



The Music and History of Our Times

“Fun, Fun Rock 'n' Roll High School”

by Glenn C. Altschuler and Robert O. Summers

With his tongue halfway in his cheek, Ambrose Bierce defined history as “an Fifties by Gilder Lehrman on account, mostly false, of events, mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers, mostly knaves, and soldiers, mostly fools.” Well, we’ve come a long way in a hundred years. These days, historical narratives routinely include the experiences and values of “ordinary” folk. They use popular culture to describe and analyze culture, society, and politics. So, “Roll over Beethoven/Tell Tchaikovsky the news”: rock 'n' roll merits inclusion in the American history curriculum.

During the 1950s—when rock 'n' roll was born—many Americans asserted that their nation was prosperous, harmonious, and homogeneous. If consensus wasn't real, it could be declared—or imposed. Dwight Eisenhower, the symbol for the age, represented the unity of “The Greatest Generation.” Television reflected and extended middle-class values, without much acknowledgment of social problems, dissent, or the existence of African Americans. Just beneath the surface, however, there were tensions, and as yet “invisible” Americans who were restive: about conformity, the authority of adults, sexual norms, and racial injustice. Rock 'n' roll became a medium for expressing and explaining problems that heretofore had no name.

HIDE FULL ESSAY ▲

Enmeshed in the racial politics of the 1950s, rock 'n' roll was credited with and criticized for promoting integration and bringing black ideas and idioms to millions of Americans. It got white teenagers to listen to black music, idolize black singers (like Chuck Berry and “Little Richard” Penniman), and, at times, mix with black kids at concerts. In the South, rock 'n' roll became a lightning rod for die-hard segregationists who associated the music with depraved beliefs and behavior. Showing pictures of black men and women dancing, captioned “total mongrelization,” white supremacists charged that the music “excited youth like jungle tom-toms.”

Rock 'n' roll never ceased to resist and unsettle “mainstream” values. But as it became a big business, subject to the dictates of a mass market, rock 'n' roll often forgot its debt to rhythm & blues, bleached the music, and promoted white performers. Racial references were rare—and confined to sub-texts, in coded language. Some white teenagers may have responded to “The Great Pretender” by The Platters as the story of the double lives of African Americans. As they slow-danced to the song, however, most listeners probably thought it the sad reflections of a lovesick young man. Teachers might get at these issues—and assess whether rock 'n' roll advanced a racial agenda with “all deliberate speed”—by comparing the lyrics of “The Great Pretender” with Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “We Wear the Mask” and Ralph Ellison’s great novel *Invisible Man*.

Even without rock 'n' roll, generational conflict would have held a prominent place in the private and public discourse of the 1950s. But the music, made by teenagers for teenagers, added fuel to the flames. And



Chuck Berry - Collection of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame

it permeated discussions about the state of the family, the threat of juvenile delinquency, and the emerging power of “Baby Boomers.” “Are you afraid of your teenager?” *Cosmopolitan* asked. Nor was critic John Sharnik alone in finding Elvis Presley’s “air of inarticulate suspicion” just as subversive as his onstage gymnastics: “It’s like that hostile look you get when you’ve told your 13-year-old daughter that she can’t wear lipstick, or stay up to watch the late movie.”

Citing party raids, critics (and historians) have suggested that “deviance” in the ’50s was a harmless rite of passage and that teenagers had coalesced only to conform. Teachers might explore these claims and counter-claims—and discuss whether ’50s “alienation” prepared the way for the “rebelliousness” of the ’60s—by comparing Elvis with Pat Boone, the clean-shaven Christian, dressed in white sweaters and white bucks, who refused to kiss any woman other than his wife; by deconstructing the payola scandal, which was fueled by the argument that record companies were “foisting” rock ‘n’ roll on an unsuspecting public; and by analyzing the film *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), which pits jazz against rock ‘n’ roll as evidence of cross-generational hostility.

As the music pulsed, the guitarist fondled his instrument, and the singer undulated, rock ‘n’ roll also became the focal point for anxiety that teenagers would let go of traditional morality and become addicted to the pleasures of the body. The music—and uninhibited rock ‘n’ roll dancing—became “contested terrain” throughout the 1950s. With its anticipation of “fifteen minutes of teasin’, fifteen minutes of squeezin’, and fifteen minutes of blowin’ my top,” “Sixty Minute Man” by the Dominoes was one of several chart toppers that ignited a “campaign against crudity.” By mid-decade “leerics” were almost entirely gone, and Ed Sullivan tried to reduce the anatomical appeal of Elvis the Pelvis by filming him from the waist up.

There is also evidence that rock ‘n’ roll, which in the ’50s set sexuality in the context of love and marriage, was as much a form of social control as of sexual expression. Was it, then, a straw in the wind for a “revolution” that only seemed to spring out of nowhere in the 1960s? Teachers might ask students to evaluate the complex and contradictory sexual messages of the decade by reviewing the rise and fall of Jerry Lee Lewis, whose songs, “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Going On” and “Great Balls of Fire,” seemed less about foreplay than about the act itself, and whose career came crashing down when he married Myra Gale, his thirteen-year-old cousin.

During the 1960s (which we date from 1964 to 1975), rock ‘n’ roll, which had been revitalized by the blues- and rockabilly-inspired British invasion led by the Beatles (who only wanted to “hold your hand”), got caught up in the politics of urban riots, black militants, the military draft, and Vietnam War protest. And as folk music cross-pollinated with a West Coast electronic psychedelic sound, and Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Jefferson Airplane, and The Grateful Dead burst on the scene, rock (as it was now called) mirrored the mores of the counterculture, including those, like Timothy Leary, who didn’t trust anyone over thirty—and were determined to “tune in, turn on, drop out.”

More than any other genre of popular culture at the time—and teachers might ask students to compare it to television and the movies—rock ‘n’ roll mounted a critique of American oppression at home and abroad. Along with folk comrades Peter, Paul and Mary, and Simon and Garfunkel, Bob Dylan, who went “electric” in the ’60s, set the standard for “political rock” with “The Times They Are A ‘Changin’,” “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” and “The Ballad of George Jackson.” After the debacle at

Kent State, Neil Young wrote "Ohio," which chronicled "tin soldiers and Nixon coming." To sample the protest-song tradition, students might watch Country Joe and the Fish, the paradigmatic anti-war rock group, perform "Vietnam Song" on YouTube. And then use the Apple program GarageBand to create their own one-minute song based on a recent political controversy.

Political rock was episodic, chaotic, and rent with contradictions. A commercialized medium, rock was, at times, co-opted by record companies, whose advertisements proclaimed "The Revolutionaries Are on Columbia" and "The Man Can't Bust Our Music." More importantly, many rockers retreated from politics in reaction to the conservative ascendancy of the late 1970s and 1980s. Neil Young gave voice to his disillusionment in "Revolution Blues." Peter Townshend promised "Won't Get Fooled Again." And Dylan proclaimed "politics is bullshit. . . . The only thing that's real is inside you."

More enduring, perhaps, was rock's cultural critique. The controversial message, grounded at times in eastern philosophy and mysticism, was (mostly) libertarian: on and off stage, rockers embraced—and embodied—spontaneity, antipathy to authority, individual fulfillment, free expression, and unregulated and unlimited recourse to drugs and sex. "We need drugs," Eric Clapton explained, "to free our minds and our imaginations." In 1966 dozens of radio stations banned The Byrds' "Eight Miles High." A year later, The Doors reneged on a promise to Ed Sullivan and sang "Girl, we couldn't get much higher" on prime-time TV. And in 1971 The Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers* album cover had a close-up of a male crotch with a real zipper in it. Students might gauge the cultural and generational divide generated by rock (and the tension between its communitarian and individualistic dimensions) by reviewing the reactions to the (now iconic) 1969 "Woodstock Music and Art Fair," sub-titled "An Aquarian Exposition," which ranged from an enthralled beat poet Allen Ginsberg ("a major planetary event") to an appalled writer for *Time* magazine ("a squalid freakout, a monstrous Dionysian revel, where a mob of crazies gathered to drop acid and groove to hours of amplified cacophony").

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, rock 'n' roll fragmented. But the music continued to respond to cultural and, to some extent, political realities. Whether it's the southern white backlash of Lynyrd Skynyrd; the working-class critique of Bruce Springsteen; the New York avant garde art rock of Velvet Underground; the anti-hippy anarchism of punk; the new technology of Yello; the "mope rock" of The Cure; the cool New Wave of Blondie; the depressive grunge of Nirvana; the surf warrior revival of Dick Dale; the anti-Reaganism of the Minutemen; the post-punk melancholy of Mission of Burma; the black prophetic rage of Public Enemy; the "creative intelligence" of KRS One, Jay Z, or Master P—rockers prized, above all else, originality, self-expression, and, in the spirit of rock 'n' roll, an ability to (simultaneously) stand outside the mainstream and be accepted (and "consumed") by it.

Teachers can use "contemporary rock"—if that's what it is—to engage students in discussions of political, social, economic, cultural, and spiritual discourse and dissent. Was '70s punk rock a repudiation of '60s idealism—and a new kind of political protest? Why, in the '80s, did rock provide a platform for feminism—and for "Heavy Metal" misogyny? Why has MTV programming changed? Is there a double standard for black and white rappers? Does Lollapalooza represent "alternative culture"? What accounts for the popularity of mashup artists? How, if at all, has the Internet changed rock music?

The questions will keep on comin'. As long as there is a United States, some form of rock 'n' roll—or its ethos—will be part of the cultural mix, speaking to the thoughts and feelings of the nation's youth (and more than a few of their parents). It's an ideal topic—and, we believe, an essential one—for teachers of American history.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell

University.

Robert O. Summers teaches social science at Washington-Lee High School in Arlington, Virginia.
