

“Riding a Rocket: The Rise of Rock ‘n Roll”

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Most of us, especially those of us who are part of the Baby Boom generation, consider rock *our* music, just as the World War Two generation felt about the big bands. Yet how well do we really know the origins of the music we feel is our own?

Rock ‘n’ roll grew out of African-American jump blues in the 1940s into a hybrid, new form popularized by white performers, such as Bill Haley, Elvis Presley, and others who brought a country and western swing influence to the genre. In 1952 the Cleveland DJ Alan Freed titled his radio show “Moondog’s Rock and Roll Party,” but Freed was only one of many who were referring to the new music as “rock and roll”—though he later claimed credit for the phrase. While an entire paper could be written on the use of the term “rockin’” in music, it had of course long been risqué: In 1922 Trixie Smith recorded a song titled “My Daddy Rocks Me (with One Steady Roll)” for Black Swan Records.¹ By 1948 it was a common double-entendre referring to dancing and lovemaking, and having a good time, generally.

The story of rock ‘n’ roll is in many ways a business story of how small, independent record labels eventually bested the major record companies in the post-war era by scouring the southeast for artists—black and white but mainly black—to meet the demand for the new, beat-driven music: The Chess brothers—Leonard and Phil, street-smart Polish-Americans from Chicago who had gotten into the music business running a tavern in the 3900 block of cottage Grove Avenue. The Bihari brothers: Jules, Saul and Joe, children of Jewish immigrants from Hungary who had started in the business in Los

Angeles in the '40s with jukeboxes and pinball machines. The Biharis had Modern, Meteor, and RPM, which focused on rhythm and blues. Syd Nathan in Cincinnati, founder of King Records, initially a country label. And, of course, Sam Phillips, the groundbreaking Memphis-based record producer, who said he didn't really want to start a record label but saw no other choice. He played a key role in the birth of rock 'n' roll because of his obsessive search for artists with a certain sound. His recording studio was a musical laboratory, and the elements he was trying to create were rare and elusive—and in many cases short-lived. Had Phillips not been obsessed with a certain authenticity he sought in the music he recorded—whether white or black performers—rock 'n' roll would have developed differently—probably elsewhere. Establishing just what that word *authenticity* means is a more difficult matter.

But the story also has a strong regional element: Memphis—and its Beale Street—had been a musical crossroads for generations. But Memphis was still the south. White church groups claimed rock 'n' roll was a plot to corrupt white, southern youth.² In 1948 Memphis Vice-Mayor Joe Boyle ordered police to destroy 400 copies of three “blues” records labeled “obscene” by the police department: “Move Your Hand, Baby,” by Crown Prince Waterford, “Take Your Hand Off It,” by Billy Hughes, and “Operation Blues,” by Amos Milburn.³ To be fair, similar efforts to censor and outlaw rock 'n' roll occurred throughout the country, if a little less authoritatively. Pressure on radio stations to play the right kind of music was widespread. This only intensified the appeal of the “forbidden” music among teenagers. This “crossover” shift forced radio stations to change their policies and begin giving black artists' records airtime. Likewise, jukebox owners recognized they needed to keep up with market trends.

One can't talk about rock 'n' roll without talking about racial and cultural divisions in American society. In the 1920s recording industry entrepreneurs, sensing sales opportunities, had began issuing records that catered to different demographic segments, such as "hillbilly" music, which comprised a quarter of all record sales by 1930, as well as so-called "race records" aimed at African-Americans.⁴ These earliest blues and jazz recordings featured artists such as Mamie Smith, whose best-selling performance of "Crazy Blues," spurred other companies to record and market records featuring black artists. Sales of "race records" alone reached 10 million copies a year in the '20s, indicating that even then white audiences were buying records made by black artists.⁵

By 1933, however, after the arrival of the Great Depression record sales had dropped by nearly 95 percent.⁶ The war years were marked by other challenges, such as a two-year strike by the American Federation of Musicians and wartime restriction on the supply of shellac, an important component in the physical production of records. The 1940s had seen the growth of dozens of small, independent labels that had prospered by specializing in jazz, hillbilly, and so-called "race music." But the six major record companies—Decca, Mercury, RCA-Victor, Columbia, Capitol, and MGM—dominated the popular music marketplace: From 1946 to 1952 all but five of the 163 records that each sold more than a million copies were produced by one of the six majors.⁷ Rock 'n' roll would change that. Later the majors often countered the independents, when possible, by producing "cover" versions of independent labels' songs, which DJs usually broadcast.

Billboard magazine, the industry publication, in accounting for records aimed at African-Americans, began using the genre “Harlem Hit Parade” from 1942 until 1945. In 1945, the publication shifted to the term “race records.” In 1949 Gerald Wexler—then a music journalist—convinced his bosses at Billboard magazine to change the phrase to “rhythm and blues.”⁸ This change indicated not only the increasing clout of black audiences, but also the fact that white audiences were buying more records ostensibly aimed at black listeners.

In the mid-1940s Bing Crosby, Perry Como, Dinah Shore, and Frank Sinatra were the iconic figures in middle-of-the-road popular vocal music.

Crooners and the big band sound dominated the popular music environment of the 1940s—often with a tightly harmonized, even shrill vocal ensemble behind him, such as the Andrews Sisters. Black performers did occasionally make it onto Billboard’s top 40 pop chart in the 1940s. The Ink Spots’ song “The Gypsy” was number 1 on Billboard’s top-selling record list for 10 weeks in 1946. The Ink Spots, the Mills Brothers, even the great Nat King Cole, tended to have a soft, approachable sound—some would say tailored for white audiences.

During the war big bands—which had dominated popular music—began to wane. A new musical form based on a smaller ensemble drew many instrumentalists into the smaller jazz bands.

Frenetically paced, melodically angular and complex, with edgy chromaticism, bebop was an aficionado’s music, not really suitable for sociable dancing. Bebop jazz, though open to anyone who cared to listen, was unabashedly elitist in its search for musical truth and virtuosity.

But beneath the surface the American music scene was anything but homogenous. Boogie-woogie, which had apparently originated in east Texas lumber and turpentine camps in the 1870s, had been adapted by a variety of musical stylists, from early jazz and ragtime to urban blues, and eventually country and western swing.

The boogie-woogie left-hand piano bass line itself became the rhythmic and harmonic scaffolding for rock 'n' roll. Artists such as Jimmy Yancey, Albert Ammons, Pete Johnson, and Meade "Lux" Lewis perfected the stride piano style in the 1920s and '30s. Johnson, interestingly, recorded a song called "Rocket 88 Boogie" in 1949.

The great migration of African-Americans from the south to northern and western urban centers meant their music had not only traveled with them, but changed, as well. In the process, the Delta blues forms had become Chicago and Detroit blues, epitomized by Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker, who married the electric guitar's characteristics with the boogie-woogie and roots blues to produce a more hard-edged, aggressive, urban sound.

And though the blues, boogie-woogie, and jazz were not necessarily welcome in many middle-class African-American homes, gospel styles could and would often gain a wider audience in "respectable" black families and across racial lines.

Sister Rosetta Tharp, whose own roots were in deep the gospel tradition, defied convention, blurred musical boundaries, and influenced a diverse generation of important musical figures, including Little Richard, Johnny Cash, Chuck Berry, Elvis, and Jerry Lee Lewis.

Transitional musical forms began to appear during the war as the big bands became less popular, and the effects of the 1942-44 musicians' strike wore on. The major

labels sold recordings they had stockpiled and wartime V(ictory)-recordings, but the independent labels—catering to the specialty markets—had prospered during the war years.⁹

Artists such as Ella Mae Morse and Louis Jordan, often recording for independent labels, gained popularity and began to cross genre and racial boundaries, disrupting conventional classifications.

Morse, originally from Mansfield, Texas, auditioned for Jimmy Dorsey in Dallas in 1938 when she was 14—though she told him she was 19. He hired her on the spot. She was a member of the band long enough to meet its pianist, Freddie Slack, known for his swinging boogie-woogie.

She and Slack met again, however, in San Diego, and she joined his small band. She and Slack's ensemble recorded "Cow Cow Boogie," which became the newly formed Capitol Record's first gold record. In 1943 she went solo, reaching number one in the R&B charts that same year with "Shoo Shoo Baby." She had exceptional crossover appeal, achieving hits on both pop and R&B charts in the 1940s, despite the musicians' strike. Her sensual voice, and her musical approach blended elements of rhythm and blues, jazz, blues, country, gospel, and jive. In 1946 she and Slack collaborated again on "The House of Blue Lights," which reached number 8 on the R&B charts.¹⁰ She continued to record through 1947. She returned to Capitol in 1951, recording an eclectic brew of pop, country, and rhythm and blues, but by then the music world had moved on.¹¹

Louis Jordan epitomized the shift in taste from the big band sound to smaller, tighter jump blues sound.

Jordan, born in Brinkley, Ark., in 1908, moved to New York City in 1936 after playing with several regional bands in Arkansas and the southeast. By 1936 Chick Webb had asked Jordan to join Webb's orchestra—which featured Ella Fitzgerald as vocal soloist. In 1938 Webb fired Jordan for trying to convince Fitzgerald to join Jordan's new nine-piece band: the Elks Rendezvous Band, which by 1939 was known as Louie Jordan and his Tympany Five—even though he actually always had a seven- or eight-man group: piano, bass, drums, and three or four horns. On stage in the Midwest he honed his performances, drawing from “stage comedy revues, Caribbean and Southern folk stories, and the bawdy, raucous domain of street wisdom on relations between the sexes,” as Adam Green, a University of Chicago professor wrote recently.¹² Between 1943 and 1951 Jordan and his band had 55 singles in the top 10 on Billboard magazine's rhythm and blues chart.

“With my little band,” Jordan said, “I did everything they did with a big band. I made the blues jump.”¹³

Jordan, like the great African-American playwright August Wilson, mirrored how post-migration communities lived out their relationships in the new urban environment. In a world in which aspirations of wealth, position, and education were restricted by an oppressive, white-dominated society, Jordan's lyrical narratives focused on how men and women in black communities managed to get along, or try to put things right.

The jump blues style was a strong influence on other early rock and rollers such as Chuck Berry and Fats Domino. Raucous, with its heavy backbeat and four- or eight-to-a-bar bass lines often built on a boogie-woogie figure, jump blues was nothing if not exciting. Jump blues exemplified the characteristics rock 'n' roll was to define even more

starkly: a strong backbeat usually marked by a snare drum, a bass line, and guitar or piano accompaniment providing melodic and harmonic elements. With one foot in jubilant gospel, and the other foot in the raw “shouter” urban blues of figures such as Big Joe Turner and Jimmy Rushing jump blues was as close to rock ‘n’ roll as you could get. Jordan, though the practitioner *par excellence*, was not alone on the stage. In the late ‘40s jump blues was at a steady boil, with artists such Roy Brown—“Good Rockin’ Tonight,” Wynonie Harris, and Goree Carter—“Rock Awhile”—anticipating the rock ‘n’ roll era. Carter’s boogie-driven beat, lyrics, and above all, the distorted guitar, foreshadowed musical developments well into the ‘60s.

Meanwhile, country or “folk” music had been changing, as well. Boogie-woogie had permeated through the American musical soil by the mid-1930s, so much so that it had been adapted by country figures, as well.

The Delmore Brothers, Alton and Rabon, were mainstays of the Grand Old Opry through the 1930s. With their roots firmly in gospel and Appalachian music, by the late 1930s they and other country artists were well on their way to incorporating boogie rhythms and bass lines into their songs. Their sound made them early interpreters of what came to be known as rockabilly.

It was not uncommon for country and rhythm-and-blues singers to cover one another’s material: Wynonie Harris recorded Hank Penny’s “Bloodshot Eyes” and Louie Innis’s “Good Mornin’ Judge.” Eddie Crosby covered Hank Williams’ “Lovesick Blues.”¹⁴

Bill Haley had a vision of blending country with “old-style” rhythm and blues and Dixieland. Milt Gabler, who produced Jordan’s Decca recordings, also produced Bill

Haley's early recordings—including "Rock Around the Clock" in April 1954—after Haley's first big hit, "Crazy, Man Crazy," reached number 12 on the *Billboard* Juke Box chart in mid-1953. When "Crazy, Man Crazy" hit the best-selling lists disk jockeys ignored it, playing cover version of the song by Ralph Marterie, which went nowhere. This was notable as the first rock 'n' roll song to be generally recognized as a pop hit. Gabler wanted to incorporate Jordan's "jump" beat into Haley's sound. This, Gabler said, gave Haley's band the "sound that had the drive of the Tympany Five and the color of country and western. 'Rockabilly' was what they called it back then."¹⁵

Haley had been influenced by Jordan's music primarily through his work as a record librarian at a Chester, Pa., radio station. Haley later put it: "Why shouldn't a country-and-western group sing rhythm-and-blues?"

Haley's first commercial recording—by Bill Haley and his Saddlemen—for Essex, a small independent label, had been a 1951 cover of "Rocket 88," originally recorded by Ike Turner and Jackie Brenston that same year in Sam Phillips' Memphis recording studio for Chess Records. For that reason Haley's western swing version of the "Rocket 88" qualifies it as the first rock and roll recording by a white artist, according to *The Billboard Book of Number One Hits*.¹⁶

Turner and Brenston's "Rocket 88," considered by some historians to be the first genuine rock and roll song, has an energy and drive that makes Haley's cover seem insipid. The March 7, 1951 recording session for "Rocket 88" did not begin auspiciously. The band, Ike Turner and His Kings of Rhythm, had arrived at Phillips' studio late because they had been stopped by the highway patrol on their way to Memphis from Mississippi and hauled into court. Then they had a flat tire. When they set up their

equipment in the studio they discovered the guitar amplifier had a blown speaker cone. Phillips stuffed some brown paper into the speaker cabinet—he loved the fuzz-tone sound the blown speaker gave the guitar part—it sounded a little like a sax. It was Jackie Brenston’s song—an update of Jimmy Liggin’s 1948 hit “Cadillac Boogie”—but it was Ike Turner’s band: Ike Turner and His Kings of Rhythm. For reasons that are still unclear, Phillips credited Brenston on the record label, promising Turner credit on the next couple of releases. Phillips had then sent the recording to Leonard Chess of Chess Records in Chicago, apparently violating an understanding that he had with the Bihari brothers that Phillips’ recordings were to be sent to them. At any rate, after the record was pressed and labeled by Chess, it read “Jackie Brenston & His Delta Cats.” If the record had been plagued by mishap in its production, it became an instant hit among audiences of all kinds.

Phillips had persuaded his friend, Memphis DJ Dewey Phillips to play it on his show—after that it took off. The Memphis *Commercial-Appeal* ran a page one story on March 28, 1951 under the headline: “Rocket Becomes Flying Disc, Spins Toward Record Glory.”¹⁷

One other recording session that turned out to be historic was Elvis’s version of “That’s All Right”—a cover of Arthur Crudup’s 1946 recording, “That’s All Right, Mama.” Crudup’s lyrical phrasing dates back to 1926 and Blind Lemon Jefferson’s “That Black Snake Moan.”¹⁸ Only after his death did Crudup’s estate finally receive royalties on the song.¹⁹

The choice of “That’s All Right, Mama” was not intentional, however. The story of the July 5, 1954 recording session is the story of rock ‘n’ roll in miniature. Phillips’

assistant, Marion Kleisker, had heard *something* impressive in Presley's voice months before.

A strange, insecure kid, who liked to dress in black and pink, Presley had come to the studio several times since the summer of '52, when he came by ostensibly to make a recording for his mother. Then, on June 26, 1954, Phillips asked Kleisker to call Presley back into the studio. That afternoon they went through everything Presley knew, from spirituals to pop. But the session went nowhere.

A few days later Phillips asked bass player Bill Black and guitarist Scotty Moore to meet with Elvis at Moore's house to see what they could come up with. Still nothing.

Even so, Phillips had Presley, Moore and Black come into the studio the next day. They spent hours working through a series of popular songs—from hillbilly, country, pop to Hank Snow's and Eddy Arnold's latest hits, Bing Crosby's "Harbor Lights." Nothing. In desperation the threesome took a break, and Elvis started fooling around with "That's All Right, Mama." Moore, joined in, as did Black, thumping out a slap beat. Phillips, though distracted by something else in the control booth, heard it, and asked, "What are you doing?"

They managed to get a decent recording of "That's All Right." Phillips was ecstatic; sure he had a hit record. There was, however, no B side. The following evening they recorded Bill Monroe's "Blue Moon of Kentucky," a classic in the so-called "Hillbilly" genre. They had their B side. Elvis did achieve something that was much more than a copy of Crudup's record. It was one of his most authentic career recordings. The record came out two weeks later and sold like nothing Memphis had ever seen. Though

Elvis's early performances were uneven at best, his career was launched. Who the real Elvis was, in a musical sense as well as a person, remained an enigma.

If there had been no independent record companies rock 'n' roll would have evolved later, and in a less edgy form. Despite their size and resources, the majors, however, were curiously ineffective at identifying and cultivating artists who would create hit records. The most popular rock 'n' roll came from independent labels: Roughly two-thirds of the 147 rock and roll hits in the 1955-59 period were released by independent record companies.²⁰ Virtually all of the important early rock 'n' roll figures were recorded by independent labels, such as Atlantic, Jubilee, Sun, King, Chess, Modern, Veejay—one of the few black-owned independents—Aladdin, and others.²¹

Of the dozens of independent labels that came and went in the '40s and '50s, Sun Records was the only important rock and roll label to produce only rock 'n' roll. Sun Records dates from 1953, though Phillips had founded Memphis Recording Service in January 1950. The list of artists either discovered or recorded or both by Phillips is staggering: Chester Burnett, better known as the Howling Wolf, Riley B. "B.B." King, Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison, Little Milton, Little Junior Parker, Charlie Rich, and many more.

King Records, formed in 1945 in Cincinnati by Syd Nathan, was in some ways equally amazing because King, originally a country label, recorded a wide variety of musical styles—rhythm and blues (Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson), jump blues vocal (Wynonie Harris), country and western (the Delmore Brothers), vocal groups such as the Platters and the Dominoes, and guitar blues (Albert King, Freddy King). King lasted

longer—till 1967—partly because Nathan tried to vertically integrate his production process, owning his own record-pressing factory and distribution network.

Though pivotal in the creation of a new American music, the independents were based on a flawed business model: Record pressing plants insisted on cash on delivery, but distributors had 90 days to pay their invoices, and could return any unsold records for 100 percent credit.²² Plus distributors and retailers had to be persuaded to defy white community pressure to buy the records in the first place, just as DJs had to be convinced—sometimes paid—to play the new releases. The Congressional investigation into the “payola” scandal in the late 1950s highlighted one of the industry’s worst-kept secrets: Paying DJs for airtime had become common practice at many radio stations. DJs often resisted playing the new music peddled by Phillips and others, making promotion all the more difficult. So independents, such as Sun, were constantly struggling for cash flow.

And rock ‘n’ roll, especially south of the Mason-Dixon Line, was regarded as “black” music—the wrong kind for teenagers—so it was barred from many radio stations. Throughout the country anxiety over teenage delinquency was growing: By 1955 movies such as *Rebel Without a Cause*, *The Wild One*, and *Blackboard Jungle* had reached the theaters. White teen-agers, increasingly alienated and forming their own subcultures—made the music their own—buying R&B and rock ‘n’ roll records, listen to them on the radio or in jukeboxes.

Jordan, in a 1974 interview, had this to say about the birth of rock and roll:

“Rock ‘n’ roll was not a marriage of rhythm and blues and country and western. That’s white publicity. Rock ‘n’ roll was just a white imitation, a white adaptation of rhythm and blues.”²³

In one sense, then, when black performers played rock ‘n’ roll, it was rhythm and blues, when white performers played it, it was rock ‘n’ roll. But would never be quite as simple as imitating black musicians: “Adaptation” was more accurate. The essential actions to describe the beginnings of rock ‘n’ roll were “crossover” and “disruption.” If record label owners and their artists were to achieve the sales success they wanted, they had to defy categories—such as race music, rhythm and blues, hillbilly boogie, or jump blues. The genius of a few producers such as Phillips—and of a handful of early DJs such as Alan Freed and Bill Randle in Cleveland, and others—was to recognize this and do something about it. To complicate things further, the songs’ creators sometimes crossed categories: the team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, two young, white Jewish guys living in Los Angeles, wrote many early hits performed by African-American and white artists alike, including “Hound Dog,” “Kansas City,” “Jailhouse Rock,” “Young Blood,” “Yakety Yak,” “Poison Ivy,” “On Broadway” and many others.

Phillips’ early career, when he worked with so many African-American musicians—including the Prisonaires at Tennessee’s penitentiary—and musicians of all backgrounds, demonstrated that it was not just about the money, despite his famous remark that “if I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars!”—which he later disavowed.²⁴ The statement was more a commentary on the racial climate at the time than a statement of greed. When Sun Records did find a white man who seemed to embody that hybrid quality, he was in no

financial position to take advantage of the situation, and was more or less forced by circumstances to sell his rights to Elvis to RCA for \$35,000 to keep his company afloat. Besides, he was never as excited about Elvis as he was about other artists he worked with, such as Jerry Lee Lewis or Howlin' Wolf.

One of his biggest regrets was losing the opportunity to work further with Howlin' Wolf after Leonard Chess broke off his business relationship with Sun Records. Wolf, Phillips said, "could have been the counterpart to Elvis—he would have been huge with white youngsters—and black."²⁵

Despite the fact the world was segregated racially, in the end rock 'n' roll was about unity. White musicians wanted to incorporate the vitality inherent in jump blues into a new-itself sounding music that young people, in particular, would and could call their own. African-American musicians, such as Chuck Berry, would dominate the heyday of rock 'n' roll, to be sure. But the music developed further in the 1960s, including a reinterpretation of '50s rock and early blues by British musicians, creating a new cultural force that shaped popular music. In the end the world remained divided but the music itself emanated an appeal that changed the course of music history.

¹ Tosches, 6.

² Gillett, 17.

³ "Memphis Gestapo Smashes Records Eyes Radio-Flicks," *downbeat*, Feb. 25, 1948, in Escott and Hawkins, 8.

⁴ Columbia had begun to release vaudeville blues recordings as early as 1912, such as William C. Handy's "Memphis Blues," and "St. Louis Blues" in 1914.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶ Gillett, 4.

⁷ Shaw, 5.

⁸ Shaw, xv.

⁹ Sanjek and Sanjek, 81

¹⁰ Tosches, 64ff.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹² Green, 8.

¹³ Shaw, 74.

¹⁴ Tosches, 6.

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- ¹⁵ Ibid, 64.
¹⁶ Bronson, ?.
¹⁷ Guralnick, 107.
¹⁸ Davis, 122.
¹⁹ Weissman, 120.
²⁰ Gillett, 64.
²¹ Ibid, 67ff.
²² Ward, 113.
²³ Shaw, 73.
²⁴ Guralnick, 207.
²⁵ Guralnick, 148.

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