

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 an electric green suit, baggy pants, a white shirt, and a wide, striped tie. He sported a 3-inch pompadour with his hair slicked back on the sides.

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 midcentury. The singer’s name was Muddy Waters, and he was playing a new, electrified music called rhythm and blues, or 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 a 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 jazz, rhythm and blues, and rock-and-roll.

Torn from their kin, enduring a brutal journey from their homes in West Africa to the American South on slave ships, and forced into a servile way of life, Africans retained continuity with their past through a variety of ways, including 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 in the fields, one slave would call or play a lead part, and fellow slaves 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.

The slaves, accustomed to dancing and singing to the beat of drums in Africa, emphasized rhythm in their music. 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 poly-rhythmic practice “patting juba.” 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 their 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 call-and-response, the rhythmic complexity, and the minor-key sound common in African music.

Such African-inspired church music, later known as spirituals, became the basis for the blues, when singers applied the religious music to secular themes. Bluesman Big Bill Broonzy, who recorded nearly two hundred 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.”



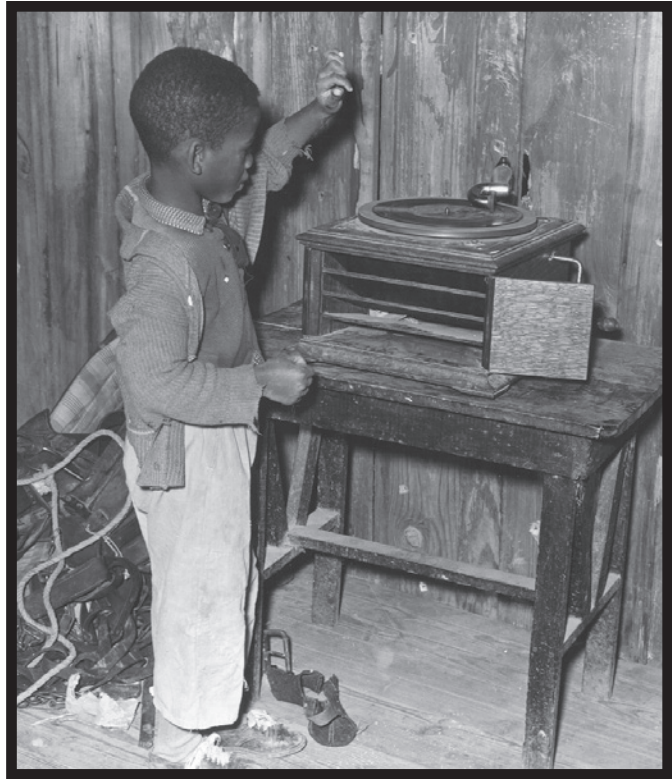
On the plantation,
1937. Photo by
Dorothea Lange.
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The blues appropriated the African-based sound that spirituals had first captured and combined it with European harmony. It featured a centuries-old, twelve-bar European harmonic progression in a standard 4/4 time. Over the twelve-bar format, the music generally repeated a set of three chords to create a call-and-response effect. In the lyrics, the singer did the same by reiterating a line twice before embellishing it with a third line in a pattern called AAB. On the bass or the bass notes, the music emphasized a three-note riff to create a distinctive and dominant rhythm sometimes called a groove or a shuffle.

Blues players distinguished this rhythmic twelve-bar structure by using blue or bent notes—the flattened third, fifth, and seventh notes of a major scale. These notes, a cornerstone of the blues, gave the sound a rising and falling sensation and distinguished it from the diatonic European scale.

Blues musicians many times played the music on instruments from their African heritage. Many started with a one-string instrument called a diddley-bow, which they created by unraveling the wire that had been wrapped around the straw of a broom and then attaching one end of the wire to a stationary object like a barn. Once they

Listening to the blues, 1930s. Photo by Russell Lee. Permission by Library of Congress, F34-31941.



could afford it, they transitioned to the more traditional guitar which surged in popularity around 1900 when Sears and Roebuck began to sell inexpensive guitars through a mail-order business. A few favored the banjo, a traditional African instrument that many 19th-century slaves played.

Following African griots who relayed oral traditions by telling stories to the beat of music, blues players spoke rhythmically about either their personal situation or a recent natural disaster like a flood. As with the hollers they had learned in the fields while sharecropping or used to communicate with their neighbors over distances in rural areas, they would follow the African oral tradition by developing a line about a recent event or a local person, repeat it, and end with a final line that completed the thought. All told, the sons of former slaves combined their African heritage with European musical elements to develop a genre called the blues.

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



Dancing at a juke joint, Memphis, 1939. Photo by Marion Post Wolcott. Permission by Library of Congress, F34-052590-D.

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. Others wanted to leave the shackles of the sharecropping farm system that had replaced plantation slavery in the South after the Civil War and which bound many ex-slaves and their children to former slave masters. Some migrated to break loose from the chains 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 restriction on European immigration. They settled in Chicago’s South and West Side neighborhoods.

The migrants to the Windy City included Big Bill Broonzy, an ex-slave’s son who worked as a plow hand in Mississippi and laid railroad track in Arkansas. He reached Chicago in 1920. In 1925, guitarist Tampa Red (b. Hudson Woodbridge)

headed from Florida to the same destination where he scored with the double entendre “Tight Like That” three years later. Pianist Eurreal Wilford (“Little Brother”) Montgomery, born in 1906 on the grounds of a Louisiana lumber company, performed at logging camps until he ended up in Chicago in 1928. A few years later, barrelhouse pianist Roosevelt Sykes, “The Honeydripper,” took the same route. In 1934, harmonica wizard John Lee (“Sonny Boy”) Williamson, the first Sonny Boy, migrated from Jackson, Tennessee to the Windy City where three years later he cut his “Good Morning Little School Girl.” George Leaner, 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 the [blues artists].”

These migrants played different styles of blues. At first, most brought country blues to the city. 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 became popularly associated with the jump-blues band of Louis Jordan who had eighteen number-one hits from 1942 to 1950. 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 pawnshop. And a lotta 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, 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. Mechanical cotton pickers introduced in the South and the need for workers in wartime Northern industrial factories pushed many African Americans northward.

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 day-long 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, and the African-American population in Chicago increased to nearly a half million. About half of the new 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 style of blues on their sharecropping plantations. On Saturdays, at parties, at picnics, and in juke joints, they listened to the twelve-bar blues of local musicians who sometimes slipped the head of a broken bottle around a finger and slid it up and down the neck of their guitars to coax an other-worldly, minor-key sound from their instruments. 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," "Pea Vine Blues," and "Tom Rushen Blues." He played with Eddie "Son" House, a fallen-away Baptist preacher who taught himself how to play the guitar at age twenty-five. In 1930, House cut such discs as "Preachin' the Blues," which featured insistent, repetitive rhythms, a bottleneck guitar-style, and field-holler-like vocals that sent chills down the spines of listeners.

Robert Johnson represents one of the most celebrated and legendary Delta bluesmen, though not the most popular at the time. He first learned harmonica and then turned to guitar. He transformed his playing after listening repeatedly to House and his accompanist Delta guitarist Willie Brown. As House related, Johnson would beg him to use his guitar. Though House told the younger man to "just leave the guitar alone," Johnson would sneak up to the instrument "and go bawling with it." "BLOO-WAH, BOOM-WAH – a dog wouldn't want to hear it!" After a year or two, continued House, Johnson returned and again asked House and Brown to play during a break. House "winked at Willie" and gave Johnson his seat. "And when that boy started playing, and when he got through, all our mouths were standing open. All!" A myth started that the mild-mannered Johnson had sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads in exchange for his new-found guitar technique.

From 1931 until his untimely death from poisoning in August 1938 at the age of 27, Johnson traveled widely throughout the South and even reached St. Louis, playing his finely crafted music. Between November 1936 and his death, he signed a contract with Paramount Records, one of the few companies that extensively recorded Delta blues artists, and cut a series of such future rock standards as "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom," "Sweet Home Chicago," "Cross Road Blues," and "Love in Vain Blues."

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 seventeen. “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 suitcase, a suit of clothes, and a guitar,” hoping to “get into the big record field.” He told a journalist, “I wanted to get out of Mississippi in the worst way. 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.” Muddy 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, and 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, Muddy 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 “(I’m Your) Hoochie Coochie Man,” “I’m a Man,” and “I 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.” “We kept that Mississippi sound,” explained Muddy himself. “We didn’t do it exactly like the older fellows—with no beat to it. We put the beat with it. You know, put a little drive to it.” The peppy, hard-driving blues of artists like Muddy Waters became known as rhythm and blues.

After three years of perfecting his electric sound in Chicago clubs, Muddy signed with Aristocrat Records, owned by local entrepreneur Evelyn Aron in partnership with Jewish immigrant brothers Leonard and Phil Chess, who had 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] 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.” Muddy remembered about his first disc, “I Can’t Be Satisfied,” backed with “Feel Like Going Home” [September 1948], “I had a hot blues out, man. I’d be driving my truck and whenever I’d see a neon beer sign, I’d stop, go in, look at the



Muddy Waters, 1950s.
Permission by Alamy.

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 December 1949 the Chess brothers bought out their partner Evelyn Aron, changed the name of the company to Chess, and released a series of Muddy Waters sides that became hits on the "race" charts. They first cut "Rollin' Stone" backed by the Robert Johnson tune "Walkin' Blues," followed by "Long Distance Call" and "Honey Bee" the next year. By the mid-1950s, Waters had defined the raucous, urbanized, electric Delta blues, recording "Got My Mojo Working," the Delta standard "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, Jimmy 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 Muddy Waters with a raw, 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, the House Rockers, who at times included harp players James Cotton and Little Junior Parker. The Wolf and his band 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'] 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 Zanzibar, and Ray and Ben Gold at the 708 Club. When Muddy went on the road, 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." Willie Dixon, hired by the Chess brothers in 1950 as a songwriter and talent scout, recalled, "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." 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 standards that would influence the course of rock-and-roll. He recorded his calling card, "Moanin' at Midnight"; "Killing Floor," 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 popularized 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.”

Bo Diddley and Other Chess Discoveries

The Chess brothers recorded other hard-driving rhythm and blues performers from the Delta. Born Otha Ellas Bates McDaniel in McComb, Mississippi, on December 30, 1928, Bo Diddley moved to the Windy City with his family when he was six years old. “Oh, I played street corners [on Maxwell Street] until I was nineteen or twenty, from about fifteen on,” he told rock critic and musician Lenny Kaye. “Then I walked the streets around Chicago for about twelve years, before I got somebody to listen to me.” Eventually, he landed a job at the 708 Club, and in June 1955, he signed with Chess Records, where reputedly he took the name Bo Diddley from a local comedian. That year, Diddley hit the R&B 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 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: Aleck “Rice” Miller (Sonny Boy Williamson II) and Marion Walter Jacobs, otherwise known as Little Walter. Miller was the undisputed king of the blues harmonica, who gained popularity through his long-running *King Biscuit Time*, a daily fifteen-minute radio show on station KFFA, broadcast from Helena, Arkansas. Although 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,” which the Allman Brothers later covered.

Walter grew up in the cotton fields of Louisiana. He learned to play the harmonica (the harp, as he called it) during his teens, patterning himself after Miller. A year after World War II, Little Walter left home and reached Chicago, where he joined the Muddy Waters band. In 1952, backed by the Muddy Waters group, he hit the chart with “Juke,” which remained in the R&B Top Ten for fourteen weeks. Little Walter quickly formed his own band, the Night Cats, and followed with several others, culminating in 1955 with his biggest commercial success, “My Babe,” a Willie Dixon composition based on the gospel song “This Train.”

By the mid-1950s, the Chess brothers had offered a new blues sound to record buyers. As Billy Boy Arnold (the harp player who backed Bo Diddley on his first Chess recording) explained, blues “changed drastically from 1940 to 1950. . . . The saxophone players couldn’t hardly get jobs. And piano was just about obsolete,” with the notable exception of Otis Spann in the Muddy Waters band. In their place, continued Arnold, Chicago blues during the 1950s featured “that harmonica blastin’ on the amplifiers. Two guitars strumming behind ’em. . . . Electric blues and harmonica and Muddy’s type of country singing and low-down blues was at its pinnacle at that

time.” In the Windy City, the entrepreneurial Chess brothers had captured the new sound on vinyl and helped make popular the guitar-driven, amplified blues, which reflected postwar America and formed the bedrock of rock-and-roll.

Modern Records: B. B. King, Elmore James, and John Lee Hooker

Other Jewish immigrants, who lived in many of the same poor urban areas as African Americans and started R&B record labels in other cities, competed with the Chess brothers to popularize electric blues. They included Syd Nathan, who established the King label; Herman Lubinsky, who started Savoy Records; and Hy Weiss, a one-time distributor of Chess Records, who opened Old Town Records in New York City with his brother Sam. “We were people who had an understanding with the African-American musicians, asserted Dave Usher, a Jewish music entrepreneur who worked as a talent scout for the Chess brothers. “You’ve got to understand, you’re talking about Eastern European Jews that were persecuted,” reasoned 1950s disc jockey Harold “Mr. Blues” Ladell. “So they’re not ones to look down upon the blacks; they’d just come out of persecution.”

Modern Records and its various subsidiaries, owned by three Jewish brothers, Saul, Joe, and Jules Bihari of Los Angeles, gave Chess Records its stiffest competition in the search for R&B talent. Starting their label in 1945, Jules recorded the artists, Saul pressed the records, and Joe promoted and sold the discs. The brothers focused on the blues. As Jules explained, “I was an operator of pinball machines and jukeboxes. I operated mostly in Negro areas, as far as jukeboxes were concerned. So naturally I took a liking to blues records.” “So one day Jules said, ‘If we can’t buy them, let’s start making [blues records],’” continued Joe Bihari. “Saul got out of the army and he had the money; he saved eight hundred dollars. We stopped operating jukeboxes once we got into the record business.”

During the early 1950s, Joe and Saul made numerous scouting trips to the Mississippi Delta and Arkansas. They also worked with talent scout and pianist Ike Turner, who then was the leader of the Rhythm Kings and later gained fame as half of the Ike and Tina Turner duo. As Joe Bihari told it, “I traveled looking for those country blues singers and musicians. Some were from the cotton fields and plantations, some walking down the highway with an old guitar slung across their backs, others playing in juke joints, nightclubs and the backwoods gambling joints.”

The Biharis signed one of the most successful rhythm and blues artists, Riley “Blues Boy” King. Born on a cotton plantation near Itta Bena, 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*. In 1940, a fifteen-year-old King bought a “little red Stella guitar” for a month’s wages, which quickly 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 eighteen, 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 1946, 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 in early 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 P.M. 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 nearly 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, swinging, 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 subsequent rock guitarists have either copied or stolen, including “Everyday I Have the Blues” and “You Upset Me Baby.”

Elmore James eventually joined B. B. King at Modern Records. Born on a farm near Richland, Mississippi, on January 27, 1918, James taught himself guitar by stringing a broom wire to a wall of his cabin and plunking on it. He listened to Delta giants such as Robert Johnson and Charley Patton; by the late 1940s, he had become a master of the slide guitar. Trumpet Records, started in Jackson, Mississippi, by Lillian McMurry, first recorded James. In 1952, the company released James’s gut-wrenching, slashing version of Robert Johnson’s “Dust My Broom.” The next year, the Bihari brothers lured 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 “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, totin’ 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 October 1948, he 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 come 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 King Snake,” and “I’m in the Mood,” which label owner Besman leased to Modern Records.

Other Independents

African-American disc jockey Vivian Carter and her husband James Bracken founded Vee-Jay Records of Chicago in 1953. Noting the success that Chess and Modern had achieved with the electrified Delta blues, 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 fifteen 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, 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 Lovin’ 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. By the early 1960s, Reed had charted on the pop chart with eleven songs.

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. 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 bed-spring 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 one million copies. Domino followed with a string of hits, including "Ain't That a Shame," "Blueberry Hill," "Blue Monday," and "I'm Walkin'." From 1949 to 1962, Fats had forty-three records that made the *Billboard* charts, twenty-three gold records, and record sales of sixty-five million units.

R&B record companies arose in cities other than Chicago and Los Angeles. In Cincinnati during 1943, record-store owner Syd Nathan set up King Records in an abandoned icehouse 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, radio pioneer 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 the major urban areas of the United States had begun to grab a market share of the record industry through R&B. In 1953, the independents already accounted for more than 80 percent of the R&B product. In just two more years, they produced 92 percent of all R&B releases, cornering an emerging market.

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, cofounder 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 such as 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, which numbered 400,000 by 1950.

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, barber shops, shoeshine 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 be citified.”

At first, only African Americans bought R&B discs. Johnny Otis, a white bandleader who grew up in a black section of Berkeley, California, 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, Peetie 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 a maximum of 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.”

During the early 1950s, more and more white teenagers began to become aware of R&B and started to purchase the music. At first, young southern whites began 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 that 40 percent of its sales were 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-six, Sonny Boy Williamson was fifty-six, John Lee Hooker was thirty-five, 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 October 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. Rather than deliver Chicago blues, he pounded the piano with a boogie-woogie bass line, played his right-hand notes at double speed, and let go high-pitched screams before the solos of his saxophonist, Lee Allen. 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 on September 14, 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 three years, Richard cut a wealth of rock



The fabulous Little Richard. *Permission by Concord Music Group, Inc.*

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 with a pompadour hairstyle and makeup, delivered his music accompanied by 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 from 1944 to 1947 and having held various 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 Johnnie Johnson on piano and Ebby 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-eight-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 or 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 Red.” 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 an upbeat rolling boogie-woogie beat on the guitar, which hinted at the marriage between country and R&B that would reach full fruition with the rockabillys. Within weeks, Berry’s upbeat song had received national airplay and by the end of August hit the Top Five Pop chart in *Billboard*. The guitarist-songwriter followed with “Roll Over Beethoven (Dig These Rhythm and Blues),” “School Day,” “Rock and Roll Music,” “Sweet Little Sixteen,” “Johnny B. Goode,” “Reelin’ and Rockin’,” and an almost endless list of other songs. He embarked on 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 three hundred television stations in the United States broadcast to more than twenty-seven 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 musical 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. Prodded by record-store owner Leo Mintz, 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 ‘n’ 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 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 twelve million consumers, many of them teens, bought the handheld 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 fifty 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. 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 "wartime baby boom."

Many of these teens enjoyed prosperous times and had money in their pockets to spend on records. Between 1940 and 1954, the average yearly family income increased from about \$5,000 to \$6,200. In general, Americans had more leisure time than during the war and started to use financial credit, which had been extended to them for the first time since before the Great Depression. 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,



School integration, Tennessee, 1956. Photo by Thomas O'Halloran.
Permission by Library of Congress.

an increasingly affluent and consumer-based society paved the way for the mass consumption of rock music.

By 1954, rock-and-roll was beginning to achieve widespread popularity among white youths. Teens bought discs by Chuck Berry and Little Richard and soon started to dance to the music. While touring with Fats Domino, Chuck Berry saw audiences beginning to integrate racially: “Salt and pepper all mixed together, and we’d say, ‘Well, look what’s happening.’” When Ralph Bass, a producer for King and then Chess Records, went on the road with African-American acts during the late 1940s and early 1950s, he observed that “they let the whites come over once in a while. Then they got ‘white spectator tickets’ for the worst corner of the joint.” “By the early fifties,” continued Bass, “they’d have white nights, or they’d put a rope in 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.” The producer concluded, “You know it was a revolution. Music did it. We did as much with our music as the civil rights acts and all of the marches, for breaking the race thing down.”

R&B and early rock-and-roll helped racially integrate America as white teens began to accept aspects of African American culture. “By their new-found attachment to rhythm and blues,” suggested Mitch Miller in April 1955, “young people might be protesting the Southern tradition of not having anything to do with colored people.” *Cashbox* had come to the same conclusion a few months earlier. Rock-and-roll, it

editorialized, “has broken down barriers which in the ordinary course of events might have taken untold amounts of time to do.” R&B “is doing a job in the Deep South that even the U.S. Supreme Court hasn’t been able to accomplish,” the jazz magazine *Downbeat* contended the same year. “In some areas, areas where segregation is the most controversial, audiences will often be half colored and half white, not in separate accommodations either.”

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, Asa “Ace” Carter of 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.” *Cashbox* 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 screaming 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.)” She added, “Rock-and-roll has a good beat and a jolly approach that keeps you on your toes.”

To jazz innovator William “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, rejecting the Court's logic, tried to waylay expected integration by outlawing rock-and-roll. In 1955, the Houston Juvenile Delinquency and Crime Commission sent local DJs a list of nearly 100 songs that it considered objectionable, all of them by African American artists. Their list 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/blues 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."

The same year, anti-R&B crusaders in other cities followed the Houston example. 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. Radio program managers in Mobile, Alabama, similarly pledged that "the offensive will be discarded." In Long Beach, the sheriff banned "offending" records from the town's jukeboxes. In nearby Los Angeles, twenty-five disc jockeys agreed to "do everything possible to avoid public airing of records which [were] believed to be objectionable."

In some cases, racist violence erupted over the new music. In April 1956, at a Nat King Cole concert, members of 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 an interviewer that "we used to have funny things like bomb scares and stuff like that because we were in South Carolina where the Ku Klux Klan 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 reiterations and sly—lewd—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 Tilton of WMFM in Madison, Wisconsin, called for "some records for adults that don't rock, roll, wham, bam, or fade to flat tones." To Chuck Blower of KTKT 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 usually was written by the performers themselves, professional songwriters who had been dominant in the music industry since the days of Tin Pan Alley 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 obscene 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.”

To reassert 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 1940 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 en masse.

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, became the most successful cover artist of the era. He wore a white sweater and white buck shoes, had attended college, and idolized Bing Crosby. After hosting the “Youth On Parade” radio program on Nashville station WSIX, Boone signed with Dot Records in early 1955. The singer, though speaking out against racism, refused “to do anything that will offend anybody. If I have to do that to be popular, I would rather not be an entertainer. I would rather not have a voice.”

In September 1955, Boone first hit the top of the charts with a cover of Fats Domino's "Ain't That a Shame." He continued to score hits during the next two years with other covers such as "At My Front Door" by the El Dorados, Big Joe Turner's "Chains of Love," and "Tutti Frutti" and "Long Tall Sally" by Little Richard, among many others. All told, Boone recorded sixty hit singles, six of them reaching the number-one 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."

Boone, as well as some of the other 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. So if it hadn't been for the vanilla versions of the R&B songs in the 1950s, you could certainly imagine that rock-'n'-roll, as we think of it, would never have happened," argued Pat Boone. "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 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 within a year 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 strayed 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 7-inch vinyl, 45-rpm record, which revolutionized the record business and made the breakable, 10-inch 78-rpm obsolete overnight. . . . [We] had to reduce the price of R&B records from a \$1.05 to 75 cents, retail. This forced many independent companies out of business." By 1956, the new 7-inch records accounted for \$70

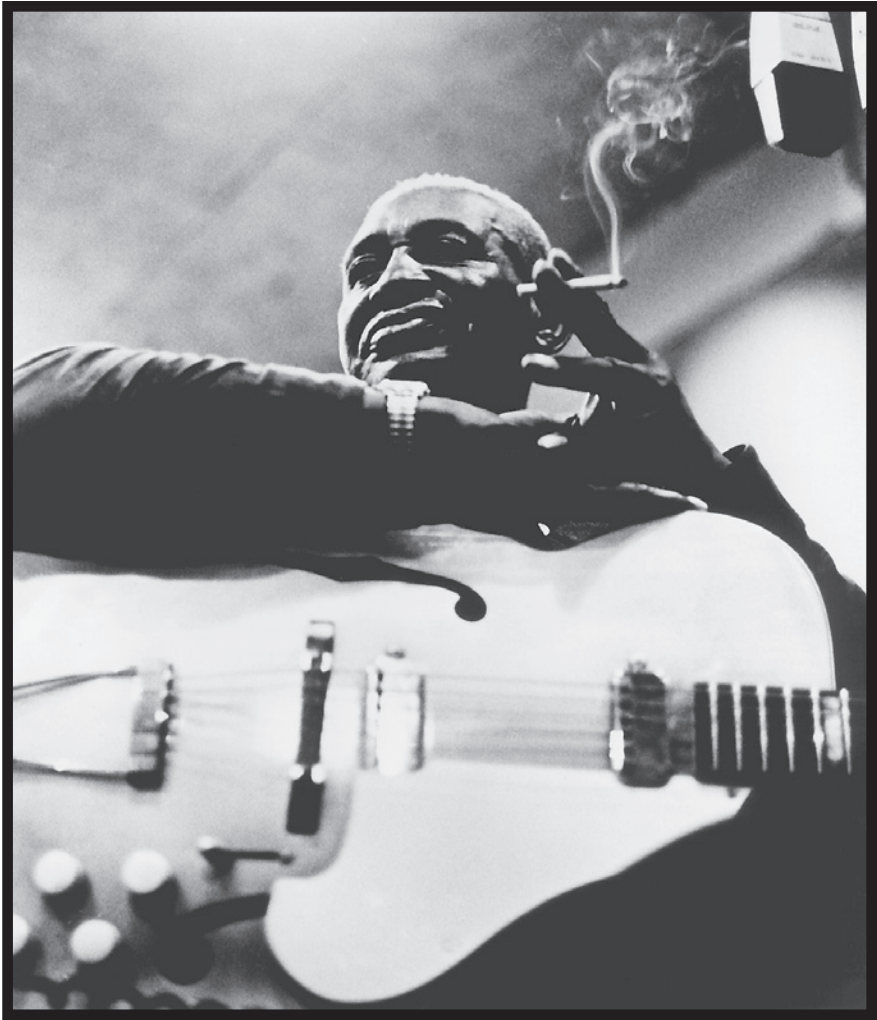
million in sales, mostly to teenagers who preferred the less breakable and the more affordable record. Two years later, the 45-rpm disc accounted for nearly 66 percent of all vinyl sales, the classical-music friendly 331/3 grabbed 24 percent and the heavy, breakable 78 rpm had fallen to less than 5 percent.

Through all of these efforts, business people 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 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 Forest, Mississippi, on August 24, 1905, 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 than eighty sides, which included "Mean Ole Frisco Blues," "Rock Me Mama," "So Glad You're Mine," "Who's Been Foolin' You," "That's All Right Mama," and "My Baby Left Me," which have been subsequently reworked 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."

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 necessary legal 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



Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup. Photo by George Wilkinson. *Permission of Delmark Records.*

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, with little money.

Though Crudup did not reap the benefits of his innovations, his voice did not go unheard. Years later, one rock-and-roll star confessed his debt to Crudup. "If I had any ambition, it was to be as good as Arthur Crudup." This admission came from Elvis Presley.