Crossing Over: From Black Rhythm & Blues to White Rock 'n' Roll

by Reebee Garofalo

The history of popular music in this country—at least, in the twentieth century—can be described in terms of a pattern of black innovation and white popularization, which I have referred to elsewhere as "black roots, white fruits."[1] The pattern is built not only on the wellspring of creativity that black artists bring to popular music but also on the systematic exclusion of black personnel from positions of power within the industry and on the artificial separation of black and white audiences. Because of industry and audience racism, black music has been relegated to a separate and unequal marketing structure. As a result, it is only on rare occasions that black music "crosses over" into the mainstream market on its own terms. The specific practices and mechanisms that tend to institutionalize its exclusion and dilution change over time and, for the most part, remain unchallenged even to this day. In the last half century, the relative success of black artists has been determined by variables that range from individual preference and personal prejudice to organizational memberships, population migrations, material shortages, technological advances, corporate configurations, informal networks, and government investigations. Inevitably, black popular music is affected by the prevailing economic and political climate. Still, black music (and the musicians who create it) continues on its creative course and also continues, against all odds, to exert a disproportionate influence on popular music in general. In this essay, we shall investigate the phenomenon of "crossover," beginning with an analysis of the social forces that gave rise to rhythm & blues in the 1940s.

The Rise of Rhythm & Blues

Prior to World War II, the popular music market was dominated by writers and publishers of the Broadway–Hollywood axis of popular music. They exercised their collective power through the American Society of Authors, Composers, and

1. Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo, *Rock n' Roll is Here to Pay: The History and Politics of the Music Industry* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1977), Chapter 7.

Publishers (ASCAP), a "performance rights" organization that recovers royalty payments for the performance of copyrighted music. Until 1939, ASCAP was a closed society with a virtual monopoly on all copyrighted music. As proprietor of the compositions of its members, ASCAP could regulate the use of any selection in its catalogue. The organization exercised considerable power in the shaping of public taste. Membership in the society was generally skewed toward writers of show tunes and semi-serious works such as Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, and George M. Cohan. Of the society's 170 charter members, six were black: Harry Burleigh, Will Marion Cook, J. Rosamond and James Weldon Johnson, Cecil Mack, and Will Tyers.[2] While other "literate" black writers and composers (W. C. Handy, Duke Ellington) would be able to gain entrance to ASCAP, the vast majority of "untutored" black artists were routinely excluded from the society and thereby systematically denied the full benefits of copyright protection. It was primarily artists in this latter group who would later create rhythm & blues.

Earlier in the century, after a hard-fought battle, ASCAP established in practice the principle, articulated in the 1909 copyright law, that writers are entitled to compensation for the public performance of their work. But it was not until the legal principle was extended to include radio that ASCAP began to realize its full economic potential. "ASCAP income from the radio, of which the networks paid about twenty percent, had risen from $757,450 in 1932 to $5.9 million in 1937, and had then dropped to $3.8 million the following year. It increased by twelve percent, to $4.3 million, in 1939."[3]

In 1940, after more than a year of rocky negotiations with radio, ASCAP announced its intention of doubling the fee for a license when the existing agreement expired on December 31. For broadcasters, who had always considered ASCAP's demands excessive, this was the last straw. The National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), representing some six hundred radio stations, formed their own performing rights organization, Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI). "Taking advantage of ASCAP's stringent membership requirements, as well as its relative indifference to the popular and folk music being produced outside of New York and Hollywood, BMI sought out and acquired its support from the 'have not' publishers and writers in the grassroots areas."[4] When broadcasters decided to boycott ASCAP in 1941,

2. Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), p.353.
3. Russell Sanjek, *American Popular Music and Its Business: The First Four Hundred Years: Vol. III, From 1900 to 1984* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.176.
4. Nat Shapiro, *Popular Music: An Annotated Index of American Popular Songs: Vol. 2, 1940–49* (New York: Adrian Press, 1965), p.6.

BMI was ready with a catalogue of its own. For the next ten months the United States was treated to an earful of its own root music. Authentic regional styles were broadcast to a mass public intact, not yet boiled down in the national pop melting pot. Though in its initial stages BMI came up with few songs of lasting significance, the Broadway-Hollywood monopoly on popular music was challenged publicly for the first time. Without this challenge, we might never have heard from composers like Huddie Ledbetter, Arthur (Big Boy) Crudup, Roy Brown, Ivory Joe Hunter, Johnny Otis, Fats Domino, and Wynonie Harris.

The success of these artists testifies to what critic Nelson George has referred to as "an aesthetic schism between high-brow, more assimilated black styles and working-class, grassroots sounds" that had existed in the black community for a long time.[5] A number of writers, notably Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), have written at length about class differences between jazz and the blues. While jazz was unquestionably an immensely popular and influential crossover music that introduced elements of the African-American tradition into the mainstream, it was also in some ways a product of the black middle class. Many of its most notable practitioners such as Duke Ellington, Coleman Hawkins, and Fletcher Henderson were college educated. By the thirties it was a music that had "moved away from the older *lowdown* forms of blues . . . a music that still relied on [an] older Afro-American musical tradition, but one that had begun to utilize still greater amounts of popular American music as well as certain formal European traditions."[6] The artists who pioneered rhythm & blues in the forties were much closer to their blues roots. While they often retained some semblance of the big-band sound, their initial popularity in the black community represented, in many ways, a resuscitation of the "race"-record market of the twenties and thirties. "While the term 'jazz' gave Whiteman equal weight with Ellington, and Bix Beiderbecke comparable standing with Louis Armstrong," writes Nelson George, "the term 'race' was applied to forms of black music—primarily blues—that whites and, again, the black elite disdained."[7] The race records of the twenties and thirties sold well, but primarily in regional markets.

The creation of a national audience for this regional music was aided significantly by the population migrations associated with World War II. Eastern and Midwestern GIs, who were stationed in Southern military bases, were exposed to

5. Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm & Blues* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), p.176.
6. Leroi Jones, *Blues People* (New York: William Morrow, 1963), p.160.
7. George, *The Death of Rhythm & Blues*, p.9.

musical styles that had not yet become popular in the North. At the same time, large numbers of Southern African-Americans moved north and west to find work in defense plants, and they brought their music with them. In the forties, more than one million black people left the South, three times as many as the decade before. Newly emigrated African-Americans had enough money from wartime prosperity to establish themselves as an identifiable consumer group. In areas that received a high concentration of black immigrants, it was in the interest of radio stations to introduce some programming that would cater to this new audience. Gradually, some black-oriented programs, usually slotted late at night, began to appear on a few stations. It was this kind of "specialty" programming that would begin to tear down the walls of the race market at the end of the decade.

Having already alienated the music-publishing establishment of the day, the broadcasters—which is to say, radio—managed to arouse the anger of established musicians as well. The period before the end of World War II was the era of big bands, fancy ballrooms, and, most important for the musicians, live music on the radio. Radio was, in essence, their electronic ballroom; it provided very steady work. By and large, live music on radio meant live music performed by white musicians. As a rule, black musicians were barred from radio performances. Of course, there were exceptions, such as:

> live broadcasts of Duke Ellington at the Cotton Club and Chick Webb at the Savoy in Harlem, Earl [Fatha] Hines from Chicago's Grand Terrace, or maybe a late set from some California band from the West Coast Cotton Club. Significantly, these broadcasts weren't aimed at blacks. Broadcasters and advertisers were simply meeting America's demand for big-band music. These bands just happened to be black and popular.[8]

In the forties, radio began to experiment with programming recorded music. The musicians were not about to surrender their best gig to records without a fight. In 1942 the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) struck the major record labels and ordered a ban on recording. Months later, the musicians returned to the studios to find vocalists in charge. Vocalists belong to a different union—currently called the

8. *Ibid*, p.11.

American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA)—and AFTRA did not join the strike. The AFM itself thus aided the rise of solo vocalists, who were now becoming the main attraction of the big bands, by allowing them free rein in the recording studios. With the rise of vocalists, the pop charts were gradually taken over by such figures as Bing Crosby, Perry Como, Dinah Shore, Vaughn Monroe, Frankie Laine, Doris Day, Jo Stafford, and, of course, Frank Sinatra. Throughout the post-war forties the only black vocal acts to make the year-end pop charts were the more pop-sounding artists like Nat "King" Cole ("For Sentimental Reasons"), Ella Fitzgerald ("My Happiness"), the Mills Brothers ("Across the Valley from the Alamo"), and the Ink Spots ("The Gypsy"). There were never more than two black vocalists on the year-end charts in a given year.

If the rise of the solo vocalist was a psychological blow to the big bands, it was the post-war economy that dealt the death blow. After the war, it was no longer feasible to support the elaborate production of twenty-piece orchestras as a regular attraction. Ballrooms disappeared and, unable to find steady work, the big bands gradually broke up. The black big bands, which had provided much of the impetus for the big-band sound, limped along for a while on one-nighters on the dying dance-hall circuit. The better-known black bands, like Count Basie's band and Duke Ellington's, could also count on an occasional hit record such as Basie's recording of "Open the Door, Richard" for Victor, which made the year-end pop charts in 1947. Still, it was clear by then that a musical era in the United States had come to an end, and it was reflected in record sales. Between 1947 and 1949 sales dropped off more than fifty million dollars, which at the time represented more than twenty percent of the dollar volume of the industry. The situation was worse for black artists. By the end of the decade not a single black performer could be found on the year-end pop charts.

The population migrations previously mentioned opened the possibility of a nationwide market for black music, which did not exist prior to World War II. The major companies never exploited this new market during the war because a shellac shortage caused significant cutbacks in the number of records that could be manufactured. Shellac was the principal ingredient used in making the old 78rpm records. During the Pacific blockade it became almost impossible to obtain the material from India where it is secreted by a tree-crawling insect. At the height of the shortage, in order to buy a new record it was often necessary to return an old one so that it could be recycled. Since the pop-music market alone was capable of absorbing virtually all

the records that could be produced, the major labels concentrated their efforts there. The specialty fields, especially blues, jazz, and gospel, bore the brunt of the cutbacks, and were essentially abandoned by the major labels.

Whereas the shellac shortage had seriously limited the supply of specialty music, cross-cultural contact had, if anything, increased the demand. Thus, after the war ended, the major companies tried to regain control of the specialty markets. In the country & western field this proved to be relatively simple. According to pop historian Charlie Gillett:

> [T]he companies responded by heavily promoting various songs performed in versions of country & western styles. One tactic was to promote the strong Southern accent of most country & western singers as a "novelty," as Capitol did successfully with Tex Williams's "Smoke That Cigarette" in 1947, and as Columbia did for several years with various Gene Autrey songs, including "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer" (1950). Alternatively, the country & western songs that were closest to the melodramatic or sentimental modes of conventional popular songs were promoted as popular songs—or, more frequently, recorded by popular singers in a style that was halfway between country and pop.[9]

Performers such as Frankie Laine and Guy Mitchell fit this latter category. Through these various manipulations, the country music field was soon firmly back in the hands of the major companies.

The black music market proved much more difficult to absorb. Having ignored black music for a number of years, the major companies had lost touch with recent developments in the rich and constantly evolving black culture. While these companies contented themselves with connections to the most prominent black innovators of the big-band sound, other black musicians were developing styles that were much closer to the blues. As the swing era declined, the music that was brought to the fore in working-class black communities came to be called rhythm & blues. If there was a transitional figure in this development, it was Louis Jordan. Signed to Decca, a major label, Jordan and his group, the Tympani Five (actually seven members), anticipated the decline of the big bands and helped to define the instrumentation for the black dance bands that followed. With a much smaller horn section, the rhythm became

9. Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock and Roll* (New York: Outerbridge and Dienstfrey, 1970), p.9.

more pronounced. Jordan's material was composed and arranged, but selections like "Saturday Night Fishfry," "Honey Chile," and "Ain't Nobody Here But Us Chickens" evoked blues images not found in most black pop of the day.

While Jordan was said to have "jumped the blues," the rhythm & blues stars who followed in the late forties screeched, honked, and shouted. The raucous sounds of artists such as Wynonie Harris ("Good Rockin' Tonight"), John Lee Hooker ("Boogie Chillen"), saxophonist Big Jay McNeely ("Deacon's Hop"), and pianist Amos Milburn ("Chicken Shack Boogie") were something of a break from the recent musical past and a harbinger of sounds to come:

> Suddenly it was as if a great deal of the Euro-American humanist facade Afro-American music had taken on had been washed away by the war. Rhythm & blues singers literally had to shout to be heard above the clanging and strumming of the various electrified instruments and the churning rhythm sections. And somehow the louder the instrumental accompaniment and the more harshly screamed the singing, the more expressive the music was.[10]

Since this music did not readily lend itself to the production styles of the major labels, they continued to ignore the relatively smaller race market. This situation made it possible for a large number of independent labels to enter the business. It is estimated that by 1949 over four hundred new labels came into existence. Most important among these were Atlantic in New York; Savoy in Newark; King in Cincinnati; Chess in Chicago; Peacock in Houston; and Modern, Imperial, and Specialty in Los Angeles. The independents were generally hampered by a shortage of materials, lack of funds, and inadequate distribution. Yet, with a hit, profits could be substantial. Modern was able to sell its blues singles for $1.05 in the late forties, while the major companies were only getting seventy-eight cents for pop singles. Particularly with the increased affluence provided by the war, black people were willing to spend more for their music. The relatively small number of independents that survived the forties gained a foothold in the industry that would not be dislodged.

A number of technological advances set the stage for the growth and further expansion of rhythm & blues music and its eventual takeover of the pop market as rock and roll. The first of these was the introduction of magnetic tape, an invention stolen from

10. Jones, *Blues People*, p.171.

the Nazis during World War II.[11] Prior to this innovation, quality recording was tied to elaborate studios, cumbersome equipment, and a substantial capital investment. Recording facilities were located in a relatively few city centers and were firmly under the control of established corporate powers. Magnetic tape and its more versatile hardware changed that. Aside from bringing the obvious technical advantages of editing and better sound reproduction, magnetic tape made it possible for anyone to record anywhere. Operating from a small studio in Memphis, an enterprising young engineer named Sam Phillips could record B. B. King, Howlin' Wolf, Junior Parker, Rufus Thomas, and, later, Elvis Presley. The new technology clearly encouraged independent production and the formation of independent labels.

In 1948 Columbia's Dr. Peter Goldmark invented high fidelity. In what was to become known as the "battle of the speeds"—a contest that pitted Columbia's 33rpm record against RCA's 45rpm record—competition between the two giant firms yielded discs of excellent sound quality and maximum durability. These records were lighter and less breakable than the 78rpm records and were well suited to the rapidly changing pop market because they could be shipped faster and more cheaply. Again, independent production was encouraged.

Most audio and visual media—television, film, and, to a lesser extent, radio—are capital-intensive industries. They require huge sums of money for production. Records, on the other hand, do not depend on an elaborate transmission system as does television, and they are not affected by such government regulations as the assignment of frequencies on the electromagnetic spectrum. Particularly in the late forties, records emerged as a relatively inexpensive medium. It was in part for this reason that it was not easy for a few giant electronics firms to monopolize the business. Records soon became the staple of the music industry, surpassing sheet music as the major source of revenue in 1952. About the same time, radio overtook jukeboxes as the number-one hit-maker.

Another technological development strengthened local radio as the main vehicle for popularizing rhythm & blues; it involved a major media policy decision that had been made earlier in the century but which came to fruition in the early fifties. As early as 1935, RCA had announced plans to commit its research capabilities to the development of a then-unheard-of broadcast medium—television. In the late forties

11. See Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web: Broadcasting in the United States: 1933–1952* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p.204.

television became available as a consumer item. By 1951 RCA had already recovered from the cost of research and development and from the initial period of programming television stations at a loss. By 1957 there were thirty-nine million television sets in use, filling eighty percent of the homes in the United States. Because television quickly attracted most of the national advertising, network radio ad revenues fell off. Local radio grew as an effective medium for local advertisers. Experimenting successfully with new music, new programming, and new personalities, these independent stations eventually pushed aside the more staid network stations and in the process helped to revitalize the then-smaller record industry.

Local radio in the early fifties was very loosely structured. The independent deejays, or "personality jocks" as they were called, were in control. These men were not subject to the dictates of music directors, and there was nothing approaching the tightly structured programming and restrictive playlists that we see today. In the search for cheaper forms of programming, records provided the obvious answer. Record programming soon became the rule for radio, and the disc jockey replaced the live entertainment personalities who had dominated radio in the thirties and forties. Until the 1959 congressional payola hearings curtailed their power and "Top 40" programming rationalized the AM format, the independent deejays were the central figures in the record industry. They could and did make hits. Relying on their own inventiveness for popularity, they often experimented with "specialty" music as an antidote to the trivial popular fare of network radio. Rhythm & blues proved to be quite popular with white as well as black audiences. As early as 1952, Dolphin's Hollywood Record Shop, a black retail outlet, reported that its business suddenly consisted of forty percent white customers. They attributed it to independent deejays playing rhythm & blues records. Early rhythm & blues hits that were popular among both black and white audiences included Fats Domino's "The Fat Man" for Imperial (1950), Jackie Brenston's "Rocket 88" for Modern (1951), Lloyd Price's "Lawdy Miss Clawdy" for Specialty (1952), and Joe Turner's "Chains of Love" (1951), "Sweet Sixteen" (1952), and "Honey Hush" (1953) for Atlantic. All were recorded for independent labels.

As the market for black popular music expanded, so did the number of stations that played it. At first, the Deep South was the center for rhythm & blues radio. Gradually, white-oriented stations began programming some rhythm & blues shows to accommodate the potential audience for black music in Northern cities. As record

sales indicated the surging popularity of rhythm & blues among white teenagers, white stations made a growing commitment to the music, and pioneering black deejays like "Jockey" Jack Gibson in Atlanta, "Professor Bop" in Shreveport, and "Sugar Daddy" in Birmingham were soon followed by white rhythm & blues deejays such as Alan Freed, who is remembered as the "Father of Rock 'n' Roll."

Rhythm & Blues Begets Rock and Roll

The rhythm & blues that these stations were playing, the forerunner of rock and roll, was itself a hybrid form. As a category, it had been adopted by the music business in 1949 as a more palatable catch-all phrase, replacing the designation "race" music. Still a code word for black music, it encompassed styles as diverse as gospel, blues, and jazz. In the nationwide musical market made possible by radio, a number of these traditions converged with some country influence to become rock and roll. Rhythm & blues artist Johnny Otis recalled the phenomenon from a West Coast perspective:

> In the early forties a hybrid form of music developed on the West Coast. What was happening in Chicago was another kind of thing altogether. It was all rhythm & blues later, but the Chicago bands, the people that came up from the Delta, came up with harmonicas and guitars—the Muddy Waters and the rest of them. They had a certain thing, and we loved it, and we were influenced by it to a certain degree. But on the Coast, the people who were there, like myself and Roy Milton, T-Bone Walker, and Joe Liggins and the Honeydrippers, we all had big-band experience. We all thought in terms of big bands, but when it became impossible to maintain a big band and work and make a living we all had to break down, and when we broke down, we didn't break down to just a guitar and a rhythm & blues section. We still tried to maintain some of that sound of the jazz bands. We kept maybe a trumpet, a trombone, and saxes—this was a semblance of brass and reeds, and they continued to play the bop and swing riffs. And this superimposed on the country blues and boogie structure began to become rhythm & blues. And out of rhythm & blues grew rock and roll.[12]

12. Johnny Otis interviewed by the author, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1974.

By the time rock and roll established itself as an independent style, the horn section described by Otis had been reduced even further, first to a single saxophone, and then to no horns at all. The rhythmic base of the boogie structure had become even more dominant. And the music was hardly limited to California.

Although its roots were in the Deep South, the music that became rock and roll issued from just about every region in the country. Most of its formative influences, as well as virtually all of its early innovators, were black. T-Bone Walker's pioneering work with the electric guitar on the West Coast had an obvious effect on the Memphis-based B. B. King ("Three O'Clock Blues," "The Thrill is Gone"), whose single-string runs influenced dozens of rock guitarists to follow. Delta-born Muddy Waters ("Got My Mojo Working") "electrified" the blues in Chicago; shortly thereafter Bo Diddley ("Bo Diddley") crossed over into the pop market as a rock and roll star with his distinctive variant of the style. The New Orleans boogie piano of Professor Longhair influenced Fats Domino, whose successful rhythm & blues career was transformed into rock and roll legend with hits such as "Ain't That a Shame," "I'm in Love Again," and "Blueberry Hill." The jazz/gospel fusions of Ray Charles ("I Got a Woman," "What'd I Say") and the more pop-oriented gospel stylings of vocalists like Clyde McPhatter ("Treasure of Love," "A Lover's Question") and Sam Cooke ("You Send Me," "For Sentimental Reasons") brought the traditions of the black church into the secular world of rock and roll. The assertiveness of Joe Turner, veteran blues shouter from Kansas City, was taken up by female vocalists such as Ruth Brown ("5-10-15 Hours," "Mamma, He Treats Your Daughter Mean") and Lavern Baker ("Tweedle Dee," "Jim Dandy"), and carried to an extreme in the outrageous rock and roll performances of Little Richard ("Tutti-Frutti," "Long Tall Sally," "Rip It Up"). The elegant harmonies of urban vocal groups like the Orioles ("Crying in the Chapel"), the Crows ("Gee"), the Chords ("Sh-Boom"), and the Penguins ("Earth Angel") ushered in a whole genre of rock and roll known as doo wop. Even with the new name, however, there was no mistaking where this music came from. As late as 1956 *Billboard* referred to the music as "a popularized form of rhythm & blues." What made the mainstream popularity of this music that much more incredible was the vast array of social forces that stood in its way.

In the fifties one of the factors that kept rhythm & blues from expanding in popularity in its original form was the rapid turnover of artists working in the field.

Billboard reported the following in a retrospective article on the year 1952: "On the whole, the older more established artists held their own throughout the year, less than a handful of new names established themselves in the pop field, and less than that in the country & western division. The rhythm & blues department where artists turn over like leaves in the fall followed its usual pattern this year."[13]

The "usual pattern" of rhythm & blues turnover continued throughout the 1950s. Groups like the Chords, the Charms, the Spiders, the Spaniels, the Crows, and the Four Tunes, all of whom had pop hits in 1954, could not be found on the year-end pop charts one year later. Often catapulted to success from a neighborhood street corner or, like Little Richard, from a bus terminal kitchen where he was washing dishes, black musicians seldom had access to good advice about record contracts, royalty payments, marketing, promotion, or career development. As a result, they were routinely swindled out of their publishing rights and underpaid for record sales.

Rhythm & blues artist Jimmy Witherspoon recorded "Ain't Nobody's Business" on the Supreme label owned by a dentist named Al Patrick. "But I didn't get one penny royalty," complained Witherspoon. "Patrick paid me a flat fee for the session. I was supposed to get so much on each record sold, which he never paid me."[14] In some cases black artists were not paid for recording at all. Said Saul Bihari, founder of Modern, an independent label that included on its roster Lightnin' Hopkins, John Lee Hooker, Etta James, and B. B. King:

> We used to bring 'em in, give 'em a little bottle of booze and say, "Sing me a song about your girl." Or, "Sing me a song about Christmas." They'd pluck around a little on their guitars, then say "OK" and make up a song as they went along. We'd give them a subject and off they'd go. When it came time to quit, we'd give them a wave that they had ten seconds to finish.[15]

The major companies were no more principled in their treatment of black musicians. Ahmet Ertegun, the president of Atlantic, tells an interesting story about a Columbia representative who came to see him in the early years of Atlantic:

13. *Billboard* (January 3, 1953): p.3.
14. Arnold Shaw, *Honkers and Shouters: The Golden Years of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Collier Books, 1978), p.213.
15. Saul Bihari quoted in "World of Soul," *Billboard* (June 23, 1967): p.26.

He wanted to make a deal whereby Columbia would distribute for Atlantic records because we seemed to be very good at what he called "race" records. So I said, "Well, what would you offer us?" He said, "Three percent." "Three percent!" I said, "We're paying our artists more than that!" And he said, "You're paying those people royalties? You must be out of your mind!" Of course he didn't call them "people." He called them something else.[16]

Another practice that served to limit the crossover potential of black artists was the widespread use of "cover versions" of rhythm & blues hits. Strictly speaking, a cover record is a copy of an original recording performed by another artist in a style thought to be more appropriate for the mainstream market. Table 2.1 lists some of the better-known cover records. In the vast majority of cases, black artists recording for independent labels were covered by white artists signed to one of the majors. In the 1950s covers were commonly used by the major companies to capitalize on the growing popularity of rhythm & blues among white listeners. Cover records were often released within the expected chart life of the original and, owing to the superior distribution channels and promotional power of the majors, often outsold the originals. But most of them lacked the feeling and sense of excitement that the originals conveyed.

Several dozen songs were successfully covered by the majors in the early years of rock and roll. RCA began by covering Gene and Eunice's "Kokomo" with a version by Perry Como. Columbia covered the same song using Tony Bennett. Columbia and Victor were so reluctant to have anything to do with rock and roll that they were less aggressive with cover versions than other majors. Mercury and Decca had the most luck of the major companies. Mercury's Crew Cuts, aptly named for the fifties teenage audience, recorded a cover version of the Chords' "Sh-Boom" (originally on Atlantic's Cat label) that became the fifth-best-selling popular song of 1954.

Following the success of "Sh-Boom," the Crew Cuts systematically pillaged the rhythm & blues charts, covering hits like Nappy Brown's "Don't Be Angry" (Savoy), the Charms' "Gum Drop" (Deluxe), and the Penguins' "Earth Angel" (DooTone). Georgia Gibbs, also signed to Mercury, covered Etta James's "Wallflower" with a cleaned-up version called "Dance with Me, Henry." The original version sold 400,000 copies for Modern while the Gibbs cover sold one million records for Mercury. Decca

16. Ahmet Ertegun interviewed by Steve Chapple, New York, NY, July 1974.

used the McGuire Sisters (on their Coral subsidiary) to cover the Moonglows' "Sincerely" (Chess) and made it the seventh-best-selling pop single in 1955.

Cover Records and Original Artists

Song	Original Artist	Cover Artist
"Crying in the Chapel"	Sonny Til and the Orioles	June Valli
"Sh-Boom"	Chords	Crew Cuts
"Earth Angel"	Penguins	Crew Cuts
"Don't Be Angry"	Nappy Brown	Crew Cuts
"Gum Drop"	Charms	Crew Cuts
"Goodnight, Well It's Time to Go"	Spaniels	McGuire Sisters
"Sincerely"	Moonglows	McGuire Sisters
"Dance with Me, Henry" ["Wallflower"]	Etta James	Georgia Gibbs
"Tweedle Dee"	LaVern Baker	Georgia Gibbs
"Kokomo"	Gene and Eunice	Perry Como
"Shake, Rattle and Roll"	Joe Turner	Bill Haley
"Hound Dog"	Big Mama Thornton	Elvis Presley
"Money Honey"	The Drifters	Elvis Presley
"Lawdy Miss Clawdy"	Lloyd Price	Elvis Presley
"Ain't That a Shame"	Fats Domino	Pat Boone
"I Almost Lost My Mind"	Ivory Joe Hunter	Pat Boone
"Tutti Frutti"	Little Richard	Pat Boone
"Long Tall Sally"	Little Richard	Pat Boone
"I'll Be Home"	Flamingos	Pat Boone
"Hearts of Stone"	Charms	Fontaine Sisters
"Little Darlin'"	Gladiolas	Diamonds
"I'm Walkin'"	Fats Domino	Ricky Nelson
"Party Doll"	Buddy Knox	Steve Lawrence
"Butterfly"	Charlie Gracie	Andy Williams
"I Hear You Knocking"	Smiley Lewis	Gale Storm

Pat Boone, more than any other artist, built his reputation as a rock and roll singer by covering black rhythm & blues tunes. His label, Dot, was the most successful

company at the practice. In 1955, Dot got fifteen percent of the popular singles on the charts and shortly after achieved the status of a major company by setting up its own distribution system. Boone recorded "Ain't That a Shame" (Fats Domino), "I Almost Lost My Mind" (Ivory Joe Hunter), and "Tutti Frutti" (Little Richard), among others.

In order to obtain the far larger royalties from performances, record sales, and sheet-music sales available in the white-audience market, small record companies that consigned publishing and copyrights to themselves sometimes took their rhythm & blues songs to the big companies to be covered. Such practices kept the black version of the song out of the popular market and denied the original singer the royalties that would have come if the record company/publisher had pushed the first version as a potential crossover hit. By 1956, however, this initial suppression of black music was less generally successful. Rhythm & blues had merged with and changed into rock and roll, which was becoming a dominant popular style, and the original versions of songs were in demand by a more sophisticated white audience.

The profitable practice of covering records was greatly aided by the copyright laws. The appropriate law under which artists worked in the fifties had been written in 1909, and thus did not include recorded material. Under the 1909 copyright law, it was impossible to copyright a particular recording of a song; one could only copyright the original sheet music. Thus, while a publisher received a royalty payment for the use of his publication and a composer received a royalty payment for the performance of his music, no royalty was derived from the actual recording. The performer was paid only for the sales of his records. In this period of heavy cover activity it was the performer who suffered. Most of the performers whose songs were covered were black.

The wording of the 1909 copyright law often led to other abuses. Even though the royalty payments on any piece of music were supposed to be divided by the writer and the publisher (usually fifty percent each), many performers who wrote their own material never got their royalties. According to Lee Berk, lawyer and founder of the Berklee School of Music in Boston:

> The US Copyright Act speaks of a situation in which, in the case of an "employee for hire," it is the employer and not the composer who will have the right to be considered author or composer of the work. In such a case, then, the employer would also be the proprietor of the work by the fact of the employment relationship, and would have not only the right to copyright the work and name himself as copyright proprietor, but also the right to name himself composer.[17]

The name that appeared on the record might not have been the actual author of the song. More important, even if the real author were credited on the record, his name might not have been registered with the publishing rights organizations (ASCAP and BMI) that collected the royalty payments for artists.

Fred Parris, for example, wrote "In the Still of the Night" and recorded it with his own group, The Five Satins. The record is a rock and roll classic. Re-released in a number of oldies anthologies, the record has probably sold millions of copies. With proper credits, "In the Still of the Night" should have been worth tens of thousands of dollars for Parris in mechanical royalties alone (one cent for every record sold), not to mention performance royalties of 2.5 cents for every radio play. Had Parris also owned the publishing, the record would have been worth more than twice that figure. As to what really happened with the recording, Parris claimed:

> I don't know about BMI. Okay, I used to see BMI on every label, but I never knew what it meant. I didn't become a BMI writer—and this is very sad—until after the bulk of the plays on "In the Still of the Night." So what was happening was my name was on the label, I'm the writer, I'm getting a fair shake . . . I'm not going to try and incriminate anyone, but somebody else's name was in at BMI as the writer, and that was where the money came from. When I got out of the service and went to them with my problem, they said "Okay, we feel sorry for you." And again, I still didn't have enough knowledge of the business, and I didn't have enough patience, you know, to say, "Well, I'll see my attorney about this. I'll wait." Instead I wanted the money right then. They said, "Okay, we'll make it retroactive from such and such a date." But that "such and such a date" was nowhere near where the bulk of the sales were. So I came up with a figure of something like $783.[18]

A final factor that helped to suppress black music and musicians was the technological innovations in the industry that required equipment changeover in the record-buying public. The late 1940s saw the development of unbreakable 45rpm

17. Lee Eliot Berk, *Legal Protection for the Creative Musician* (Boston: Berklee Press, 1970), p.177.
18. Fred Parris interviewed by the author, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1974.

and 33rpm records that required different playback equipment than had been used for the 78rpm records. Because of a simple lack of money, the black record audience was slower to make this switch than the white. Victor and Columbia were marketing three-speed record changers by 1952, but as late as 1956, rhythm & blues records were still sold in the black community as shellac-based 78s. Independent distributors evolved formulas for predicting when a song would cross over into the white market on the basis of the demand for the disc in the 45rpm configuration. Of course, to go into a separate 45rpm pressing, a rhythm & blues record would have to show evidence of very strong sales potential. The dual technology had the effect of delaying mainstream exposure for many rhythm & blues artists. While not a conspiracy of the major record companies, the lock-and-key relationship of new and better records and the new record changers tended to isolate black music.

Even with such obstacles to overcome, the mainstream acceptance of rhythm & blues surpassed all expectations. A *Billboard* headline announced: "1955—The Year R&B Took Over Pop Field." The dramatic numerical increase of black artists in the popular market was second only to their influence in shaping public taste. Reviewing the year 1956, *Billboard* offered the following assessment:

> Looking closely at the twenty-five rhythm & blues platters that made the pop charts, it is interesting to note the great variety of rhythm & blues artists and styles that found pop acceptance. It was not only the slicker, pop-oriented singers like Clyde McPhatter and Otis Williams who hit in the pop market, but also those working in the traditional style like Shirley and Lee, Little Richard, and Fats Domino. Their impact, in fact, has virtually changed the conception of what a pop record is.[19]

By the mid-1950s this music, now called rock and roll, had become "perhaps the most profound and enduring reshaping of a dominant musical style to have taken place since the Renaissance."[20]

19. *Billboard* (December 22, 1956): p.10.
20. Christopher Small, *Music of the Common Tongue: Survival and Celebration in Afro-American Music* (New York: Riverrun Press, 1987), p.371.

Rock and Roll: Black or White?

Were it not for the dynamics of racism in our society, the man who would most likely have been crowned the "King of Rock 'n' Roll" was the son of a carpenter from St. Louis—Chuck Berry. When Berry walked into the offices of Chess Records on the recommendation of Muddy Waters, his demo of "Ida Red" (backed with a blues number, "Wee Wee Hours") had already been turned down at both Capitol and Mercury because it sounded "too country" for a black man. On the advice of Leonard Chess, Berry gave the tune a "bigger beat" and changed the title to "Maybellene," taking the name from a hair-cream bottle. Said Chess a few weeks before he died:

> I liked it, thought it was something new. I was going to New York anyway, and I took a dub to Alan [Freed] and said, "Play this." The dub didn't have Chuck's name on it or nothing. By the time I got back to Chicago, Freed had called a dozen times, saying it was his biggest record ever. History, the rest, y' know? Sure, "Wee Wee Hour," [*sic*] that was on the back side of the release, was a good tune too, but the kids wanted the big beat, cars, and young love.[21]

For his part, Freed and another deejay named Russ Fratto were credited as co-writers of the song. The country-tinged "Maybellene" went to number five on the pop charts in 1955.

> But his next four singles, performed in a blues style and presenting in their themes some strong criticisms of aspects of American life, showed his interests much more obviously. Judges and courts in "Thirty Days," credit and car salesmen in "No Money Down," high culture in "Roll Over Beethoven," and all these and more in "Too Much Monkey Business" were cause for complaint. Since these records were performed in a strong "blues" voice, the songs . . . received relatively little attention from disc jockeys.[22]

The songs Berry is best remembered for are the simpler, teen-directed, but still socially relevant recordings he turned out later, such as "School Days" and "Rock

21. Leonard Chess quoted in *Rolling Stone* (January 18, 1973): p.38.
22. Gillett, *The Sound of the City*, pp.96–97.

and Roll Music" in 1957, and "Sweet Little Sixteen" and "Johnny B. Goode" in 1958, all of which reached the Top 10 on the pop charts.

Other rock and roll artists may have had more and bigger hits than Chuck Berry, but none matched his influence in defining the style. "As rock and roll's first guitar hero, Berry, along with various rockabilly musicians, made that instrument the genre's dominant musical element, supplanting the sax of previous black stars."[23] In his writing and performing, he had the uncanny ability to relate rhythm & blues to white teenage culture without disowning his blackness. He was a true storyteller in the folkloric sense of the term, but he was also a man for his time. As he recently told his fans: "I said: 'Why can't I do as Pat Boone does and play good music for the white people and sell as well there as I could in the neighborhood?' And that's what I shot for writing 'School Day'."[24]

Berry's career was interrupted in 1962 when he was convicted of a violation of the Mann Act and sent to prison. He had done no more than bring a girl back with him from a tour in Mexico, but because she was underage, he was convicted. It took two trials. The first was vacated because of the prejudice shown by the judge, who referred to Berry as "this Negro." The underlying meaning of the conviction was shown in a headline of the time, cited by Michael Lydon. It read "Rock 'n' Roll Singer Lured Me to St. Louis, Says Fourteen-Year-Old."[25] Berry's songs continued to be recorded, and he staged a comeback in 1972 with a song as commercially successful as it was puerile: "My Ding-a-Ling."

The second wave of rock and roll performers to hit the charts were white. These were the rockabilly artists Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Gene Vincent, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Johnny Cash, and their country cousins, the Everly Brothers and Buddy Holly. Their music was widely regarded as an amalgam of rhythm & blues and country & western, the first tradition being upheld by black artists, and the second by predominantly white ones. Both rhythm & blues and country & western exhibited a spontaneity that differentiated them from the Tin Pan Alley pop of their day. But the relative contribution of each to the equally authentic rockabilly strain is more difficult to pinpoint. Johnny Cash's "I Walk the Line," for example, was closer to traditional country material, with country phrasing and the bass line providing a steady country rhythm. The Everly Brothers' close harmonies were also characteristic of the country

23. George, *The Death of Rhythm & Blues*, p.68
24. Chuck Berry interviewed in the Taylor Hackford documentary, *Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll*, 1987.
25. Michael Lydon, *Rock Folk: Portraits from the Rock 'n' Roll Pantheon* (New York: Dell, 1968), p.20.

genre, but their unorthodox, syncopated guitar riffs clearly established them as a rock and roll act. Similarly, Presley, Perkins, and Lewis often sang with a traditional country drawl, but in their up-tempo tunes the lyric phrasing and driving rhythms clearly came from the rhythm & blues tradition.

The phenomenon of country-flavored rock and roll had its origins in the rather unlikely figure of Bill Haley ("Rock Around the Clock"), a middle-aged, slightly balding guitarist who was signed to a major label. His heroes were Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys, who played a culturally mixed brand of music known as Western swing, but his sound came closer to Louis Jordan. His producer, Milt Gabler (who had also been Jordan's producer in the forties), told chronicler Arnold Shaw that he consciously modeled Haley's sound on Jordan's jump beat. "We'd begin with Jordan's shuffle rhythm," said Gabler. "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 guitars and tenor sax . . . They got a sound that had the drive of the Tympani Five and the color of country & western."[26]

Country music is usually seen as having developed from the Anglo-Celtic folk tradition. Among those immigrants from the British Isles who settled in the valleys of the Appalachian Mountains, this music retained much of its original character. In the slave-owning South, however, where most of the rockabilly artists came from, there was a continuing interaction between the European and African cultures, despite the legally enforced separation of the races. While there is no question that cultural crossover was a two-way process, there is considerable controversy over which musical elements can legitimately be considered Africanisms—and, therefore, the contribution of black artists—and to what extent they influenced styles generally performed by whites—in this case, rockabilly. The debate usually includes a discussion of variables such as tonal inflection, instrumentation, "blue notes" and musical scales, the call-and-response style, and rhythmic patterns.

According to African music scholar John Storm Roberts, there is an "intimate connection between speech and melody in African music, which arises partly from the fact that so many African languages are tonal."[27] As Hettie Jones commented, "The song you sing is what you mean to say."[28] This heightened sense of music-as-language

26. Milt Gabler quoted in Shaw, *Honkers and Shouters*, p.64.
27. John Storm Roberts, *Black Music of Two Worlds* (New York: William Morrow, 1974), p.189.
28. Hettie Jones, *Big Star Fallin' Mama* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1974), p.41.

extends to African concepts of musical instrumentation as well. In traditional African music, instruments are often used to approximate human speech. They are not simply external devices used to produce notes and "melody," as in European music. African talking drums, for example, did not send messages by using an abstract Morse code–like system of tapping. They replicated the pitch and rhythmic patterns of the language; they really talked. In addition to this "'talking' function that goes far beyond the well-known use of talking drums, or even talking flutes, xylophones, and so forth," Roberts notes that there is also a "semi-personification of instruments, which are considered to have some form of soul."[29] Centuries later Ray Charles said that it was this human quality that attracted him to country music instrumentation: "I really thought that it was somethin' about country music, even as a youngster. I couldn't figure out what it was then, but I know what it was now . . . Although I was bred in and around the blues, I always did have interest in other music, and I felt the closest music, really, to the blues [was country & western]. They'd make them steel guitars cry and whine, and it really attracted me."[30]

At first the blues was a largely improvisational music, with no standard form or rhythmic pattern. Interacting with the European diatonic scale, the blues eventually became standardized into two or three common forms, the best known of which is called the "classic" blues. The notation of the diatonic scale, however, did not accommodate the way the bluesmen really sang. Their deviations from European melodic regularity came to be known as "blue notes." A blue note sounds a little flat, but not flat enough to be the next note down on the scale. There is some controversy not over whether such tones exist but whether they constitute an Africanism. While "an ambiguous third," to use John Storm Roberts's term, appears in the music of more than one continent, the flatted seventh is more of a defining characteristic of the blues. According to noted African scholar Kwabena Nketia, "The flatted seventh is frequent and well-established in Akan vocal music."[31] Such tones are also common in rockabilly songs such as Elvis Presley's recording of "Hound Dog," and Jerry Lee Lewis's "Whole Lotta Shakin'," both of which also follow a classic twelve-bar blues structure.

Another Africanism that found its way into rock and roll was the call-and-response style. In African culture this style is used in religious ceremonies as well as

29. Roberts, *Black Music of Two Worlds*, p.190.
30. Ray Charles quoted in *Rolling Stone* (January 18, 1972): p.18.
31. Kwabena Nketia quoted in Roberts, *Black Music of Two Worlds*, p.190.

collective work. Most commonly identified with gospel music, the style was probably introduced to America in the work songs of the slaves. In traditional African music the call-and-response style exists primarily as a vocal form where a lead singer is answered by a chorus, but in America instrumental variations of this device also developed in blues and jazz. Both forms of call-and-response were evident in blues-based rock and roll. It is also possible, however, to establish a link to the more country-oriented rockabilly strain, which at times employed instrumental fills in a way that suggested an African influence.

"European and Anglo-American folk music sometimes has instrumental bridges between the verses," says Roberts. "It must be said that this is rare, however, and most Anglo-American singing was unaccompanied until so late that a black influence could be postulated," especially in those cases where the "instrumental sections were clearly used not as a bridge to lead to the next vocal line, as a European musician might use them, but as an answer to the previous one."[32] One can hear these instrumental responses in rockabilly songs such as Bill Haley's "See You Later, Alligator" and in "Wake Up Little Susie" by the Everly Brothers. In these instances, to use the words of musicologist Christopher Small, "the instrument is too much like a second voice to allow us to call it merely accompaniment; this second voice seems to work in a way which reminds us more of African call-and-response procedures than of European concepts of melody and accompaniment."[33]

The most significant contribution black music made to rock and roll, of course, was its rhythmic base. Says Small, "Rhythm is to the African musician what harmony is to the European—the central organizing principle of the art."[34] Not surprisingly, African music is polyrhythmic. In America, where slaves were generally denied the use of drums (thought to be politically dangerous, since they could be used to signal an uprising), other percussive practices such as finger popping, hand clapping, and foot stomping were developed. Polyrhythms were not found in European folk forms or their American country derivatives, which invariably accented the so-called strong beats and reinforced a single unsyncopated sustaining rhythm. The "Big Beat" that was rock and roll, which accents the second and fourth beats of each measure, was African-derived. It is found in virtually every up-tempo rock and roll tune, including the rockabilly style. In 1954 *Billboard* described Elvis Presley as "the youngster with

32. *Ibid*, pp.182–83.
33. Small, *Music of the Common Tongue*, p.201.
34. *Ibid*, p.25.

the hillbilly blues beat."[35] Bill Haley stated the issue most clearly when he told his audience, "I felt that if I could take a Dixieland tune and drop the first and third beats and accentuate the second and fourth, and add a beat the listeners could clap to as well as dance, this would be what we were after."[36]

In addition to the musical Africanisms that pervade rock and roll, including the rockabilly strain, the influence of black music and musicians can be seen in the personal lives and styles of the memorable rockabilly performers. Prior to the emergence of rockabilly, Sam Phillips, founder of the archetypal rockabilly label, Sun, had been almost exclusively a blues producer, having recorded blues giants like B. B. King, Bobby Bland, Howlin' Wolf, and James Cotton very early in their careers. According to his secretary, Marion Keisker, Phillips used to say: "If only I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars."[37] With Elvis Presley, his dream of a white man who could sing black came true, and it transformed Sun Records into an overwhelming commercial success.

Each of Phillips's white singers had grown up in an environment that mixed black and white cultures to a degree unknown in the North. This crossover of cultures created the conditions that gave rise to rockabilly, and through it to the dominant strain of rock and roll itself. Presley was reared in Mississippi until his late teens when his family moved to Memphis, Tennessee, in search of work. Later he described growing up:

> I'd play along with the radio or phonograph, and taught myself the chord positions. We were a religious family, going 'round together to sing at camp meetings and revivals, and I'd take my guitar with us when I could. I also dug the real low-down Mississippi singers, mostly Big Bill Broonzy and Big Boy Crudup, although they would scold me at home for listening to them. "Sinful music," the townsfolk in Memphis said it was. Which never bothered me, I guess.[38]

Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenhall described "Elvis Presley watching Old Charlie Burse, 'Ukulele Ike,' twitching his knee, rocking his pelvis, and rolling his

35. *Billboard* (December 11, 1954). Cited in Nick Tosches, *Country: Living Legends and Dying Metaphors in America's Biggest Music* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), p.52.
36. *New Musical Express* (September 21, 1956). Quoted in Gillett, The Sound of the City, pp.328–29.
37. Sam Phillips quoted in Peter Guralnick, *Feel Like Going Home: Portraits in Blues and Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Outerbridge and Dienstfrey, 1971), p.140.
38. Elvis Presley quoted in Gillett, *The Sound of the City*, p.36.

syllables during a show at a Beale Street honky-tonk (the style Elvis copied to launch the blue-suede blues)."[39] Similarly, Jerry Lee Lewis explained how he

> used to hang around Haney's Big House, that was a colored establishment where they had dances and such . . . We was just kids, we wasn't allowed in. So we'd slip around to the back and sneak in whenever we could. I saw a lot of 'em there, all those blues players. No, it wasn't anything about us being white, we was just too young. See, it wasn't no big thing just because it was a colored place. Of course we was about the only ones down there.[40]

Carl Perkins, the son of a sharecropper, said,

> I was raised on a plantation in the flatlands of Lake Country, Tennessee, and we were about the only white people on it. I played with colored kids, played football with socks stuffed with sand. Working in the cotton fields in the sun, music was the only escape. The colored people would sing, and I'd join in, just a little kid, and that was colored rhythm & blues, got named rock and roll, got named that in 1956, but the same music was there years before, and it was my music.[41]

Although it borrowed heavily from black culture, rockabilly was still a legitimate musical movement that integrated black-based blues with country & western styles. It had its own identity and, obviously, in singers like Presley, Perkins, and Lewis, performers of real originality and talent. Unfortunately, it is impossible to separate the popularity of white rock and roll from a racist pattern that exists in American music whereby a style that is pioneered by black artists eventually comes to be popularized, dominated, and even defined by whites as if it were their own. That has been the history of black music in America from ragtime, to jazz, to swing—and rock and roll was no exception. Johnny Otis commented that

> black artists have always been the ones in America to innovate and create and breathe life into new forms. Jazz grew out of black America and there's no question about that. However, Paul Whiteman became the king of jazz. Swing music grew

39. Margaret McKee and Fred Chisenhall, *Beale Black and Blue: Life and Music on Black America's Main Street* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: LSU Press, 1981), p.9.
40. Jerry Lee Lewis quoted in Guralnick, *Feel Like Going Home*, pp.150–91.
41. Carl Perkins quoted in Lydon, *Rock Folk*, p.32.

out of black America, created by black artists Count Basie, Duke Ellington. Benny Goodman was crowned king of swing. In the case of rock and roll, Elvis Presley—and in this case, not without some justification because he brought a lot of originality with him—became king. Not the true kings of rock and roll—Fats Domino, Little Richard, Chuck Berry . . . What happens is black people—the artists—continue to develop these things and create them and get ripped off, and the glory and the money goes to white artists. This pressure is constantly on them, to find something that whitey can't rip off.[42]

This skewed racial pattern makes the task of unearthing an accurate history of American popular music that much more difficult, and it seriously underestimates the degree of cross-cultural collaboration that has taken place. Styles are described (and defended) in terms that are clearly racial rather than musical. "[R]ockabilly is hillbilly rock and roll," insists Nick Tosches. "It was not a usurpation of black music by whites because its soul, its pneuma, was white, full of the redneck ethos."[43] "[I]t was that to a degree," acknowledges Arnold Shaw, "though it would probably be more accurate to describe it as the sound of young, white Southerners imitating black bluesmen."[44]

Were it not for the artificial separation of the races, popular-music history might read surprisingly differently. According to Jimmy Witherspoon, "Chuck Berry is a country singer. People put everybody in categories, black, white, this. Now if Chuck Berry was white, with the lyrics he writes, he would be the top country star in the world."[45] Just as an artist need not be limited to a single performance style, so pieces of music do not automatically have a genre; they can be performed in many idioms. There have been any number of country & western covers of Chuck Berry songs, including Hoyt Axton's "Maybelline," Freddy Weller's "Too Much Monkey Business" and "Promised Land," Waylon Jennings's "Brown-Eyed Handsome Man," Buck Owens's "Johnny B. Goode," Linda Rondstadt's "Back in the USA," Emmy Lou Harris's "You Never Can Tell," and Johnny Rivers's "Memphis."[46]

42. Johnny Otis interviewed by author, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1974.
43. Tosches, *Country*, p.55.
44. Shaw, *Honkers and Shouters*, p.497.
45. *Ibid*, p.215.
46. George Lipsitz, *Class and Culture in Cold War America: A Rainbow at Midnight* (South Hadley, Mass.: J. F. Bergin Publishers, 1982), p.224.

Even with these contradictions, however, the vintage rock and roll years were generally good for black musicians. From a low point of three percent in 1954, the percentage of black artists on the year-end pop charts rose to an unprecedented twenty-nine percent in 1957. In addition to Chuck Berry, black artists like the Platters ("Only You," "My Prayer," "Great Pretender," "Magic Touch"), Bill Doggett ("Honky Tonk"), Fats Domino ("I'm in Love Again," "Blueberry Hill," "I'm Walkin'," "Blue Monday"), Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers ("Why Do Fools Fall in Love"), Little Richard ("Long Tall Sally"), Sam Cooke ("You Send Me"), the Coasters ("Searchin"), Johnny Mathis ("Chances Are," "It's Not for Me to Say"), the Bobbettes ("Mr. Lee"), and Larry Williams ("Short Fat Fanny"), all made the year-end Top 50 during this period. These and other black performers also scored with lesser hits on the weekly pop charts as well.

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