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## Using Rock 'n' Roll to Teach the History of Post-World War II America

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WHEN I TOLD MY COLLEAGUES I planned to include a section on rock 'n' roll in my United States History course I got two reactions. The highbrows suggested that rock 'n' roll "might not be a suitable academic subject." The "experts" demanded guest lecturer spots because they had listened to original airings of Alan Freed's "Moondog Rock & Roll House Parties," attended Woodstock or possessed the finest collection of Grateful Dead recordings west of the Rockies. Neither group understood that I had a more insidious motive—to get unsuspecting undergraduates interested in American History.

Most students come into my survey courses hating history. They think it is boring and has nothing to do with their lives. But almost all students, from hip kids to nerds, feel that rock 'n' roll is important to their lives. We do not have too many chances to connect with students on history subjects *they* are eager to learn about. This is why I have started to teach my main themes for the post-World War II era—the Cold War, economic prosperity, the Civil Rights Movements and regionalism in contemporary America—through the underlying narrative of the birth of rock 'n' roll. Using the following essays, all three entitled "The Birth of Rock 'n' roll," I introduce my students to the era in the following manner:

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1. I divide students into groups, each with approximately six students.
2. I then pass out *one* of the three attached essays to each student, without telling them that there are three different essays. I make sure that each group has all three of the different essays.
3. I have each student read his/her essay, listing its main points and summarizing it in two to three sentences.
4. Next, I have each student read his/her summary to the group.
5. When students realize they have different essays, I have them discuss how each of the essays contributes to understanding the birth of rock'n'roll, as well as the history of the era.
6. Each student is then given all three essays, including the glossary, to read at home. Using the essays, students write a one- to two-page essay on the relationship between rock'n'roll and aspects of postwar America, such as the Cold War, economic prosperity, regionalism and the Civil Rights Movement.
7. At the next class meeting, I divide students into groups, each with approximately four students. I have each student read his/her essay to the group. Incorporating the students' essays and using cassette recordings of appropriate music, I discuss rock'n'roll and postwar America over the next two to three class meetings. As students today are media-oriented, I recommend using the excellent PBS video series *Rock & Roll*, produced by WGBH-TV (Boston/BBC). Parts of the first two episodes are particularly appropriate for this topic.

Rock'n'roll is not the only thing that interests today's young people. I hope to find other points of interest that will connect them to their history. But for now, rock'n'roll is the vehicle I use to get students tuned-in to the history I feel they need to learn.

### **The Birth of Rock 'n' Roll** (Essay No. 1)

The roots of rock'n'roll are African American. Brought over from Africa by slaves, this music is affective and participatory. Emphasizing rhythm (beat) over melody, the music makes your body move. It is Dionysian, as defined by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche—raw, immediate and evocative. It is diametrically opposed to the Apollonian drive for order, discipline and logic. Where Apollonian music aims to calm and soothe the mind, Dionysian music seeks to excite and arouse the body.

The call-and-response style, made popular by Doo Wop groups in the 1950s, began as slave work songs. Songs reduced the monotony of manual labor in the days before the Walkman®. A plantation overseer described the way his slaves sang as they worked: "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...the other five then joined in the chorus, always repeating the same words.”

Slaves were not allowed to read or write. Songs and story-telling therefore became important forms of communication as well as central forms of entertainment. Rap does both today. In *Black Noise; Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994), Tricia Rose states that “oppressed people use language, dance, and music to mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion.” Slaves clapped, danced and slapped their bodies to the rhythm of their music. Clapping and body slapping compensated for the absence of African drums, outlawed by plantation owners, who suspected that the instruments would be used to coordinate slave revolts. Their singing and dancing gave some Northerners the impression that southern slaves were happy and content. “It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake,” according to Frederick Douglas, an ex-slave turned abolitionist, “Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears.... I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express happiness.”

Slavery therefore gave birth to the music that came to be called “the blues.” Injustices suffered by blacks after emancipation nurtured the blues. *De jure* segregation, in the form of “Jim Crow” laws, held southern blacks in inferior jobs, homes and schools. Lynchings and other forms of intimidation reminded blacks of their “proper place in society.” *De facto* segregation in the North kept blacks in ghettos and away from desirable jobs. Many northern neighborhoods required home buyers to sign covenants pledging not to sell their homes to blacks. Many labor unions did not allow blacks to join, thereby excluding them from high paying blue collar jobs. In his autobiography, Malcolm X observes that the best job a black man could hope for in New York City before World War II was to be a doorman at the Ritz Hotel.

The blues are written and performed in order to face and to escape life’s hardships—unfaithful lovers, poverty, racism and a whole lot more. “My heart is broken and it won’t mend,” Billie Holiday sings, “it’s just awful how that boy can cheat!” Leadbelly’s song describes how thirsty you get picking cotton all day and still not earn enough to keep your family fed and clothed. Lawrence Gelb tells southern blacks, “Your head tain’t no apple for dangling from a tree.... Your body no carcass for barbecuing on a spree.” Muddy Waters “got a letter this morning,” and it “said you better come home,” they “tell me your baby’s dead.” The Buddha is correct. Life is painful. But at least when you’re singing the blues you’re not experiencing the blues. A song does not need sad lyrics

or a somber rhythm in order to be a blues. What it needs is the (indescribable) “blues’ feel.” Some blues have sensual titles, such as Muddy Waters’ “Hoochie Coochie Man” and Etta James’ “Roll With Me Henry.” Some also have overtly sexual lyrics. In his song, Bo Carter tells his lover “I got ants in my pants, baby, for you.” Clara Smith sings, “I wear my skirt up to my knees, and I whip that jelly with who I please.” Some scholars feel blacks wrote overtly sexual songs in order to taunt the uptight and repressive pre-World War II white culture.

Over five million African Americans migrated out of the South between 1910 and 1950, the largest migration in American history. Most migrated to northern cities, which provided job opportunities, especially during the two world wars. There was racial prejudice in the North, but not the constant fear, humiliation and degradation blacks faced in the deep South. The migration helped create a “Renaissance” of black culture in Harlem and Chicago, with Langston Hughes as its poet laureate. In northern cities, country blues from the Mississippi Delta played alongside an upbeat form of jazz from New Orleans. The raw, gut-wrenching blues of Blind Lemon Jefferson, Robert Johnson and Sonny Boy Williamson merged, in time, with the hot, sophisticated jazz of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Count Basie. Distinctions between the two dissolved in the compositions of W.C. Handy, who promoted himself as the “father of the blues.” Popular female blues singers, such as Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, often performed with jazz musicians. Jazz and blues went their own ways in the 1940s, but not before giving birth to “boogie woogie,” “swing” and other hybrid styles. In Chicago’s southside, dozens of African American bands played at clubs and all-night parties. Electrical amplification gave the music the tension, volume and confusion of the city—as in the blues of Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf. Record companies, eager to cash in on the diverse outpouring of black music that rivaled Tin Pan Alley compositions, marketed it as “rhythm & blues.”

There were significant events in the fight for black civil rights during the 1950s. The United States Supreme Court ordered the integration of public schools in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). Buses in Montgomery, Alabama were desegregated after a thirteen-month boycott (1955-56). The pace of integration, however, was painfully slow, as white resistance to it hardened. One exception, for some, was in their music consumption. Before the 1950s, the rhythm & blues audience was almost exclusively African American. Independent r&b labels were able to stay in business because blacks, excluded from many forms of entertainment, spent a larger portion of their earnings on records. Polite white society rejected rhythm & blues. They regarded its suggestive lyrics and

insistent beat as vile and vulgar. But white teenagers, bored with their parents' music, turned to r&b in the 1950s. They purchased Chuck Berry, Little Richard and Fats Domino records, enabling these records to "cross-over" to the mainstream American popular music charts. In order to avoid r&b's sexual stigma, record labels marketed this "new music" as "rock'n'roll." Ironically, rock'n'roll had long been a blues euphemism for sexual intercourse. When asked how long he had been playing rock'n'roll, Fats Domino told a journalist, "most of my life, only we called it rhythm & blues."

### **The Birth of Rock 'n' Roll (Essay No. 2)**

Rock'n'roll was born in the South. "The South," according to historian Dewey Grantham, "has been the region most sharply at odds with the rest of the nation." This begins with the Civil War and Reconstruction. The South, as historian C. Van Woodward points out, is the only region of the United States that was defeated in war and suffered military occupation. In *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction* (1951), Woodward argues that the South agreed in 1877 to become "a satellite of the dominant region" if the North would not interfere with its racial policies. This brought about a reconciliation. Grantham notes, however, that it also made the South "the nation's poorest, most isolated, and most distinctive section...less industrialized, less diversified, and less literate than other parts of the country." In *The South in Modern America* (1994), Grantham states that while the South has industrialized and diversified in the twentieth century, it has remained, for the most part, "a poor stepchild in a well-to-do American family." In 1860, Mississippi was the richest state in the union. Today it is one of the poorest.

The South is a land of displaced persons. In some ways, all southern whites since the Civil War and Reconstruction feel like displaced persons in their own lands. This is captured in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* (1936), a novel whose characters are haunted by a past that they can neither restore nor discard. The South is also inhabited by descendants of blacks brought over in chains from Africa to work on its plantations, Mexicans who find themselves as aliens in lands that belonged to their ancestors before the Mexican War and Cajuns exiled from their ancestral homes in Nova Scotia after the French and Indian Wars. "Hillbillies," living in extreme poverty along the Appalachian Mountains, have always been outsiders.

Brutal southern segregation laws kept the races "in their places." Despite segregation, blacks, whites and Hispanics interacted more in the

South than in the North. They lived with each other in the South, although not on equal bases, since colonial times. Most blacks and Hispanics did not migrate to the North until the twentieth century. There, most of them wound up in segregated urban ghettos. Relations in the rural South tend to be on a more personal basis than in northern cities. In the South, poor whites—called “rednecks,” “hillbillies” and “poor white trash”—had more in common with blacks and other minorities than with affluent whites. As sharecroppers and unskilled laborers, they shared the same dashed hopes and limited horizons. In this land of displaced persons and racial prejudice, a musical transculturation took place. Melancholy hillbilly ballads fused with gut wrenching Delta blues. They in turn combined with the Latin beat and cowboy tunes of the Southwest. This music was not European, African or Hispanic. It was American.

“Southern folk culture and music,” according to historian Bill Malone, “had been alternately scorned, viewed with condescension, exploited for their humor, romanticized, or, most often, merely ignored.” Rural Southerners sang with a high, nasal and somewhat strained tone. In the Southwest, singers yodeled and their voices would “break” under the strain of the song’s emotion. A marriage of hillbilly and cowboy music later came to be called “country & western.” Radio and records introduced country music to general audiences in the 1920s. Jimmie Rodgers, country’s first superstar, sang about trains. Trains took lovers away and brought them back. Trains also symbolized escape—from the poverty, bigotry, rigidity and despair of rural communities. This music had rough edges. Mainstream musicians often laughed at and parodied country singers. But country music was beloved. And it sold. When asked what accounted for his phenomenal success, legendary country singer Hank Williams said, “It can be explained in just one word—sincerity.”

The South shared in the nation’s economic boom after World War II. Southern per capita income tripled in the 1940s. Its economy diversified. By 1960, only ten percent of the South’s population was still engaged in farm labor. At the same time, however, its racial policy isolated the South once again. As the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other civil rights groups agitated for civil rights, most Southerners’ commitment to segregation hardened. One exception, for some, was in their music. In the 1950s, poor white teenagers in the South began to directly fuse country & western with rhythm & blues and produced a style that came to be called “rockabilly.” This did not shock most Southerners, who grew up hearing both country and blues. Buddy Holly’s group played country and rockabilly regularly to the same audiences. Bill Haley’s group changed its name from the Saddlemen, to the Country Jive Band and finally to the Comets, before recording “Rock

Around the Clock,” the song that helped launch rock’n’roll. Carl Perkins wrote “Blue Suede Shoes,” which became the rockabilly anthem. Jerry Lee Lewis jumped on his piano and pounded out “Great Balls of Fire” with his feet. And then there was Elvis.

Elvis Presley was born in 1935 to a poor sharecropper family in Tupelo, Mississippi. Evicted from their house in 1949, Elvis’ family moved to Memphis, Tennessee. Like most Southerners, Elvis began singing in church. Holiness churches provided hope and pride for poor whites and blacks, whom polite Southern society regarded as trash. In church, Elvis was impressed with the preachers who captured the congregation’s attention by “cut[ting] up all over the place, jumpin’ on the piano, movin’ ever’ which way.” He grew up listening to country, gospel and the blues. After graduating from high school, Elvis worked as a truck driver in Memphis.

Sam Phillips, who earned certification as a radio engineer through a correspondence school, built a recording studio in a converted radiator shop. His Memphis Record Company recorded anyone who could pay for the cost of producing a single record. Phillips, who grew up picking cotton in Alabama, knew the musical talent of African Americans. He also knew “there was no place in the South they could go to record.” Phillips therefore concentrated on recording rhythm & blues. Howlin’ Wolf, B.B. King and Ike Turner all made their first recordings at Phillips’ studio. Frustrated at losing these stars to northern record labels, such as Chess and Modern, Phillips created his own label—Sun Records. Apprehensive about his new venture, Phillips was rumored to have said, “If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars.”

In 1953, Elvis walked into Phillips’ studio, paid four dollars and recorded an Ink Spots’ song as a present for his mother. Elvis came back in January of 1954. This time he recorded a ballad and a country tune which Marion Keisker, Phillips’ secretary, taped and passed on to her boss. A few weeks later, Phillips telephoned Elvis to come in for a recording session. Elvis agreed. The rest is history.

### **The Birth of Rock ‘n’ Roll (Essay No. 3)**

Post-World War II America gave birth to twins—the teenager and rock’n’roll. Both were made possible by the nation’s phenomenal economic boom after the war. One reason for the boom was the war’s devastation. The United States was the only industrial power to emerge from it relatively unscathed. Germany and Japan were defeated and in



ruins. England, France and the Soviet Union, while victorious, were economically devastated. Until these nations recovered, America dominated the world economy. Another reason for the boom was the pent-up consumerism of the American people. Americans held off on purchases during the Great Depression. Rationing and other regulations limited consumption during World War II. The pent-up consumerism exploded after the war with unprecedented purchases of homes, cars, clothes and appliances. America's gross national income (GNP) increased 250 percent from 1945 to 1960. Unemployment, which averaged between fifteen percent and twenty-five percent during the Depression, remained under five percent throughout the 1950s. The net result was that the United States, with six percent of the world's population, controlled over fifty percent of its wealth.

With new found confidence and optimism in their nation's economy, American couples produced a boom in babies. America's population, which leveled off during the Depression, jumped by twenty percent after World War II. It was not unusual to see families with four, five and even six children. One European visitor noted that every young housewife he saw was pregnant. Parents followed Dr. Benjamin Spock's book *Baby and Child Care* (1946), making their children the centers of family life. Businesses welcomed babies as future consumers. The immense size of the "baby boomer" generation insured that it would be targeted for the majority of advertisement campaigns. Those born before or after the baby boom were made to feel too old or too young each time they opened a magazine or turned on the television.

The affluence, the baby boom and innovations in home building/financing prompted a migration of young white couples to the suburbs. Those who remained in the inner cities, many of them blacks and Hispanics, faced declining public services, decaying infrastructures and rising crime rates. The suburbs, on the other hand, offered young couples privacy, security and a sense of community. Having lived through the Depression and World War II, they cherished the sense of security, conformity and homogeneity that Levittowns and other suburban developments offered.

The inclination to conform was also a by-product of the Cold War. As the "iron curtain" descended on Europe in the late 1940s and China "fell" to the Communists in 1949, American leaders began to portray the Cold War as a holy struggle between the "free world" and the Soviet bloc. A policy to "contain" communism led the United States into a stalemated war in Korea (1950-54). At home, Senator Joseph McCarthy, the United States House of Representatives' Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) and numerous loyalty boards sought to expose communist

infiltrators and disloyal Americans. Government employees were fired. Hollywood actors, writers and directors were blacklisted. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed in 1953 for supposedly passing atomic bomb secrets to the Soviets. A mood of fear and suspicion descended on America. This mood was captured in the grade 'B' science fiction film *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956).

It was difficult for youngsters growing up in their secure suburbs to comprehend the gravity of events such as the Great Depression, World War II and the Cold War. They could not understand their parents' obsession with material and spiritual security. As they entered adolescence, some felt suffocated by the neighborhood barbecues, Boy Scout/Girl Scout troop meetings and television depictions of ideal suburban families in *Father Knows Best*, *Ozzie and Harriet* and *The Donna Reed Show*. Generation gaps are nothing new in history. What was new, and unique to America in the 1950s, was the birth of the teenager. Historically, adolescence meant adult work and responsibilities for all but the wealthiest Americans. America became rich enough in the 1950s to give all its youngsters longer childhoods. They now stayed in school for twelve years. Many went on to college. This extended childhood gave birth to a youth culture—based on group identity, material prosperity and the prospect of a nuclear holocaust hanging over their heads.

For some teenagers, group identity was not enough. They rebelled. Many rebels did not know what they were rebelling against, but still felt the need to rebel. Marlon Brando, who plays a motorcycle gang leader in the film *The Wild One* (1954), is asked, "What are you rebelling against?" He replies, "What you got?" James Dean, playing a troubled teen in the film *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), is challenged to a life and death game of chicken. When Dean asks his challenger "Do we really have to do this," he replies, "We gotta do something!" Hollywood executives claimed that these films were designed to straighten out misguided youths. Teens, however, saw these screen rebels as role models. Rebellious teenagers also emulated the Beats, such as Jack Kerouac and Allan Ginsberg, who satirized America's materialistic, conformist and homogenous culture.

Many white teenagers rejected the music of their parents. Crooners, such as Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra and Perry Como, did not move them. Nor did they expect to find happiness "somewhere over the rainbow." Some began listening to rhythm & blues. Their parents disapproved of this "colored music," considering it lewd, vile and vulgar. Inventions of the transistor radio and the car radio, however, gave teens control over channel selections. Healthy allowances gave them a degree of economic autonomy. Teenagers became the largest consumers of the inexpensive 45 RPM records, putting black artists, such as Chuck Berry, Little Richard

and Fats Domino, on the mainstream pop charts. To avoid rhythm & blues' negative image, record labels marketed their music as "rock'n'roll." Some labels went further, "covering" songs originally recorded by black artists with clean-cut white singers like Pat Boone.

Rock'n'roll, the music of 1950s teenagers, was attacked from the outset. Frank Sinatra called it "the most brutal, ugly, desperate, vicious form of expression it has been my misfortune to hear." Racists charged that rock'n'roll served as a vehicle for miscegenation. Nationalists saw it as a tool of international communism. Parents accused rock'n'roll of corrupting the nation's youth. Elvis Presley, a white man who sang like a black and who swiveled his hips in front of wild screaming girls, bore the brunt of early attacks on rock'n'roll. Church groups condemned him, parents smashed his records and network television shows refused to film him below the waist. Teens fought back. They defended their music with allowances, yard cleaning and baby sitting money. Elvis' records soon outsold Sinatra's. Rock'n'roll was here to stay!

## Glossary

- Armstrong, Louis** (1900-1971) Greatest figure in the history of jazz. Virtuoso trumpet player and innovator, all subsequent jazz greats built on the foundations laid out by Armstrong.
- Baby and Child Care*** Published in 1946, Benjamin Spock's best seller urged mothers to abandon the rigid child-rearing of earlier generations and allow children to grow at their own pace. He also recommended that mothers be always available to respond to their children's needs.
- Basie, Count** (1904-1984) Outstanding jazz band leader of the pre-World War II era. Instead of extravagant flourishes, Basie's music is characterized by an economy of notes.
- Berry, Chuck** (1926- ) His song writing and guitar playing were major creative influences on the history of rock'n'roll. Berry's songs, such as "Maybelline" and "School Days," appealed especially to 1950s white teens.
- Blacklisting** In order to appease anticommunist zealots in Congress, Hollywood producers established a blacklist barring employment of anyone who refused to testify before the United States House of Representatives' Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) or was cited by it for contempt. Among those blacklisted were actor Charlie Chaplin and director Carl Foreman.
- Boogie Woogie** A slick treatment of the blues which combined blues singing with traditional African American dance music.
- Boone, Pat** (1934- ) Clean-cut white singer who made notoriously bland covers of songs originally recorded by black artists, such as Little Richard. At the height of his recording, film and television career in 1957 Boone left the limelight in order to attend Columbia University. Upon graduation, Boone devoted most of his time and energy to his family and his church.

**Crooners** Invention of the microphone enabled singers to adopt a more relaxed style, no longer needing to project above their band accompaniments. These singers gave the impression of singing to a single individual, thereby creating hordes of passionate fans. Bing Crosby's laid back style and Frank Sinatra's romantic style dominated the popular music charts from the 1930s to the 1950s.

**De Facto** Latin term meaning in fact, in reality or actually; often used in contrast with *de jure*—denoting legal status.

**De Jure** Latin term indicating a legal status—by law, legitimate.

**Domino, Fats** (1928- ) A self-taught pianist who wrote and performed some of the earliest rhythm & blues songs that crossed-over to mainstream pop charts under the name "rock'n'roll." His smooth compositions, such as "Ain't That a Shame" and "Blueberry Hill," had a wide and long-lasting appeal.

**Doo Wop** Call and response style of singing popular among urban youths unable to purchase musical instruments. The name comes from the none sense words sung by background vocalists accompanying a lead singer. This style was adopted and refined by successful Motown artists in the 1950s and 1960s.

**Ellington, Duke** (1899-1974) Incomparable jazz composer and band leader. As a songwriter, Ellington had an intuitive ability for creating themes. As an arranger, he made maximum use of instrumental voices.

**Ginsberg, Allan** (1926- ) Editor of *Jester*, the literary humor magazine of Columbia University, Ginsberg was suspended for writing "Butler has no balls," (referring to Columbia President Nicholas Murray Butler). He later became a leader of the Beat Generation, publishing "Howl" and other poems that staked out the group's positions and attitudes.

**Haley, Bill** (1925-1981) Haley is always associated with his group—the Comets—although its personnel constantly changed and always tied to the song "Rock Around the Clock," although he did not write it and was not the first to perform it. When the song was featured in the teen rebellion film *Blackboard Jungle*, however, it helped to launch rock'n'roll. Haley did not have the talent to continue his instant stardom and wound up playing in rock revivals for the rest of his career.

**Holiday, Billie** (1915-1959) She had an intuitive sense of timing and the ability to lend credibility to each song she sang. Raped at the age of ten, Holiday spent part of her teen years as a prostitute. Music critic John Hammond discovered Holiday in 1933—"an eighteen-year-old with a voice that had a life time of experience built into it." Drugs and alcohol cut both her career and life short.

**Holly, Buddy** (1936-1959) Holly and his high school buddies formed the Crickets in 1956 and produced a brand of rock'n'roll that had a profound impact on the Beatles, Rolling Stones and other British super groups. His promising career was cut short by a plane crash. Rock stars Ritchie Valens and the Big Bopper died with Holly in the 1959 crash.

**Howlin' Wolf** (1910-1976) Master of the electric Chicago blues in the 1950s, the three hundred pound Wolf's mere presence gave his performances an intensity that was seldom equaled among bluesmen.

**Hughes, Langston** (1902-1967) A world traveler who helped launch the "Harlem Renaissance," Hughes wrote bitter but humorous poems, describing the pride and pathos of African Americans. In "Weary Blues," he adapted the rhythm and beat of jazz and the blues into his poetry.

**Invasion of the Body Snatchers** Released in 1956, this class "B" science fiction film about giant seed pods taking over peoples' bodies is a film exemplifying the fear and anxieties of the 1950s. In his article, "The Age of Conspiracy and Conformity: Invasion of the Body Snatchers," Stuart Samuels maintains that while *Invasion* "is not

about McCarthyism,” it is “a *statement about* the collective paranoia and the issue of conformity widely discussed in the period.”

- James, Etta** (1938- ) Sultry rhythm and blues singer, who worked with bandleader Johnny Otis and arranger Maxwell Davis in the 1950s.
- Jefferson, Blind Lemon** (1897-1929) One of the most influential country bluesmen, Jefferson was one of the genre’s first commercially successful recording artists. He enabled other male artists to get recording contracts in an era that was dominated by female blues artists such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith.
- Johnson, Robert** (1911-1938) Robert Santelli’s *The Big Book of Blues* states that “if Robert Johnson had never been born, the blues might have seen fit to invent him, as his story has become the archetype of blues life.” According to the Johnson myth, he sold his soul to the Devil in order to obtain his guitar virtuosity. He traveled throughout the South, challenging other bluesmen to guitar duels on street corners, playing at juke-joints and disappearing with someone’s wife or sweetheart before the night was over. His death, at age 27, still remains a mystery. It is rumored that he was poisoned by a juke-joint owner after Johnson had a fling with his wife.
- Kerouac, Jack** (1922-1969) He was one of the original Beats, who felt alienation within and rebelled against the materialism and homogeneity of 1950s America. Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), which relates his travel across the country with Neal Cassady, became the bible of the Beat Generation.
- King, B.B.** (1925- ) Overlooked in the 1950s, King was “discovered” in the 1960s blues revival. Since then, he has been the most successful blues concert artist. He is not only a master guitarist and singer but the genre’s best ambassador.
- Leadbelly** (1888-1949) Born to a sharecropper family in Louisiana, Huddie Ledbetter or Leadbelly spent much of his life in prison. John and Alan Lomax discovered him in 1933, while recording folk songs sung by prisoners. After the Lomaxes obtained his release, Leadbelly went on to record folk-blues songs, revealing to white America the rich folk legacy of African American music.
- Levittown** William Levitt transformed the house-building industry by utilizing low cost prefabricated frames and walls, which were assembled on the site. He built schools, swimming pools, tennis courts and athletic fields in order to foster community spirit in these “Levittowns.” You could not tell one house from another in these developments, but they provided what young white couples were looking for in the 1950s.
- Lewis, Jerry Lee** (1935- ) Probably the most talented rockabilly star to come out of Sun Records, Lewis’ wild stage performances and highly suggestive songs, such as “great Balls of Fire” and “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Going On,” convinced parents of teens that rock’n’roll was indeed dangerous. Lewis fell out of favor with his fans when he married his thirteen-year-old cousin.
- Little Richard** (1935- ) The most flamboyant of the pioneers of rock’n’roll, Richard Penniman or Little Richard stated in a 1984 *Los Angeles Times* interview, “I’m the real king of rock’n’roll. I was singing rock before anybody knew what rock was.” At the height of his career, Little Richard gave up rock’n’roll and became a preacher. He has subsequently made several come backs, each time proclaiming his rightful place in rock history.
- Perkins, Carl** (1932- ) He was part of the wave of young country-bred artists that helped propel rock’n’roll to its dominant status. Sam Phillips sold his contract with Elvis for \$35,000 because he had Perkins, a singer *and* songwriter (“Blue Suede Shoes”), on contract.
- Rodgers, Jimmie** (1897-1933) Rodgers turned to performing when his failing health ended his career as a railroad brakeman. In the 1920s, he toured the South and

Southwest, becoming one of country music's early royalty. Millions rolled in and rolled out. Rodgers died on tour, trying to pay off his debts.

**Smith, Bessie** (1894-1937) The most successful blues singer of the 1920s, Smith influenced virtually every female blues singer who followed. Because of her assertive personality, emancipated (often excessive) life-style and her ability to turn away people trying to exploit her, Smith became a symbol of the liberated black woman.

**Swing** A style of playing two notes of equal value within a beat. The result is a swinging, dance-like feeling. It was the preferred style of the "big bands" of the 1930s, such as those of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller.

**Tin Pan Alley** By the beginning of the twentieth century, the music publishing industry had become centralized—in New York City. Aspiring composers gathered in what was then the theatre district of East 14th Street (Manhattan). The constant clatter of music being composed gave the district its name. Music created in Tin Pan Alley was marketplace oriented and closely tied to Broadway shows. In the 1950s, after the first outburst of rock 'n' roll, *Variety* magazine nostalgically looked back to a time when "Tin Pan Alley's obligation to its public [was] almost idealistically manifest over the years. The treasury of American pop songs that inspire the sentimental, nostalgic and rhythmic moods is a tribute to the ingenuity and productivity of the American music business."

**Turner, Ike** (1933- ) Turner organized a band in early 1950s and recorded "Rocket 88," one of the seminal records of early rock 'n' roll. He recalled, however, that "I got only \$40 for writing, producing and recording it." Turner teamed up with his wife Tina and had a successful touring show in the 1960s. In 1976, Tina divorced him and achieved superstardom on her own.

**Williams, Hank** (1923-1953) In his short and troubled life, Williams was unable to translate his musical talent into inner happiness. His recording career lasted only six years. But in those years Williams produced some of the best loved songs in country music history, including "Your Cheatin' Heart," "Jambalaya" and "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry." Despite his status as country music's top seller, Williams' drinking, drug-taking and philandering got the best of him. He became so unreliable toward the end of his life that he was lucky to get booking in a beer hall.

**Waters, Muddy** (1915-1983) Patriarch of post-World War II Chicago blues, Waters' slashing slide guitar and tough voice gave the impression of man who had seen his share of life's rewards and tribulations.

**Williamson, Sonny Boy** (1910-1965) One of the most influential harmonica players in blues history, Williamson's colorful personality, unpredictability and frequent stretching of the truth shaped his particular brand of blues.

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## Discography

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- The Best of B.B. King*. MCA Records MCAD-31040.
- The Best of Doo Wop Ballads*. Rhino R2 75763. Includes The Five Satins, The Skyliners, The Penguins and others.

- The Best of Doo Wop Uptempo*. Rhino RNC 70182. Includes The Monotones, The Del Vikings, Dion & the Belmonts and others.
- The Best of Muddy Waters*. Chess 9255.
- Bill Haley; Super Ten*. Evergreen 2190512.
- The Blues; a Smithsonian Collection of Classic Blues Singers*. Smithsonian Collection RD 101. Includes Blind Lemon Jefferson, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Big Bill Broonzy, Robert Johnson, T-bone Walker, Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, Elmore James, Howlin' Wolf and others.
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- Little Richard; 18 greatest Hits*. Rhino R2 75899.
- Louis Armstrong: C'est Si bon*. Rhino R2 70383.
- Robert Johnson; the Complete Recordings*. Columbia C2K 46222.
- Rock this Town: Rockabilly Hits*. Rhino Vol. 1: R2 70741, Vol. 2: R2 70742. Includes Roy Orbison, The Crickets, Ricky Nelson, Ritchie Valens, Eddie Cochran and others.
- The Sun Story*. Rhino R2 75884. Includes Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, Charlie Rich, Elvis Presley and others.