazine called Presley a “sexhibitionist,” who lived “off what most parents would agree is the fat of teenagers’ heads,” and *Look* accused him of dragging “big beat” music to new lows in taste. The magazine *America* pleaded with television and radio executives to “stop handling such nauseating stuff” so “all the Presleys of our land would soon be swallowed up in the oblivion they deserve.” “Beware Elvis Presley,” the magazine cautioned. Broadway composer Oscar Hammerstein, analyzing “All Shook Up,” astutely noted that “bug” and “shook up” don’t rhyme. It’s sloppy writing.”

Fear of increasing juvenile delinquency underlay much of the backlash against Presley. The dark image of the alienated, shiftless, and violent street tough in a black leather jacket who dangled a cigarette from his lips had been popularized in books and films. The preoccupation with the teenage delinquent was reflected in paperbacks such as *Blackboard Jungle*, *Gang Rumble*, *The Hood’s Ride In*, *Teen-Age Vice*,...
Teen-Age Terror, D for Delinquent, and countless others. It also appeared in movies such as The Wild One (1954), which showcased Marlon Brando as the leader of a heartless motorcycle gang, and Rebel Without a Cause, released the next year, which starred James Dean, who with Brando symbolized teenage rebellion.

Rebel Without a Cause, explained Stewart Stern, who wrote the screenplay, dealt with “the phenomenon of what was called in those days juvenile delinquency, happening not in families that were economically deprived but in middle-class families that were emotionally deprived. Partly, people felt it had to do with the war, the fact that so many women were working for the first time away from the home, that older brothers and fathers who would have been role models for the young weren’t there, and the tremendous drive for material ‘things.’ When the kids saw that the material goods that were supposed to make their parents happy really didn’t, they began to doubt their parents’ authority,” said Stern. “The lesson of Rebel,” concluded the screenwriter, “was that if the kids could not be acknowledged or understood by their parents, at least they could be acknowledged by each other.”

Threatened by the power of youth banding together, which they identified with juvenile delinquency, adults many times linked rock-and-roll to teen violence. On April 11, 1956, Variety connected rock to a "staggering wave of juvenile violence and mayhem... On the police blotters, rock ‘n’ roll has been writing an unprecedented record. In one locale after another, rock ‘n’ roll shows, or disc hops where such tunes have been played, have touched off every type of juvenile delinquency.” The Pennsylvania Chief of Police Association contended that rock music provided "an incentive to teenage unrest," and Pittsburgh Police Inspector Fred Good felt "wherever there’s been teenage trouble lately, rock and roll has almost always been in the background." Entertainer Jackie Gleason put it succinctly, calling Elvis Presley "a guitar-playing Marlon Brando."

Teen riots increased the fear of rock-and-roll delinquents and prompted officials to bar promoters from holding rock concerts in civic buildings. In San Jose, rock fanatics routed seventy-three policemen and caused $3,000 in damage, convincing the mayor of nearby Santa Cruz to ban rock concerts. On May 3, 1958, violence erupted after an Alan Freed-hosted rock revue which headlined Jerry Lee Lewis. When police turned on the house lights before the show ended, Freed huffed, "I guess the police here in Boston don’t want you kids to have a good time," and teens streamed into the street. As Time reported, "All around the arena common citizens were set upon, robbed and sometimes beaten. A young sailor caught a knife in the belly, and two girls with him were thrashed. In all, nine men and women were roughed up enough to require hospital treatment." Though, as Time admitted, "the arena site had been the site of frequent muggings in the past" and teens probably did not participate in the violence, Boston Mayor John Hynes barred rock-and-roll shows from the city. Officials in New Haven and Newark followed the Boston example, canceling scheduled Freed-sponsored shows. After a melee among 2,700 fans at a rock show, Mayor Roland Hines of Asbury Park, New Jersey, banned all rock concerts from city dance halls. Officials in nearby Jersey City did the same a few days later.

Others mobilized against Elvis Presley. In Nashville, as St. Louis, angry parents burned effigies of Presley. In Ottawa, Canada, eight students of the Notre Dame convent were expelled for attending a local Elvis show. Yale University students handed out "I Like Ludwig [Beethoven]" buttons to counter the sale of "I Like Elvis" buttons. And a Cincinnati used-car dealer increased business with a sign that read: "We Guarantee to Break 50 Elvis Presley Records in Your Presence If You Buy One of These Cars Today."

Disc jockeys who broadcast classical and pop music also took action. In Halifax, Nova Scotia, station CJCH rigidly forbade the airplay of any Elvis discs. Nashville jockey "Great Scott" burned 600 Presley records in a public park, and a Chicago station manager smashed Elvis 45s during a broadcast. In Wildwood, New Jersey, a local disc jockey started an organization to "eliminate certain wreck and ruin artists" such as Elvis.

Even religious leaders spoke out against Presley. Reverend William Shannon commented in the Catholic Sun that "Presley and his voodoo of frustration and defiance have become symbols in our country, and we are sorry to come upon Ed Sullivan in the role of promoter. Your Catholic viewers, Mr. Sullivan, are angry." Although he had never seen Elvis, evangelist Billy Graham was "not so sure I’d want my children to see" him. Reverend Charles Howard Graff of St. John’s Episcopal Church in Greenwich Village called Elvis a "whirling dervish of sex," and Reverend Robert Gray of the Trinity Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida, believed Presley had "achieved a new low in spiritual degeneracy. If he were offered salvation tonight, he would probably say, 'No thanks, I'm on the top.'” In his sermon "Hot Rods, Reefers, and Rock and Roll," Gray warned the youth in his congregation not to attend an upcoming Presley show.

**Elvis Goes to Hollywood**

RCA Victor and Colonel Parker responded to the reaction against Presley by modifying the singer’s wild act. Presley’s appearance on The Steve Allen Show provides an early example. "We'd recognized the controversy that was building around Elvis and so we took advantage of it," said Allen. The host dressed Presley "in a tuxedo—white tie and tails—and [took] away his guitar. We thought putting Elvis in formal wardrobe to sing the song was humorous. We also asked him to stand perfectly still, and we positioned a real hound dog on a stool next to him—a dog that had been trained to do nothing but sit and look droopy." Elvis’s respectable behavior on the show stood in marked contrast to his earlier hip-shaking performances and foreshadowed a change in image.

Throughout the late 1950s and into the 1960s, Presley became more subdued, and more popular. In September 1957, the rising star split with two members of his original band, Scotty Moore and Bill Black, who had helped pioneer the distinctive Presley sound: Elvis recorded with them only sporadically during the next decade. After his return from the army in 1960, Presley recorded an operatic ballad "It's Now or Never," based on the Italian standard "O Sole Mio," which separated the singer even further from his rockabilly roots. "After the Army you had a totally polished performer," explained RCA executive Joan Deary. "These records ['It's Now or Never' and the 1960 number-1 hit "Are You Lonesome Tonight"] were not at all
based on the same appeal as 'That's Alright (Mama)' and 'Hound Dog' and 'Don't Be Cruel.' Suddenly Elvis was just not for kids."

With an expanded audience, Presley began to sell more records. He sold more than 20 million copies of "It's Now or Never," his best-selling single. Though briefly revisiting his rock roots in his 1968 television comeback, in the 1960s and 1970s Elvis followed with thirty gold records, which were mostly pop ballads. Appealing to a wide range of record buyers, Presley sold a total of more than 250 million records by the end of his career. In the history of recorded music, only Bing Crosby nears Elvis's mark with about 200 million records sold. Frank Sinatra, the bobby-socks sensation of the 1940s, sold only about 40 million discs.

Presley also broadened his fan base by opting for a safe, clean-cut image in his thirty-one feature films such as G.I. Blues, Flaming Star, Wild Star, Blue Hawaii, Follow That Dream, Kid Galahad, and Girls! Girls! Girls! Though offered dramatic roles in films such as Thunder Road, Midnight Cowboy, and West Side Story, Elvis listened to Colonel Tom Parker and settled for parts in movies written around songs, which for the most part abandoned gut-bucket rockabilly for a soothing ballad style that reinforced his new image. "Elvis would go ahead with the program and get the picture done," remembered D. J. Fontana, the drummer who played with Elvis from 1954 to 1968. "You see, the Colonel’s thought was don’t make any waves; don’t let me have a chance to mess with these people." "The Colonel’s stock answer was just ‘You come up with the money; we’ll do the picture,’ ” recalled Gene Nelson, director of two Elvis movies. "He wasn’t interested in Elvis’ latent dramatic abilities."

Presley, appealing to a wider audience, began to receive awards of all types. In 1959, the Mississippi legislature passed a resolution that lauded Elvis as a "legend and inspiration to tens of millions of Americans," who "reaffirms a historic American idea that success in our nation can still be attained through individual initiative, hard work, and abiding faith in one’s self and his creator." A few months later, a joint session of the Tennessee legislature honored Presley.

The young, working-class Presley, ceaselessly marketed by RCA and Colonel Parker, was swept away by stardom. "My daddy and I were laughing about it the other day," he told a reporter in late 1956. "He looked at me and said, ‘What happened, El? The last thing I remember is I was working in a can factory and you were still driving a truck. We all feel the same way about it still. It just caught us up.’"

The famous star enjoyed a newfound wealth. Elvis bought a fleet of Cadillacs, including one in his favorite color—pink, a $40,000, one-story ranch house in Memphis and then a $100,000 mansion, Graceland, for himself and his parents. He purchased an airplane, a truckload of television sets, a horse ranch, dozens of motorcycles and cars, and hundreds of gadgets, which he freely gave as gifts to his friends and employees.

The rock star paid dearly for his fame. As his popularity increased, Elvis found it difficult to protect his privacy. "Even today [late sixties] I’d be willing to bet a thousand dollars he could draw a hundred people in five minutes anywhere he went," mused Neal Matthews, one of the Jordanaires, Elvis’s backup singing group. "And he knows this. It’s bound to make him unhappy. He’d like to be able to walk down the street like a normal human being. He can’t be a person like anybody else." The "only time he could get out, really, was at night, or if he had the night off. He’d rent a skating rink or a movie house and rent it for the whole night and he and whoever’d be around would go to two, three movies after the movie theater had closed. That’s the only kind of entertainment he had. He couldn’t go out."

On his 1969 tour of Hawaii with Minnie Pearl, Minnie related, "There were five hundred women there and as we got out of the taxi, Elvis grabbed my arm and the women broke and mobbed us. I felt my feet going out from under me... You know, everyone wants to be number one, but that one experience was enough to convince me I don’t want it." As Minnie Pearl and her husband enjoyed the Hawaiian sun, "Elvis never got out of his room except to work. They say he came down in the middle of the night to swim. He couldn’t come down during the day. He had the penthouse suite on the top of that thing there and we’d get out and act crazy, having the best time in the world, and we’d look up there and Elvis would be standing at the window, looking down at us."

Eventually the isolation began to affect Presley. "You know, you all are lucky," Presley told D. J. Fontana and his wife in 1968. "I’m so tired of being Elvis—I don’t know what to do. I just wish I could do something else."

A depressed Elvis sometimes became violent. He destroyed television sets, pool cues, jukeboxes, and cars. "The temper was the hardest thing to take," one friend recalled. "One day he’d be the sweetest person in the world, the next day he’d burn holes in you with his eyes." As singer Johnny Rivers concluded, Elvis "had created his own world. He had to. There was nothing else for him to do." His retreat into himself ended in an untimely death in 1977.

Elvis Presley had been trapped by success. The gyrating, sneering Elvis, who taunted his audiences and worked them to a fevered pitch, had given way to a more haggard, bloated performer adorned by extravagant, sequined costumes, singing ballads to the well-dressed clientele of Las Vegas nightclubs. Sometimes the old magic sneaked through the weary flesh, but most of the original vibrancy and vitality had disappeared. Elvis was transformed from an innocent country boy who belted out a new kind of music with animalistic intensity to a well-groomed, multimillion-dollar product. The change, starting when Presley signed with RCA and becoming more pronounced during the 1960s after Presley returned from the army, signalled the end of rockabilly. Soon, teenaged crooners schooled by Dick Clark would vie for the mantle of the King.