

9. The Riddles of Rock and Roll

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1. The Social Construction of Rock and Roll

1.1. Some Questions about Rock and Roll

The 1950s, no doubt, were boring as well as exciting. For many young people the boring side, however, dominated because of the overbearing pressures toward conformity and consensus. These forces ruled the decade and greatly reduced the opportunities for being different and thereby relegated most expressions of new visions and ideas to the margins of society – see for instance the studies by Richard Aquila (1992: 269-270) or Douglas Miller and Marion Nowak (1977: 6-7). Yet, the 1950s also saw “a virtual revolution,” taking place in the realm of popular music as by 1954 rock and roll surfaced and took America by surprise (Pratt, 1990: 134-135). This music excited the young, who were quick to adopt it and with it the accompanying behavioral style elements, and shocked their parents, who perceived it as a form of protest against the existing order. The adult world reacted vehemently: rock and roll records were smashed or burned in public, stage shows were banned or interrupted by the police, and deejays who ventured to spin rock and roll songs on their turn tables were fired on the spot (Miller and Nowak, 1977: 303-307).

On the face of it, an explanation of this sudden musical explosion seems to be quite simple. A new popular music format with associated dance and dress styles is devised and becomes wildly popular among the young who have the time and money to indulge in its pleasures. Settled society, in turn, reacts disapprovingly and condemns the young as well as their music. As time goes by, though, people get used to it and the novelty wears off, the fad wanes, and the situation turns back to normal. The same thing had happened earlier on with swing and the jitterbug and now it just happened again. Rock and roll, however, proved to be different. First, the music existed already as a partition of rhythm and blues, the popular music of the African-American community living in the margins of American society. So, rock and roll was not newly created, but rather discovered by artists and music producers (Marcus, 1982: 12; Brown, 1983: 15; Pratt, 1990: 136; Tosches, 1991: 2). Second, rock and roll was not a fad. The music did not disappear after a few years of frenzy, but stayed on in constantly changing forms. It became a new music – youth music – and a cornerstone of a new culture – youth culture. The development of this culture was part and parcel of rock and roll's emergence. Third, the negative reactions to rock and roll did not fade away either and the active opposition to it remained – see in this respect the detailed account of anti-rock and roll activities by Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave (1988, part I).

Moreover, not only those who witnessed its arrival saw rock and roll as a form of protest and social rebellion. In a more positive way, the concept of the “rock and roll rebel” became a vital element of the self-image of artists and fans alike. And, almost all writers who tell us the story of rock and roll seem to follow track. Clearly, the benefit of hindsight did not change the definition of this music – see among others: Carl Belz (1969); Nick Cohn (1969); David Hatch and Stephen Milward (1977); Douglas Miller and Marion Nowak (1977); Charles Brown (1983); Ray Pratt (1990); Dick Bradley (1992); Philip Ennis (1992); and Paul Friedlander (1996). These observations lead us to the question, what was going on in American popular music in the 1950s that made rock and roll so different in these respects? In this essay, I will deal with this question by breaking it up into two more specific questions. First, how could an existing music format with its own delineated public develop into the music of a completely different social category and next become an autonomous popular music style? And, why did this not happen at an earlier date, for instance, several years or even a decade before? Second, how could this popular music style become signified as rebellious? The fact that rock and roll acquired such a meaning is puzzling because popular music is commercial music produced to make money. As Nick Tosches (1991: 1-2) shows, rock and roll did not differ in this respect and so was made to appeal to as large an audience as possible. Usually this aim is difficult to realize, when the music is at odds with dominant values in society (Denisoff, 1983: 55).

1.2. Rock and Roll as a Social Construct

The answers to both these riddles of rock and roll, I will argue, can be found by looking at rock and roll as a social construct in the way Ian Hacking (1999: 19) defines this concept, i.e. as the “contingent upshot” of social processes and historical events. Unraveling how this “upshot” came about – in Hacking’s words, by displaying and analyzing the actual, historically situated, social interactions that led to the emergence of rock and roll – will bring the answers to my first question. Rock and roll’s social history will, moreover, deliver some answers to my second question as well, because “making” music entails, as Norman Denzin (1970) rightfully assesses, more than creating a vehicle for expressing and mediating musical meanings. The way people interact with each other in the context of the music, is as important. As Denzin (1970: 1036) states:

“The meaning of a popular song, then, lies in the interaction brought to it. meaning resides only partly in the lyrics, the beat, or its mood.”

In popular music, there are always interactions going on between artists and listeners and between both these parties and other people involved in or confronted by this style of music. Interactions like these, often will add meanings to this music that extend far beyond the original intentions of its producers. Translated into the vernacular of popular music studies: popular music always is a

discursively constituted category (Shepherd and Wicke, 1997: 212). As these “additional” meanings are part and parcel of rock and roll, they are facts that can be analyzed as well.

Looking at a popular music style as the result of intricate processes and events closely corresponds with the manner in which Howard Becker (1982) and Richard Peterson (1976; 1994) conceptualize the materialization of other cultural elements like paintings and music. Art, according to them, involves more than just the creative activities of individual artists. Each and every work of art is always a social product too, jointly made by artists, their audiences, and all the actors in between. Its nature and content are shaped by what these actors do – their actions and interactions – and why they do it – their intentions. Just like all other forms of art, popular music is made for intrinsic as well as extrinsic reasons. Making music is fun for artists as is listening to it for their audiences. At the same time, most artists are eager to make a living out of their work and therefore are obliged to make the kind of music listeners are prepared to pay for. For its audiences on the other hand, popular music may be more than just a means off having a good time; the music may be part of their life style. In contemporary society, artists and audiences are not directly linked. There is a whole variety of actors in between – record companies, concert organizers, radio stations, disk jockeys, and so on – who have made it their business to produce and distribute the music. Popular music thus involves more than only sound. It is also a form of organization, an “art world” as Becker (1982: 34) calls it, that produces this kind of music and thereby shapes its nature and content (Peterson, 1994: 163).

Rock and roll, of course, has to be seen in relation to other styles and genres of popular music. The art world of popular music can be divided into several segments, to which Philip Ennis (1992: 20-22) refers as streams. According to Ennis, a musical stream is some sort of loose structure with a distinct artistic system. Each stream is an economic entity and serves its own audiences, who recognize the stream’s music as belonging to their own style of life. By setting the musical preferences of its audiences, each stream marks off the boundaries between social groups and thereby contributes to the formation of group identities. As such a musical stream is the site of the actual, historically situated, social interactions which produce popular music styles and the specific musical pieces belonging to it. It does so by providing the setting in which artists, producers, distributors, mediators, and publics act and interact; it is the set of conditions that make actions possible or, for that matter, impossible. A stream, moreover, is also the upshot of the past, and with its heritage it helps to shape the future. The opportunities and constraints that a stream provides, are in turn affected by – nested in – the cultural and structural conditions of the encompassing world of popular music, as the latter in turn are nested in those of the society at large. Taken together, these elements are the conditions for the emergence and development of specific popular music styles.

1.3. Opportunities, Constraints and Significations

In this essay, I will distinguish three sets of conditions. (1) The first set consists of the basic conditions that favor the development of a new music style. Examples of such conditions are the

existence of musical resources, like musical formats, artists and composers, recipes of how to make music, and so on; and the existence of economic resources, like record companies and radio stations and their willingness to record and broadcast the new music, and so on. (2) The second set comprises conditions that entice artists – or record producers – to experiment with new musical forms. Questions here, for instance, regard the existence of a potential audience for the new music, the willingness of audiences to impute new meanings to a music style such as the need of adolescents to create their own culture. (3) The third set comprises conditions like the existing rules, routines and practices that are guiding people in making and interpreting music or limiting their possibilities to do so. Conditions like these constrain the development of a given style. This set of opportunities and constraints is important, because rules, routines and practices are never static. In fact they give a stream its internal dynamics. New actors may enter the field; economic circumstances or music technologies may change; deviating cultural beliefs may arise, and so on. All this may affect the balance between favorable and constraining conditions and thus determine the fate of a music style. All in all, a musical stream may be compared to a playing field with specific institutions, cultural constructions, and strategic players. However, it is a field with shifting rules and regulations, imputed by the actual possibilities of the players, which determine the outcomes of their play.

In his impressive study Ennis (1992) shows us how rock and roll developed into a separate popular musical stream. Like any other popular musical stream, this new stream was as much the creation of composers, song-writers, singers, and musicians as the product of the dialectics between the creative efforts of these actors, their wish to make money, the commercially induced activities of the other actors in the music industry, and – last but not least – the music's reception by those for whom it was made, the rock and roll audience. In the 1950s, these actions and interactions gave, as was to be expected (Denzin, 1970), the style not only its musical form and meaning, but imputed all kinds of extra-musical meanings to it as well. The set of opportunities and constraints that shaped the social construction of rock and roll and its signification in the early 1950s was the popular music scene in the United States. This scene brought its own dynamics into the play, but was in turn profoundly affected by a number of wider social changes that were rapidly transforming American society after World War II and directly shaped the conditions for the emergence of rock and roll.

In this essay I will discuss the rise of rock and roll as a new and separate stream of popular music and look into the question how it acquired its stamp of rebellion. The changes, developments, and events in postwar America that affected rock and roll are intertwined in intricate ways with the emergence, evolution, and signification of this music and cannot easily be unraveled. In order to get a clearer view on what was going in society and in the realm of popular music and to get satisfactory answers to both my questions, it will be necessary to make some analytical distinctions. Therefore, I will treat the context in which rock and roll arose separately from the social construction and signification processes. I will deal with the context first and by doing so I will clear the ground for a better understanding of both the processes of construction and signification.

Next, I will make a distinction between the encompassing context of postwar America in transformation (section two), and the specific context, the American popular music scene in the early 1950s (section three), as the latter was influenced by the former. Having done that, I will deal with the social construction of rock and roll (sections four and five) and its signification as a rebellious music (section six), while recognizing that both processes went on side by side. In the final section (section seven), I will return to my questions and deal with the implications of my findings.

2. The Transformation of American Society

2.1. An Economic Boom and a New Social Ethic

World War II definitely transformed American society and it did so profoundly. The war forced the American government to enlarge its debts and pump enormous sums of money into war industries like shipbuilding and aviation. Thereby the administration inadvertently effectuated Keynes' recipe of how to end an economic depression. This policy worked and put an end to the period of economic stagnation that began with the Crash of 1929. Even more important, though, the war also stimulated innovation in every possible domain and the result of this was a real technological spurt. The influx of money in the economy in combination with this technological spurt, released the enormous potential of the United States. It made, as Donald Clarke (1995: 283) assesses, America the only nation to come out of the war economically more sound and healthy than it went into. America enjoyed an economic boom that lasted from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. This boom was strengthened even more by the steady and unprecedented expansion of the world economy – very much the product of this boom itself. Other positive effects on America's economy in this period, were the efforts of other countries to make up for their war losses, the aid the United States gave them by way of the Marshall Plan, and at a later date the military build-up that came with the Cold War.

The prospering economy accelerated the on-going transformation of small firm and rural America into a world of big industry, dominated by corporations. Older and smaller industries had to make way for newer and larger ones, using more advanced technologies and organizational methods. Entrepreneurial capitalism, in short, was replaced by corporate capitalism. At the same time, economic life became more complex which increased the necessity of economic planning and coordination and thus implied a growth of government. The *laissez-faire* attitude to what was going on in society, faded away and the functioning of the economy became the subject of government policy. In combination, these developments resulted in a massive growth of bureaucratic organizations in both the private and public sectors (Flacks, 1971: 35). More than ever before America became a society of people working in large organizations and, as William H. Whyte

assessed in his *The organization man* (1956), the belief in and the adjustment to the group became the core of a new social ethic (Miller and Nowak, 1977: 128).

These changes not only affected the working life of the American population. The economic developments favored an ongoing urbanization and this in turn led to suburbanization on a large scale in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. Rising incomes enabled many people to realize their dream: a house of their own with a garden in an agreeable neighborhood. Like so many other consumer dreams in this decade, this dream was realized by commodification. It was William Baird "Bill" Levitt of Levitt & Sons, who brought standardization and mass production techniques to house building. He turned farmlands into uniform housing projects, so-called Levittowns, which spread in record rates all over the United States (Miller and Nowak, 1977: 133-134; Halberstam, 1993: 131-143). The economic opportunities that the cities offered, the harsh segregation practices in the South, and the availability of houses that the new, white middle classes were leaving for the suburbs, moreover, led to a migration of large numbers of African-Americans from the rural parts of the South, in particular, to Northern cities. These processes, exacerbated by the influx of other minority groups, impoverished these cities and led to ghettoization. For most people the city, however, remained the place to work and the separation of work and home gave the automobile a central position in social life, which in turn led to massive construction of highways, fly-overs, and so on. All this spurred the economic boom but deteriorated city life even more.

The result was a profound change of the face of America. The country was already changing before the war, but the pace of innovation increased markedly afterwards. For many people the city with its expanding suburbs, its large scale production facilities, and its massive bureaucratic organizations, replaced small-town, rural America as the backbone of society and thereby the personal ties and connections belonging to this society gave way to more formal and anonymous ones. Doing things on a large scale became the typical feature of the emerging society and "mass" its predominant adjective, describing production, consumption, and the way people were mutually connected through the mass media.

2.2. The Cold War

The military expenditures and innovations necessitated by the war, augmented US military power to such an extent that the United States became a world power; the main world power even by its possession of the nuclear bomb. More important, the war also changed America's attitude vis-à-vis the world. Till then, isolationism – the dominant tendency in America's pre-war foreign policy – kept the United States from occupying a position in the world that corresponded to its strength. Entering the war meant, however, a – for many Americans involuntary – choice for internationalism and after the war it no longer proved to be possible – however hard many, mostly Republican, politicians tried – to return to the isolationist tradition. Eisenhower's election as president confirmed this shift from an eccentric to a central position in world affairs (Halberstam, 1993: 11). America's status as world power was, however, heavily disputed by the Soviet Union, which brought the

erstwhile allies in a worldwide competition that went on for the decades to come. The animosity between the Americans and the Soviets was not new. It originated with the October revolution of 1917 and from that time on the myth of the “red scare” had become a successful instrument in the United States in the struggle between capital and labor. For one thing it already had proved to be very effective in thwarting the rise of socialism as a workers movement (Miller and Nowak, 1977). In the Soviet Union it was just the other way around. Here, the capitalists got the part of the villain in a similar myth.

In the aftermath of World War II the animosity between both superpowers, as the USA and the USSR were called from then on, turned into a fierce competition and the myth of the “red scare” grew in force and importance. On the external political stage the competition between both countries took the form of a war without actual fighting, a Cold War. Both countries formed the hub of a system of allies and competed for the allegiance of countries that had not yet decided to which alliance they wanted to belong. In fact, two new empires – a white and a red one – arose of which at least the American one to many of its citizens, including a considerable number of its leaders, was an empire *nolens volens*. Both alliances made huge efforts to win military superiority which implied, above all, the development of nuclear weapons, submarines, long-distance bombers, and inter-continental ballistic missiles. There was always the fear for a Third World War, as the Cold War always threatened to turn into a hot one as, for instance, it did in Korea (1950-1953) or into crises like the Hungarian revolution of 1956. Finally, the Cold War even extended into outer space especially after the launch of the Sputnik on October 4, 1957.

Internally, the competition with the Soviet Union manifested itself in a sharp revival of the red scare myth and the development of an anticommunist hysteria in the early 1950s. The decade saw a series of witch-hunts, directed against actual or presumed communists who were accused of helping the Soviet Union by spying and of weakening America’s position by corrupting the minds of the American people. Even more important at the time, communists were said to have infiltrated the federal government and secretly guiding and shaping United States policies and “brainwashing” its citizens in favor of communism. These witch hunts were not limited to – former – members of the Communist party or to well-known fellow travelers. Everyone who had ever said or written something positive about the Soviet Union or communism – or for that matter socialism – was suspect. From here on, it was but a short step to include outspoken liberals into these hunts. In the eyes of many conservatives, these people were suspect anyway because of their support of organized labor and Roosevelt’s New Deal (Halberstam, 1993: 3-9). Accusations of being soft on communism or worse of being a fellow traveler, a socialist, or a – former – member of the communist party, became favorite weapons in political struggles, particularly in the hands of Republican politicians who desperately longed to end the Democratic reign of almost two decades. In extreme cases, it literally came to smear campaigns on the basis of which politicians like Richard Nixon and Joseph McCarthy were elected. As Miller and Nowak rightfully assess, these politicians were themselves not directly responsible for the paranoia over communism that swept all sectors of

American society; they merely capitalized on it. The anti-communist witch-hunts, of which the ones instigated and led by McCarthy became the most well-known, made many victims. A detailed description of the numerous postwar anti-red witch-hunts and their roots can be found, among others, in Miller and Nowak (1997, 21-42) or in I.F. Stone's book about this period with the telling title *The Haunted Fifties* (1963).

2.3. *The New American Consensus*

The economic, social, and political transformations of the 1950s had profound effects on the cultural climate. Not only did they bring prosperity and a hope that the "American Dream" would come true, but they also fostered widespread feelings of insecurity. This led to a strange combination of a somewhat naive optimistic belief in a bright future and a deep-seated feeling of anxiety stemming from the ubiquitous processes of social change people felt they could no longer control. Side effects like the deteriorating of the inner-cities and the rising crime figures strengthened this anxiety even more. This basic feeling of insecurity was, moreover, exacerbated by the consequences of America's new status as a superpower. The doom of an eventual annihilation by a nuclear attack loomed large in the American mind. It is only natural that people in such a situation, long to enjoy their newly found prosperity and to preserve it. At the same time, it is understandable that they also wanted to forgo the threats they perceived all around them. The majority of the Americans tried to do so by cultivating a watchful conservatism in the realms of culture and politics and by supporting a strict and normative conformism. It seemed that many people were so desperately trying to find their way back to the safe haven of an unswerving – mythical – past that they, most intellectuals included, readily abandoned their rights to dissent. Striving to consensus had become such a predominant value that conflicts were seen as something of a past that American society had outgrown in its maturity. This conformism was, moreover, strengthened by the omnipresent witch-hunts that made keeping a low profile a central value.

This new American consensus, built on the fundamentals of conformism and consensus itself, was a quaint mixture of optimism and pessimism. On one hand, people perceived the times they were living in, as an era in which "... everything was all right, everyone was getting richer, and tomorrow would always be better than today" (Brown, 1983: 20). On the other hand, negative feelings were really never far away. The 1950s were, as Miller and Nowak assess, also an era of fear leading to repression and pressures to conform. It was – like the 1920s – a period of relative prosperity and deep conservatism. The fifties were the years of Eisenhower that "... were tired, dull, cautious, and anxious ... Domesticity, religiosity, respectability, security through compliance with the system, that was the essence of the fifties" (Miller and Nowak, 1977: 7). And, behind this urge toward conformism, perceived as the means as well as the ends to a better life, there was always the gloom of pessimism. In Richard Aquila's apt portrayal of the era:

“Many Americans, still in the shadow of World War II, lived in the fear of the cold war and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. They were concerned about strange, new forces tugging at the seams of America’s social fabric ... In the 1950s, many Americans sought relief from these anxieties and fears through consensus and conformity. Pledging allegiance to American democracy and capitalism reassured Americans that they and their country were on the right track, and conforming to acceptable behavior, traditional values, and the rules of God and country guaranteed personal and national success. Anything that deviated from this consensus model was viewed as a threat to the American way” (Aquila, 1992: 269-270).

3. The Turn towards Rhythm and Blues

3.1. Musical Streams

Popular music is more than just a sequence of notes or sounds; it is also a form of social organization, an “art world.” This world, moreover, is not a monolithic block. Rather, it is split into different streams which closely follow the channels of the extant social and geographical divisions in society. Though these divisions are seemingly fading away in present-day popular music, they were still strong and valid at the end of the 1940s. In the United States, there existed six such musical streams at that time: three main streams and three smaller ones. The more important streams were (1) (white) pop or Tin Pan Alley music; (2) country and western music, mainly hillbilly and western swing (C&W); and (3) rhythm and blues (R&B). Alongside these streams, there were another three smaller and more specialized streams: (4) jazz; (5) gospel (in its black as well as its white variants); and (6) folk music. The white pop stream presented itself as the popular music of the nation. In fact it was not; it was mainly the popular music of the white population in the urban areas outside the South. In the South itself and in some parts of the West, country and western was dominant. Next to that, the African-American segment of the population had its own popular music, rhythm and blues, which concurred with the factual segregation that existed in the United States. The smaller streams each had their own specific audiences. Yet, they were important because they influenced the main streams by “giving” them songs, style elements, and artists (Ennis, 1992: 20-22).

The formation of this six-stream musical landscape in the 1940s and 1950s provided the set of opportunities and constraints for the rise of rock and roll. Singers, musicians, and composers who made rock and roll music, took the ingredients of rhythm and blues, country and western, and Tin Pan Alley music as their basic musical resources, adding to it all the material that had come earlier on from the smaller streams. These smaller streams, particularly black gospel, also influenced rock and roll directly in much the same way as they affected the main streams, i.e. by supplying songs, style elements, and artists. Other conditions favored as well as constrained rock and roll’s evolution into a separate musical stream. I will mention these elements in the next section when and where

they are relevant for our understanding of what happened and why it did happen. I will, however, make an exception for four social developments, taking place after World War II. As these four developments were crucial in shaping the opportunities for the emergence of rock and roll, they will be treated preliminarily in this section. These are: (1) the musical developments in the “white” pop stream that turned Tin Pan Alley into a dead-end street; (2) the rise of a new social category, youth; (3) the post-war structural changes in the realm of popular music, particularly those concerning the record companies and the radio stations; and (4) the turn of a white youthful avant-garde toward rhythm and blues.

3.2. *Tin Pan Alley Music*

Tin Pan Alley, the white pop style, was musically at its peak in the pre-war era. It still dominated the music scene after World War II, but its musical menu was less rich and varied than before. The music was badly affected by the dominant cultural climate in which conservatism and pressures toward conformism clearly discouraged musical experiments and innovations. The existing musical idiom was elaborated according to the rules of refinement and romanticism. So, in the 1940s and the early 1950s, sentimental ballads and melodramatic songs were predominant. It was the period of sweet love tunes, sung by suave crooners or elegant lady singers, packaged in complicated musical arrangements with scores of strings and background vocals. The only lively note came from a host of novelty tunes; a genre that became rather popular in those days. It was the era of Bing Crosby, Perry Como, Doris Day, The Andrew Sisters and the – declining – big bands. Nick Cohn (1969: 12) characterizes the music scene quite aptly by observing that “... by the early fifties, the scene had come to a standstill ... showbiz survived on habit.”

The exhaustion of the creative resources in the pop stream created a demand for “external” material. The people in the music industry took over songs and performers from the other streams. More and more hits directly crossed over from the rhythm and blues and country and western charts into the pop charts or were covered by well-known pop artists. Examples of such boundary crossings in the early 1950s are the direct crossover of the rhythm and blues hit “Sixty Minute Man” of The Dominoes (1951); Kay Starr’s cover for the pop market of the Clover’s rhythm and blues hit “Fool Fool Fool” (1951); June Valli’s pop cover of the country hit – originally a white gospel song – “Crying In The Chapel” (1953); and the success of Gordon Jenkins and the folk group the Weavers on the pop charts with the folk song “Goodnight Irene” (1950). The same thing happened to country hits like Hank Williams’ number-one hit “Cold Cold Heart” (1952), Jimmy Wakely and Margaret Whiting’s “A Bushel And A Peck” (1950), and Red Foley’s “Chattanooga Shoe Shine Boy” (1950).

The borders between the different streams were crossed in other ways too. A popular strategy of people working with the confines of a particular stream was to use the music of other streams as a source of inspiration for writing a new song. Songs were created that closely resembled hits in another stream, as so-called answer songs. Of course, songs like these had to fit in with the stream

characteristics and therefore the original material was cleverly mixed with the musical traditions of the receiving stream. A notable example is Patti Page's big success "Tennessee Waltz" (1950) in which elements of country and western and pop are combined. Originally, it was an answer song to an earlier country hit of Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys, "Kentucky Waltz" (1946). Several years after the success of Monroe, Patti Page turned her sung answer into a hit in both the pop and the country charts. Her song, in turn, was covered several times, and led itself to at least eight other answer songs in different streams over the next three years (Ennis, 1992: 203).

Many composers and producers of the pop stream even took a broader view. They were not only active in borrowing people and material from the other streams, but they also roamed "... the musical theater, the movies, music from England, the Continent, anywhere ..." (Ennis, 1992: 194). They even forayed in the field of classical music. Vic Damone's "Tell Me You Love Me" was based on an aria from the opera "I Pagliacci" and Bill Darnell's "Tonight Love", to name just some examples, on Liszt's "Second Hungarian Rhapsody" (Whitburn, 1986). A popular practice also was to find out by trial and error "what went with what." This trick resulted in all kinds of combinations, some of which were simply too bizarre to be successful, like the teaming up of opera singer Enzio Pinza with the country and western group "The Sons of the Pioneers". Other – as seemingly improbable – experiments, however, proved rather successful, like the duets by country-folk artist Tennessee Ernie Ford and Kay Starr whose style tended to rhythm and blues (Ennis, 1992: 195).

The effect of all this trespassing of the borders between the musical streams was that pop music became a jumble of styles with hardly any identity of its own and with many songs of dubious quality (Cohn, 1969: 12; Shaw, 1974: 26; Miller and Nowak, 1977: 294). As Donald Clarke (1995: 311) states, the early 1950s were "... one of the most dismal periods in the history of popular music." Alongside weak reflections of earlier Tin Pan Alley hits went vaguely religious songs like Frankie Laine's "I Believe" (1950) or Kitty Kallen's "Our Lady Of Fatima" (1950) and folk songs like "Goodnight Irene" – with eight recorded versions in 1950 – and "On Top Of Old Smokey" – with four recorded versions in 1951. In many hits influences from country and western and South American music were clearly audible as well. This dismal situation in the white pop stream was, moreover, worsened by yet another notable trend; the production of – often nonsensical – novelty songs which proved to be very popular with the audience. One of the most widely known is possibly "The Thing" (1950). Related to this tendency was the strategy to use all kinds of sounds and other gimmicks. Master of this gimmickry and sound experimenting, no doubt, was the most important A&R (Artists and Repertory) man of the period, Mitch Miller, who added sounds to his arrangements like "snapping bullwhips ... honking wild geese ... barking dogs ... braying French horns ..." (Shaw, 1974: 27). There is probably no better illustration of how bad the situation had grown at that time in the field of pop music than Patti Page's rather silly "(How Much Is) That Doggie In The Window" – in 1953 for eight weeks at number-one. As David Jasen (1988: 279) epitomizes the popular music scene at the beginning of the 1950s:

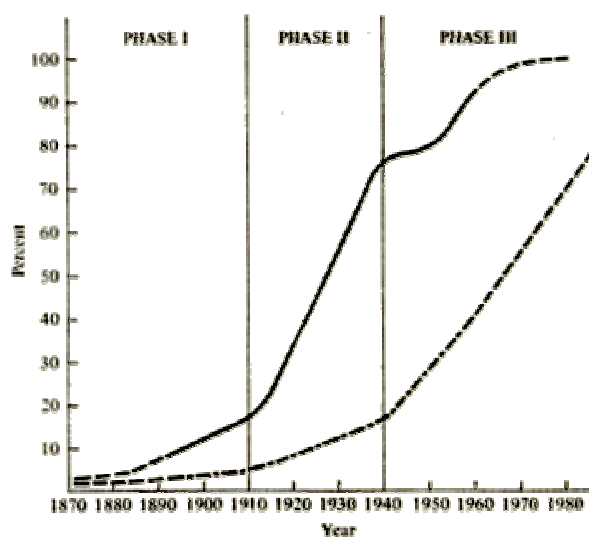
“At first, Alley operations at the beginning of the fifties seemed like a continuation of the forties, ... [but] during the early fifties ... there appeared on the top charts a greater variety of song types than ever before. Not only were the staples of the Alley, ballads, popular (“My Heart Cries For You”), but there was also success for Latin American songs (“Vaya Con Dios”), syncopated rag songs (“Music! Music! Music!”), hillbilly (“Your Cheating Heart”), homespun (“Dearie”), ethnic (“Come on-a My House”), folk (“Goodnight, Irene”), novelty (“Molasses, Molasses”), and polka (“Hop Scotch Polka”).”

All the same, the increasing variety of the Tin Plan Alley repertoire may have attracted adult audiences. However, it certainly did not make it more appealing to the needs of young people. In fact, the status position of youth was changing and with it their musical tastes.

3.3. *Youth: A New Social Category*

The post-war economic and technological transformations had yet another effect. On one hand, these changes generated a demand for better qualified employees while, on the other hand, they created the financial room to free young people from the obligation to join the work force at an early age (Weinstein, 1992: 94). The effect was that more young people than ever before went to school till they were eighteen years of age or even older. That way a new social category was created: youth, a category consisting of people who were no longer kids but not yet belonged to the adult world either. Figure 1 is reproduced from a seminal article by Martin Trow (1961), published in the early 1960s and describing the “second transformation” of American education. The black line represents the growth of high school enrollment as a proportion of the population’s age group of 14-17 year of age; the dotted line represents college and university enrollment as a proportion of the population’s age group of 18-21 year of age. The figures are based on ten year intervals; the years during World War II and the Korean War are not shown and the figures for the years after 1960 are estimated.

Figure 1: Enrollment rates in secondary and higher education in the United States, 1870-1980 (source: Trow, 1961: 110)



Characterizing the changes in educational attendance as a “second” transformation, Trow pointed at the rise participation rates in tertiary education – the colleges – and the consequent change of secondary education – high school – from a mass terminal system into an institution preparing pupils for further education. This also changed the role and position of youth itself. Their new position in-between more clearly defined status positions, meant that neither the role set that belongs to the position of children with its values, rules, responsibilities, and identities nor that of the adults fully applied to this new category. The position and role of the school-going youth between 12 and 18 was thus vague and indistinct. This ambiguity was, moreover, strengthened by the fact that the parents of these youngsters let them fully participate in the growing affluence and so these youth had money to spend. This gave them the only position in which the adult world would take them seriously – that of consumer (Denney, 1965: 159). Together, the limbo of transition that high school became and the new luxury bestowed on the young created the basic conditions for the emergence of an autonomous youth culture (Hine, 1999: 226; Miller and Nowak, 1977: 292).

Youths attending high school formed a social category whose position was not yet fixed and who – just like any other social category – needed a place in society that was clearly demarcated with its own cultural peculiarities, lifestyles, and identities. Popular music is an important means to obtain such a place because it may function as a catalyst in creating a youth culture and be a crucial building stone for such a place (Miller and Nowak, 1977: 292). The popular music around 1950 did, however, not offer much in this respect. The pop stream was, artistically seen, dead, geared mainly to adult taste, and oriented to an Eastern urban environment. It lacked, above all, passion. Emotions and feelings were reduced to worn-out cliché’s and often hidden behind euphemisms. As Douglas Miller and Marion Nowak (1977: 293) ironically note: “Pop records had the final passionate impact of marshmallow whip.” This bland music obviously could not give young people the good times they were craving for. Another of its weak points was that it did not relate to the conditions and therefore the feelings of these young people. Moreover, pop offered little for the new youth to identify with. As Nick Cohn (1969: 16) rightfully notes, young people in the early 1950s “... had no music of their own, no clothes or clubs, no tribal identity. Everything had to be shared with adults.” The only thing Tin Pan Alley had to offer was that ridiculous doggie of Patti Page. The other streams could not help out, either. Country and western was regionally bound, often associated with the “country bumpkin”, and, in general, way too far off from the life world of the young in the (sub)urban areas of America. With bebop, jazz moved toward the intellectual scene and gospel was music for church services. Rhythm and blues, on the other hand, had much in store for young people but for the time being, segregation held it out of reach of most of them. Helped by a few vital innovations in the music industry, however, some of them found their way to this musical stream.

3.4. Changes in the Realm of Popular Music

The post-war economic boom brought work and affluence to many Americans and led to a drastic rise in consumption. This consumptive demand was met by an enormous increase in mass production. The technological spurt, we mentioned before, added strongly to this change toward production for consumption, by upgrading the productive capacities of America's industry. It fostered the improvement of existing products like automobiles and, last but not least, the production of new ones like television. The growing production of an ever-expanding variety of consumer products, ranging from automobiles by refrigerators to television sets, further promoted economical growth. The consumer became the new hero of the postwar era and according to Aquila (1992: 270), "[T]he booming postwar economy produced a culture of consumption that washed over America like a tidal wave."

Product innovation also found its way into the distribution of music. In the music industry two technological product innovations proved to be crucial. The first was the invention of the vinyl record which made it possible to replace the shellac 78 rpm record by the twin formats of the 45 rpm single record and the 33 rpm long playing record. The second was the introduction of a smaller and less expensive phonograph player. Both these innovations interacted, thereby strengthening their success on the music market. In 1948 Columbia introduced the first 12-inch 33-1/3 rpm microgroove LP vinylite record with 23-minute play-time per side. A year later RCA Victor introduced the 7-inch 45 rpm micro-groove vinyl single. These new formats enabled the record companies to create a two-tier record market: one for the hit single records to be played on the inexpensive record players and one for more serious – popular and classical – music on the long-play record to be played on expensive hi-fi sets. This strategy proved rather successful and as a result the basic unit of popular music of the pre-war period, sheet music, now definitely gave way to the new post-war unit, the record. Philip Ennis points (1992: 99) to the fact, that this shift from sheet to recorded music also implied an important artistic change:

“The song as written notes, inviting varied interpretations by any performer, was gradually being replaced by a unique performance by a single artist – soloist, vocal group, or a band. The performer came to dominate the creative side, overshadowing the songwriter and lyricist” (emphasis by Ennis).

These technological and creative changes brought record companies to a dominant position in the music business as they were more and more taking care not only of recording the music but also of tracking down musical talents and catering for them.

At the same time, the structure of the broadcasting industry was changing, partially as a consequence of the antitrust measures that the federal government took from 1938 onward. The monopoly of the nationwide broadcasting networks was broken up which favored the growth of smaller local radio stations; as a result “... the small, independent station became the postwar meteoric star of the broadcasting industry” (Ennis, 1992: 136). In 1950 there were already about

2.000 AM radio stations, a number rising to about 3.400 in 1960. Moreover, television pushed radio from its throne and the number of TV stations expanded quickly from about 100 in 1950 to about 600 in 1960 (Ennis, 1992: 265). TV became the main form of family entertainment and its programs particularly replaced the nationwide broadcasted radio shows that thrived on bringing live music. The success of television also meant a lowering of the advertising income of the radio stations and thus smaller program budgets.

These developments transformed broadcasting thoroughly. The national radio market dominated by four contending national networks with lavish assets, split into a large number of local markets each served by several competing, mostly poorly capitalized, independent radio stations. The latter solved their budgetary problems by broadcasting records instead of live music. By this transition from live music to records as the basis of radio programs, radio stations and record companies were from then onwards "... inexorably bound together" (Peterson, 1990: 105). The small radio stations, moreover, tended to specialize by making specific programs for distinct audiences such as housewives or teenagers. They also employed far less staff, which favored the rise of the disk jockey. That way, radio became the medium for broadcasting recorded music by deejays for audiences that were commercially important for the advertising companies. Among those audiences the young slowly came to prominence. As Deena Weinstein (1992: 92) assesses, "[I]n their rooms or cruising in cars, they played the radio." And, so we can add, they already were trained to listen to recorded hit music by being exposed to a growing number of "automatic coin-operated phonographs," better known as jukeboxes.

Recorded hit music already was brought to the young by the rising number of jukeboxes that were being produced in great quantities between 1935 and 1950. In the early 1950s, the jukebox exploiters bought between a quarter and a third of all records and paid a fee for every time a record was played in their machines. This further strengthened the already strong position of the record companies. At the beginning of the 1950s, there were many record companies, though only a small number of those dominated the market. These were the large companies, the so-called majors, who recorded and released the bulk of white pop and country and western songs. These companies were not really interested in the music from and for African Americans and this offered a niche for the – mostly small – independent record companies, the so-called Indies. The latter flourished in the early 1950s, not only because the black population got their share of the growing prosperity but also because there were now radio stations specifically aiming their programs at black audiences – about 700 in 1954 according to Gillett (1972: 279). As we will see in the next section, the Indies and the "black" radio stations would play an important role in bringing about rock and roll and in shaping its format. But even before that time, the "black" radio stations proved important by their power to attract a youthful avant-garde to their programs.

3.5. *The Turn towards Rhythm and Blues*

At the end of the 1940s, the border lines between the musical streams were still solid but were crossed at an ever-accelerating pace in the years that followed. This was caused by the fact that everyone in the music industry tried to enlarge their share of the music market – or at least prevent losing their share in it – while they often lacked the material to reach this end on their own. In this competition, the music producers in each stream also tried to keep the border lines of their own stream intact. In their view, they were allowed to take over hits and artists from other streams but they objected to others doing the same. Keeping to the boundaries, however, involved more than keeping one's share of the music market. It coincided with the central cultural and normative trend of the 1950s; the endeavors to keep culture a large unchanged and to maintain its norms strictly. This cultural torpor could be witnessed in all cultural fields and popular music certainly was no exception.

At this point, it is important to note that this stagnation not only resulted out of the oligopoly of the major record companies as, for instance, Richard Peterson (1990) contends. To explain the continued existence of Tin Pain Alley and subsequently the late arrival of rock and roll, Peterson points at the ASCAP-BMI feud. The ASCAP was the oldest organization of copyright holders of popular music. Over the years, it launched two major attacks both focusing on the broadcasters. The first started in 1939 when the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), representing the nation's radio stations, founded its own copyright organization (BMI) to counter the high rates, charged by ASCAP for the right to play their songs on the radio. In reply ASCAP announced that it would double its rates in 1940. The NAB, however, struck back by boycotting all ASCAP tunes until ASCAP finally surrendered in 1941 (Ennis, 1992: 105-108). However, it was not the end of the war between both parties. One way or the other it continued till the 1960s. For Peterson this long episode proves that the record companies needed time to adjust to the new situation and for him this explains why people had to wait till 1955 for the emergence of rock and roll. As we shall see, there is more to this question than just the inability of the music industry to adapt to new markets. Popular music is not only a commodity. It is also a part of the culture of a society and is as much influenced by cultural trends as by economic factors. One such a cultural trend, certainly, was the rise of a youthful, white avant-garde turning towards rhythm and blues.

Despite the cultural stasis, there were pockets of resistance or niches in which people attempted to fashion – parts of – society to their own standards. An example of such a niche is the Beat Generation in literature. The same happened among young listeners to popular music. Here an avant-garde arose at the end of the 1940s that consisted, according to David Riesman (1950), of a small minority characterized by elaborate standards of music listening and a dislike of name bands and the commercialization of radio and music. This youthful avant-garde tuned their receivers into black radio stations and bought the records they heard in black record stores. They even were helped by the ASCAP-BMI struggle, for, as BMI was strong on rhythm and blues, a growing amount of this music could be heard on the radio since the early 1940s. This “rebellious” minority

tuning in to rhythm and blues was special in other respects as well because – as Riesman (1950: 365-366; Gillett, 1970: 11-13) keenly observed at that time – there are always:

“... ways in which the minority may use popular music to polarize itself from the majority group, and thereby from American popular culture generally: a sympathetic attitude or even preference for Negro musicians; an egalitarian attitude towards the roles, in love and work, of the two sexes; a more international outlook, with or without awareness, for example of French interest in American jazz; an identification with disadvantaged groups, not only Negroes, from which jazz springs, with or without a romantic cult of proletarianism; a dislike of romantic pseudo-sexuality in music, even without any articulate awareness of being exploited; similarly a reaction against the stylized body image and limitations of physical self-expression which “sweet” music and its lyrics are felt as conveying; a feeling that music is too important to serve as a backdrop for dancing, small talk, studying, and the like; a diffuse resentment of the image of the teenager provided by the mass media.”

The turn to black pop music is the more remarkable because one of the most solid barriers in society, the racial one, kept this music practically out of the reach of white youth. Rhythm and blues records were only available in black neighborhoods and most “white” radio stations deliberately kept to the policy of not broadcasting rhythm and blues records. The arrival of this avant-garde was a signal of a serious mismatch between the preferences of young people and the music the pop stream was offering.

3.6. *A Window of Opportunity*

In retrospect, other signals were clearly visible as well, although the vested music industry did not see – or blatantly ignored – the writings on the wall (Shaw, 1974: 114-115). One of these other signs was the growing preference for black music in the realm of white pop music. From 1950 onward, the black presence in pop music increased as even more rhythm and blues hits were crossing over directly to the white music stream or were covered there by white artists. The fact that the rhythm and blues cover version of “Crying In The Chapel” (1953) by the Orioles could become a pop hit while June Valli’s pop version had already been one earlier that year, shows that the preference for black styled music grew even further (Ennis, 1992: 216). Charlie Gillett (1972: 279) points out that the Orioles’ version was preferred by the largest group of record buyers, which obviously were the young.

Another hint of the rising preference for black styled music gives the swift success of Johnnie Ray whose songs were characterized by a direct emotionalism and a black voicing – the first white boy who could sing black (Ennis, 1992, 215). Moreover, there were signs that there were other mismatches as well as young people began to tamper with the conventions in society, particularly those concerning sexual behavior. Such a sign is the popularity of songs that dealt directly – the Dominoes’ “Sixty Minute Man” (1951) – or indirectly – Nat King Cole’s “Too Young” (1951) –

with this issue. The turn of a youthful avant-garde to rhythm and blues was important for the genesis of rock and roll because it showed other young people the way to a more promising music style. Therewith, it opened the window of opportunity for everyone in the field of popular music who looked for new avenues outside the well-trodden path of Tin Pan Alley.

4. The Formation of a New Musical Stream

4.1. In Search for Fresh Sounds

The story of rock and roll may be – and still is – told in many different ways and many different people are credited with the honor of having “invented” this music. Accordingly, the music’s birthday is located at different points in time. Nick Tosches, for instance sets this date as early as 1942 while others put it as late as 1953 or 1954. There really is much to say for Tosches’ view, because when listening to pre-1950s records one would categorize quite a few of them as rock and roll. The terms “rock” and “roll”, moreover, were in use in the music business long before the mid-1950s – as Tosches (1991: 6-8) indicates. Musically, it would make sense to follow Tosches’ lead and start with the story in the 1940s. Here, however, we are looking at rock and roll as a social phenomenon. Socially, rock and roll only surfaced in the early 1950s when white youngsters – inspired by avant-garde we mentioned before – began to listen to and to buy records with black music because they were fed up with the extant dull, lifeless, and uninteresting music of the white pop stream (Gillett, 1970: 13). “[T]hese young people were turning their radio dials and searching for fresh sounds on off beat black stations” (Shaw, 1974: 44). The result was that, already in the early 1950s, about 20% to 30% of the listeners to black radio stations were white (Clarke, 1995: 372).

The turn to black music made the emergence of rock and roll as popular music possible, but by itself was not the first step in the process of the social construction of rock and roll. Below I will analyze this process on the basis of the three phases – steps – I recognize in it. The first step consists of the discovery of an existing musical style as one that is interesting and useful. Such a discovery is an innovation that often gets a specific label. The second step concerns the elaboration and development of the new-found style and encompasses the experiments of the people writing, composing, performing and recording this music and their exploration of its possibilities. In the third phase, the labeled and now elaborated musical style is consolidated; its canon is fixed and the style is cleaned of its too exuberant characteristics emerging in the second phase. These phases or steps are not separated in time. As the case of rock and roll makes clear, there almost never is a neat succession of steps and they will always partially overlap.

4.2. *The Innovation of Rock and Roll*

The first step was set by some inventive members of what by now had become a prospering occupational category, the disk jockeys. The active search for rhythm and blues by a white minority meant the beginning of a trend that did not go by unnoticed. At that time, a couple of deejays witnessed this change in preferences and they succeeded in persuading the owners and directors of their stations to give them some air time for programming rhythm and blues music for white youth audiences – see for the names of the most influential deejays and of the radio stations where they made their programs: Gillett (1970: 38-39). Alan Freed has become the most well-known of them. He had his way in Cincinnati in 1951, where he organized a radio show filled with rhythm and blues music which he called “Moondog’s Rock and Roll Party”. From 1952 onwards, Freed presented the same and other, mostly black, artists also in live shows that became very popular among young audiences. This made him “... the white champion of black pop ...” (Ennis, 1992: 8). Examples of songs he and other deejays played are “Sixty Minute Man” (1951) by the Dominoes, “Fool Fool Fool” (1951) by the Clovers, “Lawdy Miss Clawdy” (1952) by Lloyd Price, “Rocket 88” by Jackie Brenston and Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton’s “Hound Dog” (1953).

The attempts of Alan Freed and other adventurous deejays to bring black pop to white audiences were important contributions to the social construction of rock and roll as a new format in popular music. First, Freed gave a selection of the existing rhythm and blues music – those songs of which the beat, the feeling, and the lyrics appealed to his young audience – a new name. This labeling of specific musical pieces as “rock and roll” allowed for marking these and similar pieces off from other forms of popular music and made it possible to treat them as a new musical entity. Second, these deejays brought this erstwhile segregated music to the attention of a wider circle of white youth. The effect was that more and more white listeners turned to programs of disk jockeys who played black music instead of the programs of the mainstream pop radio stations in which the original rhythm and blues records were ignored (Gillett, 1970: 38-39). By creating their own audiences, these deejays brought the unknown black music into the mainstream of American popular music and gave young Americans a form of music they could enjoy, relate to, and identify with.

The eager reactions of white youngsters to this programmatic innovation played an essential role in the take-off of rock and roll. Their enthusiasm did not only put pressure on the – mostly conservative – owners of the radio stations, but initiated reactions of the juke box distributors and other people in the music industry as well. The former put more and more rock and roll records in their machines and thus “... provided a new channel of communication for white record buyers who did not yet tune in to black radio stations” (Gillett, 1970: 14). The music industry, in its turn, increasingly crossed the boundary between the white and black pop music. More and more rhythm and blues songs reached the pop charts and an increasing number of rhythm and blues hits were covered. The result was that black artists and their music were introduced to a growing number of white youth next to those who already listened to deejays like Alan Freed. Together, the actions and

reactions of white youth, deejays, juke box owners, and the music industry created the foundation on which rock and roll could develop in its own way and evolve into a separate stream – the seventh stream – in American popular music (Ennis, 1992).

4.3. The Elaboration of Rock and Roll

During the times rock and roll was being innovated as a new musical stream, the external conditions enticing producers and artists to experiment with new musical forms played the most important role. Making the step toward elaboration, the internal dynamics of the field itself more overtly come into play – and with it the role of individual contributions. This second step in the social construction of rock and roll involved the shaping of the music into a format in its own right, once its foundation was laid. This transformation was wrought by a specific segment of the music business in a specific region. In the South, artists, small record producers and independent record companies now were deliberately looking for ways to combine rhythm and blues with the musical traditions they grew up in themselves. They sensed that there was a market for pop music with a markedly black influx alongside the existing rhythm and blues music. Johnnie Ray's instant success – two millions copies were sold of his "Cry" (1951; for 11 weeks at number-one) and its flipside "The Little White Cloud That Cried" – was an indication that they could be right.

Bill Haley was one of the artists who combined black and white – particularly country and western – musical elements in search for this new market. A former deejay himself, Haley was quite familiar with all the postwar popular music styles and in the early 1950s his musical interests and commercial instincts took him to the crossroads where pop, rhythm and blues, and country music met (Ennis, 1992: 220). In 1953, after some tries that were not very successful, Haley and his band "The Comets" recorded "Crazy, Man, Crazy". It "... became the first rock and roll song to make the best selling lists on Billboard's national chart" (Gillett, 1970: 3). It was followed by a whole string of hits of which "Rock Around The Clock" (1954) became the most widely known. Other famous Haley hits were "Shake, Rattle, And Roll" (1954) and "See You Later, Alligator" (1956).

By adding musical elements, originating from the country and western tradition, to rhythm and blues, Haley made a major contribution to the development of rock and roll. Particularly, the fact that he did so as a white artist – still more accepted than black artists in the America of the early 1950s – contributed greatly to the effect of his innovation. With his neat and cleaned-up lyrics he also made this music more acceptable to white youngsters. He for instance, cleaned up Joe Turner's rhythm and blues songs "Shake, Rattle, And Roll" and he was also careful enough with the lyrics of his other songs. Some people value this practice of cleaning badly while others praise Haley for doing so because he only concealed the real meaning and intentions of the lyrics for those who did not listen carefully enough. Nick Cohn (1969: 19), for instance, reject it as a watering down of the explicit sexual meaning of rock and roll but Charles Brown (1983: 25) on the other hand states, "He really did not take the meat out of the lyrics; he just covered it with a disguise." Another lasting contribution was his exuberant performing style – the bass player lying on his back

while playing and the saxophone player holding his instrument above his head in his solos. He took this style of performing, as he said, from the “old style rhythm and blues” as performed by band-leaders like Lionel Hampton or Jimmy Preston and, of course, from the jump-styled rhythm and blues bands like Louis Jordan’s Tympani Five (Gillett, 1970: 23; Pratt, 1990: 136). All in all, Haley’s creative efforts promoted rock and roll’s development toward a musical format that was something other than merely “re-labeled” rhythm and blues music.

4.4. The Contribution of Sam Phillips

Performing artists like Haley were not the only ones, contributing to the elaboration of rock and roll. At the same time, some of the record producers and owners of the small independent record companies who produced the bulk of rhythm and blues music were looking for ways to produce a new kind of pop music. Sam Phillips, no doubt, has become one of the most known among them, particularly because he was the one who discovered Elvis Presley. Phillips started out as a deejay after the war and founded his own business in 1950. His first enterprise was the Memphis Record Service, a company engaged in tracking down talents, supervising them, and recording their musical performances. The final results of these activities were leased or sold to independent companies. He was so successful at this, that he was able to start his own record company, Sun, within two years. He recorded white as well as black artists but proved to be the most successful with black blues singers as Jackie Brenston, B.B. King, Howlin’ Wolf, and Little Junior Parker.

Phillips’ main contribution to rock and roll, however, came with Elvis Presley. The story of how they both met and worked together, already has been told so many times and in so many different ways that it has become an urban legend by now. It sure does not have to be reiterated here. The important thing about their cooperation is that Sam Phillips skillfully mixed his musical experiences and knowledge and his intuition of what young people were looking for with Presley’s musical talents and roots in the white and black musical scenes of the American South. Putting these elements together in the pressure cooker of extended sessions in the small Sun studio in Memphis led to a new rock and roll style known as rockabilly in which gospel, rhythm and blues, and country and western, particularly hillbilly music, were merged into a new kind of songs. The “Presley-Phillips” cooperation led to classic rock and roll records like “That’s All Right Mama” (1954) – Presley’s first record, “Good Rockin’ Tonight” (1954), “You’re A Heartbreaker” (1955), “Baby Let’s Play House” (1955), and the last record Presley made for Sun “Mystery Train” (1955).

The combined efforts of Elvis Presley and Sam Phillips made the resources of the three main streams in popular music available to a host of new-coming rock and roll singers, musicians, and songwriters. That was important by itself, as it was crucial for the development of rock and roll as a separate musical stream. Both men, however, did more. With his way of singing Presley solved what still was a contradiction in Bill Haley’s approach – the incongruence of being white while doing black – by doing black while being white (Ennis, 1992: 253). Surprisingly, this also opened the way for black artists like Chuck Berry and Frankie Lymon to do the opposite – doing white

while being black. It made, as Ennis rightfully assesses, rock and roll a racially mixed and even integrated stream. The purposeful efforts of Sam Phillips, Elvis Presley, and of course Bill Haley to produce a new kind of music changed the scene of popular music drastically. As Charlie Gillett states, “Presley’s success ... encouraged Phillips to try other singers with comparable styles and material ...” This way, he brought artists and performers to the front lines of the changing music scene like Carl Perkins, Roy Orbison, Johnnie Cash, and Jerry Lee Lewis, who by themselves contributed greatly to the elaboration of the new stream. The first of these artists, for instance, wrote and performed one of the now classic rock and roll hits “Blue Suede Shoes” (1956); the last one became one of rock and roll’s major figures with his wild stage act, his intense way of singing, and his hammering style of piano playing. Lewis’ “Whole Lotta of Shakin’ Going On” (1957), “Great Balls Of Fire” (1957), and “High School Confidential” (1958) still belong to the best of what rock and roll has to offer.

Presley’s way of singing, his voicing of emotions closely following and adding to the songs’ chord changes, also directly inspired young artists all over America, among them singers like Gene Vincent, Eddie Cochran, and Buddy Holly. Presley brought, however, more to rock and roll than just music. He thoroughly influenced the way the music was to be performed and thereby set the standards for appearance, dress, and behavior of many youngsters. Important in this respect were, particularly, the open and hidden suggestions of sexuality in his performances and his image of the leather-clad boy from Beale Street with greasy hair. Of course, Sam Phillips was not the only independent in the record business who took the rock and roll road to success and Presley also was not the only young artist who seized the opportunity which the independent record companies offered. By that time many other independent record producers and companies were busily experimenting and recorded new – often young – artists who longed for a chance to make it.

4.5. Looking for Niches

In the mid-1950s the popular music market was booming and attracted enterprising people from outside the music business into the hit game; some of them founded a record company themselves, others became freelance producers tracking down new talents, coaching them and managing their careers. All were looking for their own niche in this new market; now producing a specific sort of music for a specific kind of audience. Almost all of them were taken by the hope to find music with the potential to break into the national market. At this point we encounter one of the main differences between the majors and the Indies. The majors were almost exclusively focused on the national market. In order not to jeopardize their position in this market, they avoided risks in their choice of music. The Indies served more specialized markets, but the possibility of a breakthrough in the national market, if only occasionally, for them was a prime mover. And, all people involved with the Indies were very well aware of the fact that their chances depended on more risky musical experiments. As rock and roll songs at that time were such risky experiments, the policies of the Indies favored the emergence of rock and roll in a major way. The result was a profusion of new

labels, artists, songs, musical styles, and records which enlarged the diversity in rock and roll music to a large degree.

Joel Whitburn's reviews of the Billboard charts (1986; 1987a) show that the interest in the new music was not evenly spread over all the Indies. Some kept aloof from rock and roll but others were more active in recording this style of music. In fact, only Sun and Specialty were fully committed to rock and roll (Gillett, 1970: 86). Nevertheless, most of the independents were frantically looking for new venues into the music market, which often meant giving young talent a chance. One way to do this was by producing records of vocal groups – a practice of almost all Indies (Gillett, 1970: 69). These groups were important in shaping rock and roll music, because alongside recording straight forward rock and roll songs they used musical material that came from the area where rhythm and blues, Tin Pan Alley, and country and western met; precisely the area where rock and roll emerged. This way they contributed to its further development. The Orioles' hit "Crying In The Chapel" (1953), mentioned before, is a good example. Here country, white gospel, Tin Pan Alley, and black pop met and the song brought the producing record company – Jubilee – success by reaching the national market. Other notable vocal group records were "Gee" by the Crows (1954; Rama label), "Sh-Boom" by the Chords (1954; Cat label), "Earth Angel" by the Penguins (1954; Dootone label), and "Why Do Fools Fall In Love" by Frankie Lymon and The Teenagers (1956; Gee label). Most of these groups were one-hit wonders but some survived over a longer period; a good example in this respect is offered by the Coasters, a vocal group recording hit songs for Atlantic from 1957 to 1964.

It would carry too far to give a survey of all the relevant vocal groups and their record companies and to assess which of their records belonged to rock and roll. It suffices to note, that the Indies were important for rock and roll by recording these new young groups. It would also take us too far to describe all the independents that once produced a particular rock and roll record. It will only recall the most relevant ones in order to assess the importance of the role the independent record producers and companies played in the elaboration of rock and roll music and the exploration of its potentialities. I have already mentioned the two most important companies, Sun and Specialty. The first company produced over 200 rock and roll records (Gillett, 1970: 90) and the second one discovered one of rock and roll's most flamboyant stars, Little Richard. Richard Penniman made "Tutti Frutti" (1956), "Long Tall Sally" (1956), "Lucille" (1957), "Good Golly, Miss Molly" (1958) into rock and roll classics. His way of performing made him, moreover, a real rock and roll legend – for Cohn (1969: 33) he even is the most splendid rocker and the most exciting live performer – and by this he had a great effect on later rock performers.

4.6. Some other Independents

Alongside Sun and Specialty, four other independent record companies – Atlantic, King, Chess, and Imperial – were influential in shaping the new music. Among those, Atlantic is probably the best known and most influential independent company of the post-war era. As Gillett (1970: 70) rightly

observes, “[its] staff ... has shown a flair for assessing performing styles and audiences tastes that has been unmatched in the post-war history of popular music.” Atlantic – on its own label and that of its subsidiaries Atco and Cat – was very active in the field of rhythm and blues and rock and roll. The company’s A&R men, particularly Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler, tracked and guided new talent and novel musical material and produced a stream of catchy records. Among their invaluable contributions to the development of rock and roll music were the rhythm and blues styled records of LaVern Baker, such as “Tweedle Dee” (1954) and “Tra La La” (1956), the genuine blues record “C.C. Rider” (1957) of Chuck Willis, and the earlier mentioned “Sh-Boom” (1954) of the Chords. Atlantic also produced straightforward rock and roll records, such as Bobby Darin’s “Splish Splash” and “Queen Of The Hop” (1958) and the Coaster’s famous hits “Searchin” / “Young Blood” (1957), “Yakety Yak” (1958), and “Charlie Brown” (1958).

King’s effect on rock and roll came above all from its geographical position, Cincinnati, which offered the company privileged access to artists from the South and the Midwest. The company was equally strong in the field of country and western and rhythm and blues and took the initiative to record rhythm and blues versions of country and western songs. From there it was but a short step to rock and roll with songs like “Hearts Of Stone” (1954) and “Ling Ting Tong” (1955) by Otis Williams and the Charms, “Honky Tonk” (1956) by Bill Doggett, and “Seventeen” (1955) and “My Boy Flat Top” (1955) by Boyd Bennett and His Rockets. King also produced a typical number-one rhythm and blues hit, “Work With Me, Annie”, in 1954 and in the same year its inevitable sequel “Annie Had A Baby” by Hank Ballard and the Midnighters. Like their predecessor “Sixty Minute Man” (1951) these songs – “... whose lyrics barely disguised their sexual celebration” (Ennis, 1992: 212) – also had a moderate success on the pop chart, where they reached a number-22 and number-23 position.

Chess, in turn, was specialized in blues with famous names like Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker. In 1954, the company entered the vocal group market with the Moonglows and the Flamingos. Chess made its most lasting contributions to rock and roll, no doubt, by recording Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley. Berry, in particular, became one of rock and roll’s major figures with songs like “Maybellene” (1955), “Roll Over, Beethoven” (1956), “Too Much Monkey Business” (1956), “School Day” (1957), “Rock And Roll Music” (1957), and “Johnny B. Goode” (1958). Berry made important contributions to rock and roll as a guitarist but, above all, he excelled as the lyricist of American teenage life. For Belz (1969: 61-66), Berry is the “Folk Poet” of the 1950s who expressed the ordinary realities of the world of youth – cars, girls, growing-up, school, and music – and for the same reason Shaw (1974: 147) crowns him with the honorary title “the song laureate of the teen generation.”

Imperial produced another of rock and roll’s legendary figures, Fats Domino. Collaborating with his bandleader Dave Bartholomew, this piano-playing singer from New Orleans developed a specific rhythm and blues style, the New Orleans Dance Blues. This warm-sounding laid-back music retroactively became rock and roll as “... Domino’s sound, called rhythm and blues in 1954,

was heralded as rock and roll by 1956” (Friedlander, 1996: 29). The “fate” of Fats Domino by itself is a clear demonstration of how the social construction of a music style works; in order to belong to a new style it is not necessary to change one’s music – labeling this music as such may suffice. Domino’s rhythm and blues records – dating back from the late 1940s – thus became rock and roll in the mid-1950s and songs like “Ain’t That A Shame” (1955), “My Blue Heaven” (1956), “Blueberry Hill” (1956), and “I’m Walkin’” (1957) now rightfully belong to the canon of rock and roll.

Alongside these Indies, there is yet one other company, Cadence, that deserves to be mentioned, because they brought us the Everly Brothers. This duo singing in a close-vocal harmony style also contributed to the development of rock and roll, though they are somewhat difficult to place. With Chuck Berry they share the same subject: teen concerns. Their country roots coincide with rockabilly, and their close harmony style of singing corresponds to the vocal groups we mentioned before. These sons of established country and western artists began their career in the country and western stream for Columbia in 1956. Their manager, Wesley Rose of the famous Nashville Acuff-Rose music firm, brought about their breakthrough “... by finding them a source of distinctive song material [Boudleau and Felice Bryant – a husband and wife team that wrote country and western songs], ... an enterprising independent record label [Cadence], ... and a production team [Archie Bleyer – owner of Cadence – and Chet Atkins – friend of Everly family and head of RCA’s country division] ...” (Gillett, 1970: 109). Despite their strong leaning toward the idiom of country music, Don and Phil Everly belong to rock and roll to which development they made important contributions. Songs like “Bye Bye Love” (1957), “Wake Up Little Susie” (1957), “Bird Dog” (1958), and “(Till) I Kissed You” (1959) belong to rock and roll classics as do “Cathy’s Clown” (1960) and “Lucille” (1960) produced by Warner.

Finally, the emergence of the freelance independent producer, a new figure in the music business, strongly influenced and shaped rock and roll. Following the lead of their predecessor, Sam Phillips, many former composers and artists started to produce and manage artists. Leiber and Stoller, for instance, produced the songs of the Coasters that were recorded by Atco. Another influential independent producer was Norman Petty who supervised the careers of Buddy Holly and the Crickets. Buddy Holly started his career in 1955 and, originally, was heavily influenced by Presley’s rockabilly style. He was contracted by Decca and made five singles in 1956, that were not selling very well. After this fruitless adventure Holly met producer Norman Petty in 1957 and out of that meeting a successful cooperation and a new group, the Crickets, emerged, leading to now classic rock and roll hits like “That’ll Be The Day” (1957) and “Peggy Sue” (1957).

4.7. The Rise of Rock and Roll

From 1954 onward, rock and roll advanced very quickly and soon about 40% of the hit songs belonged to the emerging rock and roll stream (Anderson a.o., 1980: 35). Many of the established pop stars had – at least for the time being – to give way to the advancing “rock and rollers”; the

major exception being Frank Sinatra (Peterson, 1990: 97; Shaw 1974: 28). The major record companies lost their grip on the popular music market for a while but partially recovered their position toward the end of the decade. The openness of the independent record companies and producers for new artists and novel musical forms and their eagerness to find new niches in the field of popular music provided the commercial structure for the development and elaboration of the newly discovered musical style. The exploration of its possibilities depended, however, not only on the room the Indies offered, but as much – if not more so – on the creativity and energy of the new – mostly young – artists and – last but not least – on the musical resources the latter had at their disposal.

At this point, a factor that proved to be vital for the development of rock and roll comes in sight: the geographical location – the American South – in which this music emerged. Here, the musical traditions that provided the building blocks of rock and roll existed alongside each other and, despite the extant segregation, the streams met not so much in public as in the people who created rock and roll. Examples in kind are Bill Haley, Sam Phillips, Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Jerry Lee Lewis. Alongside the Indies and the artists, we must not forget the crucial role the receptive young people played. Without the swift and enthusiastic reception of rock and roll by young audiences there, surely, would not have been such a thing as rock and roll. Though far less glamorous than others in the rock and roll stream, they are as indispensable. The actions and interactions of the record companies, the producers, the artists, and the audiences were the necessary ingredients of the second step in the social construction of rock and roll.

5. The Consolidation of Rock and Roll

5.1. Stepping into the Fad

While rock and roll grew into a clearly defined new musical stream and the public interest in its musical output was expanding, the vested interests in the music industry reacted halfheartedly and defensively. Torn between the desire to keep themselves away from this horrible music as far as possible and the anxiety to lose their share in the music market, they kept in the background. The strategies employed by the majors – and other settled actors in the popular music industry – must be seen in the light of this dilemma. In several ways, these actors became involved in rock and roll, be it in the hope that it would either prove to be a passing fad – with their help if needed – or that they would be able to control it as they did control other forms of popular music. The arbitrary way in which they intervened in the market of youth music, however, preserved the music they hated so much and so, in their own way, the majors contributed to the evolution of rock and roll. This way, the established music industry – quite unintentionally – did set the third step in the social construction of rock and roll.

Entering the field in 1954, Decca was the first major record company that became active on the market of rock and roll music. It was the only major that could do so at such an early time in the development of rock and roll because it had been involved in producing black dance music for a long time out of the personal interests of Decca's founder, Jack Kapp. So it was no surprise that Decca employed A&R men that were susceptible for the changing preferences of a segment of white youth. Decca took over Bill Haley and his band from Essex and gave Haley the opportunity to make his rock and roll records. As Charlie Gillett (1970: 51) shows, however, Decca remained indecisive about what to do next on the market of youth music. On the one hand, the company produced imitative cover records like the hits of the McGuire Sisters and Teresa Brewer while, on the other hand, it later contracted Buddy Holly, the Crickets, and Brenda Lee.

Other majors followed Decca's lead and contracted authentic rock and roll artists. Mercury, for instance, contracted the Platters who became one of the most famous black vocal groups. They enriched the fast developing idiom of rock and roll music with unforgettable songs like "Only You" (1955), "The Great Pretender" (1955), and "My Prayer" (1956). Mercury also took on Freddy Bell and the Bell Boys and the Big Bopper, as Capitol did with Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps, who made "Be-Bop-A-Lula" (1956) and Johnny Otis, who recorded the rock and roll song "Willie And The Hand Jive" (1958). The relationship between the major record companies and rock and roll music, however, remained an uneasy one. Though these companies did record and release rock and roll songs, at that time they were not really involved in developing this music.

5.2. Cleaning up the Artists and their Music

RCA-Victor intervened in a different way. At the end of 1955 this major took Presley over from Sun Records and adapted his songs and performance style as much as possible to mainstream standards. RCA succeeded in turning Presley away from "strict" rockabilly, but could not prevent that many elements of rock and roll still remained in his performances and records for the time being. This gave the music a chance to evolve further in its own direction, i.e. as rock and roll. Among the important rock and roll hits on the RCA label, are Presley's first record for RCA "Heartbreak Hotel" (1956), his rerecording of Carl Perkins' hit "Blue Suede Shoes" (1956), the cover he made of the famous rhythm and blues song of Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton "Hound Dog" (1956), and the flipside of this single "Don't Be Cruel" (1956). Though Presley switched more and more to a crooner-entertainer's style over the years, songs like "My Baby Left Me" (1956), "Jail House Rock" (1957), "Don't" (1958), and "Hard Headed Woman" (1958) still clearly remain within the confines of the rock and roll idiom.

Another – very popular – tactic the majors employed, consisted of the well-known practice of covering successful hits. This strategy implied – if needed – the cleaning up of the lyrics by removing or altering offensive bits, the softening of the music, and having the song performed a neat, clean-shaven artist – "castrating them" as Nick Cohn (1969) called it. One of the first companies involved in covering rock and roll was Dot, an independent company that was mostly

active on the pop market. Dot launched college boy crooner Pat Boone who, despite his reservations about this music, "... did his best and that turned out to be enough to smother the originals of "Ain't That A Shame" (originally performed by Fats Domino), "Tutti Frutti" (originally performed by Little Richard), and "At My Front Door" (originally performed by the El Dorados)" (Gillett, 1970: 100). Covering hits from other streams was a standing practice among the majors and they continued this policy, when rock and roll broke through. Mercury was the most active major record company in this respect. Examples are the cover versions of LaVern Baker's "Tweedle Dee" and "Tra La La" by Georgia Gibbs and of "Sh-Boom" and "Earth Angel" by the Crew Cuts. Though, when the greatly adapted cover versions of the pop singers became less acceptable to the youthful audience, the company reacted by keeping the covers more in line with the originals. See in this respect the cover version of the Gladiolas' hit "Little Darlin'" by the Diamonds (Gillett, 1970: 52). Still, in most cases, there was quite a difference – a "chasm" as Gillett calls it – between the cover and the original because cover artists often did "as if" while the original singers and musicians felt what they were doing (Gillett, 1970: 25; emphasis by Gillett). Yet, with their practice of covering rock and roll, the music industry unwillingly furthered the development of the new musical stream. As Arnold Shaw (1974: 29) remarks: "Ironically, it was the cover that led him [a youth] to the original and helped pave the way for the rise of rock and roll."

The way in which the major record companies reacted, initially, proved not to be very successful. Realizing that they were losing an ever-increasing slice of the growing music market to the Indies, they started looking for other ways to regain control. By now, they had learned that covering rock and roll songs was a dead-end street toward mastering the rock and roll market. They also realized that most of their own producers and stars were not really able to produce rock and roll records. Perry Como, for instance, turned Gene and Eunice's "Ko Ko Mo" (1955) into a pop success, but the result definitely was not a rock and roll record. At the same time, however, they had learned that it was possible to subject this new music to their familiar production techniques. The main example was set by the way the rough edges were knocked off from Elvis Presley. This practice quickly evolved into a formula that the majors used for producing other records like "Butterfly" by Charlie Gracie and "At the Hop" by Danny and the Juniors (Gillett, 1970: 40-41). From here on, it was but a short step for the companies to start the production of their own "rock and roll" singers – a phenomenon known as the creation of the teen idol.

5.3. Creating Teen Idols

Ideally, a teen idol is a neat looking boy – or girl for that matter – who sings songs that are acceptable to teen audiences, while not offending their parents. Though the making of a teen idol may seem an easy thing, it proved to be rather difficult. The problem was that these clean, neat, and innocent looking boys should at the same time correspond as closely as possible to the image that Elvis Presley initially had set for rock and roll. One way or the other, they had to look unconventional, however without any overt suggestions of sexuality and being bad. As Gillett

typifies the strategy of the vested music industry: “Managers sought out dark-complexioned boys whose pictures would look right in the teen fan magazines, and producers harnessed an ever-more blatant beat to their sing-along songs” (Gillett, 1996: 113). For the music itself, the vested music industry went back to their familiar – equally clean – Tin Pan Alley formulas and adapted them to teen criteria. The old formulas led them to emphasize romance in the lyrics and, if anything, to include strings and vocal backings by close harmony singers in the music. As concessions to the teenage audience, the music was provided with at least some beat to make them suitable for dancing, and the lyrics carefully dealt with the feelings of teenagers, such as love, cars, school, and so on. Paul Anka’s “I Am Just A Lonely Boy” (1959) is a good example of the teen-idol-format that the major record companies had in mind. This singer-songwriter from Canada was the neat boy the majors were looking for and his songs fitted in with their requirements. As the first in a whole series of idols, Anka acted as a prototype. His first hit “Diana” (1957) – 9 million records sold (Cohn, 1969: 55) – became a teen anthem by which the feeling of self-pity was introduced as a lasting feature of teen music next to the attitude of self-assertion that was propagated by the earlier rock and rollers (Gillett, 1970: 63). Anka made some other famous songs, with telling titles like “You Are My Destiny” (1958); “Put Your Head On My Shoulder” (1959), and “Puppy Love” (1960).

Other than most of the earlier rock and roll artists, the host of the teen idols came from the North. They often had an Italian-American background that gave them the dark complexion that was so useful for their pictures in the teen magazines and their appearances on TV. The most widely known of these teen idols and examples of their songs are Tommy Sands with “Teen-Age Crush” (1957); Frankie Avalon with “Ginger Bread” (1958); Connie Francis with “Who’s Sorry Now” (1958); Dion and the Belmonts with “I Wonder Why” (1958); Neil Sedaka with “Oh! Carol” (1959); Bobbie Rydell with “Little Bitty Girl” (1960); and Bobbie Vee with “Rubber Ball” (1960). Another often mentioned teen idol is Ricky Nelson. This “teen-age son” of the famous TV soap “Ozzie and Harriet”:

“... stood somewhere between the raucous classic rocker and the tepid teen idol ... [his songs] were reminiscent to rockabilly and classic rock but his weak voice and clean looks resembled the teen idols” (Friedlander, 1996: 60).

In the late 1950s, he presented a “soft-rock” alternative to Elvis Presley with songs like “Be-Bop Baby” (1957) and “Poor Little Fool” (1958).

The careers of these teen idols were helped considerably by TV as were the careers of earlier rock and roll stars such as Elvis Presley who appeared in the TV shows of Ed Sullivan, the Dorsey Brothers and Steve Allen. The decision of the TV networks to present rock and roll singers and teen idols in these shows did much to make this music acceptable. At the same time, TV was a family affair and this compelled the networks to keep their presentations neat and clean in order not to annoy the adult viewers. One TV program became of central importance: Dick Clark’s “American

Bandstand". In this program, teenagers danced to the music of the new teen stars – rock and roll singers as well as the emerging teen idols – under supervision of the brotherly, clean-cut Dick Clark, the master of ceremonies. As in all these TV programs, the clear emphasis was on being nice and civil. This program format spread all over the country and brought rock and roll within the reach of every teenager but – by favoring the softer approach of the teen idols – it hindered rock and roll's progression, i.e. improving the music while retaining its original characteristics such as loudness, rhythm, and directness.

The teen idols' success induced, moreover, the music industry to fabricate more of the same; a policy that Gillett (1970: 325) typifies as taking "... the image of Elvis Presley and repackage it as Frankie Avalon, Fabian, Freddie Cannon and the rest ...". The whole process culminated in the person of Fabian. Ironically, Cohn (1969: 78) describes this highpoint as follows:

"All of this, the whole 1960 bit, was epitomized by Fabian. His real name was Fabiano Forte and he came from Philadelphia. When he was thirteen, he was signed up by two local record men and computerized. To start with, he had the basic requirements – olive flesh, duck-ass hairstyle, conveyer-belt features. He had the required passing resemblance to Elvis Presley. On top of this, his management did the full Professor Higgins bit. They had him groomed, had him taught to speak nicely, had his voice trained. Made him round and flawless like a billiard ball. One snag: he couldn't sing. He ran through voice teachers the way old-time Hollywood stars once ran through wives. What did that matter? His management launched the biggest publicity campaign ever, besieged the trade papers for weeks, howled him from rooftops. Fabian himself only stood still and sparkled."

The music of the teen idols – teen pop – became to dominate the market of youth music after 1958, when the early rock and rollers themselves faded from the screen. Apart from the push that the music industry and TV gave this music, it was the reaction of the wider youth audiences to it that gave teen music the edge over the classic rock and roll music. The irony of it all was that rock and roll's capacity to draw an ever-wider circle of young people into its orbit, contributed to its own demise. Among the growing number of people who gave up on Tin Pan Alley music, there were more who went over to teen pop than to "real" rock and roll. Most youngsters with a preference for the real thing obviously had crossed over earlier on. This shift was also promoted by developments in radio land. Partially due to the payola scandal the role of the hit-making deejay declined and the popularity of the Top Forty format, which was less susceptible to plugging, rose. The latter was based on the sales of singles in the record stores and thus furthered the rise of teen music to prominence. The demise of rock and roll was also advanced by the behavior of some of its stars and by events out of their control, the most important of which are described by Douglas Miller and Marion Nowak (1977: 309) as follows:

“Many of the great stars left the music by that time [1958-1959]. Elvis Presley went into the army and emerged a pop singer. Little Richard took the orbiting of Sputnik I as a sign from heaven and quit the music business. Jerry Lee Lewis married his 14-year-old cousin and was ostracized by the entire industry. Chuck Berry was, in the late 1950s, charged with a violation of the Mann Act, for which he would go to jail in 1962. His time was also absorbed by business – in 1959, he sold his St. Louis nightclub and opened a vast amusement park. Some of the greats were dead – the Big Bopper, Buddy Holly, and Ritchie Valens all died in the same 1959 plane crash.”

5.4. Bridging the Lean Years

Still, and particularly if we focus our attention not entirely on the worst examples, teen music did retain enough elements of rock and roll to carry the music through the musically lean years which began in 1958/59 and lasted till the British Invasion hit America in 1963/64. Several songs that were performed by the teen idols, moreover, can be judged as rather good rock and roll songs. Examples are Neil Sedaka’s “Oh! Carol” (1959), Frankie Avalon’s “Ginger Bread” (1958), and quite a few of Paul Anka’s songs. The same can be said of some of Connie Francis’ hits. Look, for instance, at “Lipstick On Your Collar” (1959) or “Stupid, Cupid” (1958).

In fact, teen music did serve as a bridge between classic rock and roll of the 1954-58 period and later revolutions – the beat music of the early 1960s and the rock music that evolved from it. Teen music could do so because it retained the main elements of rock and roll, such as its beat, its focus on the concerns of young people, the way it delivered feelings and passions to its audiences, and its use of electrical instruments. The teen pop, moreover, did not fade away completely from the musical scene as classic rock and roll did after 1959. Ironically, mostly out of the greed to make some profits, the vested interests in the music industry kept the very music alive they hated so much and so their interventions contributed to the consolidation of rock and roll as a self-evident part of the popular music scene. This consolidation forms the third and final step of the social construction of rock and roll.

One should, moreover, not forget that at the same time – despite the demise of important rock and roll stars – many others continued with their music, as did Fats Domino, the Everly Brothers, and Clyde McPhatter. Vocal groups like the Coasters and the Platters did the same. There were also singers from the rhythm and blues stream who succeeded at last to break through on the pop chart. Among them we find the names of Ray Charles, Lloyd Price, Etta James, and a vocal group, Hank Ballard and the Midnighters. These singers and groups all contributed to the continuation of rock and roll as a music style. Others kept the torch of rock and roll burning as well; singers like Roy Orbison and Brenda Lee and black girl vocal groups such as the Shirelles, the Chiffons, the Crystals, and the Ronettes. It would, however, take me too far to delve deeper in their music and their contributions to the rock and roll stream. It may be clear that the attempts to smother rock and roll failed one way or the other. As Richard Aquila (1992: 278) concludes:

“In the end, the attempts to homogenize rock music into a uniformly safe pop form did not succeed. Not only did rock and roll retain its musical diversity and identity, but the sound remained creative and vital. As a result, the late 1950s and early 1960s witnessed some of the greatest hits in rock and roll history.”

6. The Signification of Rock and Roll

6.1. Reception and Signification

After our extensive description of rock and roll's evolution as a new musical stream, it now is time to turn our attention to its signification. Almost from the start, as we have already indicated, rock and roll was received as a “rebellion.” It is not difficult to see why most teenagers welcomed the arrival of this music enthusiastically. An important reason for their turn to this music was a simple one: rock and roll was just fun. This loud, rhythmic, direct, and simple style of music contrasted sharply with the reigning “June, croon, spoon” sort of music that was being released in such great amounts by Tin Pan Alley. Instead rock and roll promised them the opportunity of having a good time and some release from the urgent everyday commitments of school life. Rock and roll, moreover, was not only fun to listen to but its beat made it even more fun to dance to. Dances, dating back to older and wilder days, like the Lindy Hop and the Jitterbug, were revived while others, like the Duck, the Pony, the Locomotion, and the Twist, were newly invented to fit to the music (Braun, 1969; Belz, 1969).

From the very start, however, rock and roll had some wider meanings too. The music and the related style elements made it possible for young people to distinguish themselves from adults and to communicate this “difference” to society. It added to the build-up of a distinctive identity, modeled on prototypes like Elvis Presley, Marlon Brando, and James Dean, and contributed to the demarcation of an own cultural space for adolescents. Buying and listening to rock and roll records, listening to this music on the radio, gathering around juke boxes, dancing at high school hops, going to rock and roll concerts: participating in all these activities were symbolic tokens of what it meant to be “young.” Rock and roll had even more to offer to young people besides the marks of identity and life style. The lyrics of its songs dealt with the exigencies of adolescents' lives and with their experiences, feelings, and problems. Till then adult society had deemed these feelings either as being unimportant, as just school or – puppy – love, or as not existent, sexuality. Many feelings were repressed anyway and sexuality was the most important of them. The acknowledgment in rock and roll songs of the existence of these suppressed and not recognized feelings brought many teenagers relieve.

Taken together, these three elements – release, identity and relieve – provided rock and roll with a firm place in the developing youth culture alongside typical youthful dress styles, haircuts, looks, demeanor, slang, and so on. This placement of rock and roll in the emerging youth culture gave the music a meaning that extended far beyond entertainment. Rock and roll clearly acted as a

catalyst, releasing the needs of adolescents as well as the potential of the world of commerce to serve them (Miller and Nowak, 1977: 292). It was, moreover, not only the music itself that played this role but also the way its performers behaved. Through their behavior and their style of clothing, the new rock and roll stars became early role models for the emerging teenage category and they could do so more readily as the rapid transformation of American society made parents obsolete as role models. In this respect Kenneth Keniston (1965: 204) clearly was at something when he pointed at "... the absence of paternal exemplars in many contemporary plays, novels, and films" and, as Dick Bradley (1992: 97) remarks, the new heroes in films, books, and music were appealing alternatives for them.

6.2. *The Politics of Fun*

Because of its wider meanings, Lawrence Grossberg (1992: 180) rightfully describes rock and roll as a "politics of fun", as it "... declared youth's rejection of the boredom, surveillance, control and normalcy of the straight world as their own imagined future." We can find a classic example in the lyrics of Chuck Berry's "School Day" (1957), a song that openly expressed the familiar, but at the time mostly still hidden resentments against school of many pupils:

"Up in the mornin' and out to school
The teacher is teachin' the Golden Rule
American history and practical math
You're studyin' hard and hopin' to pass
Workin' your fingers right down to the bone
And the guy behind you won't leave you alone"

The location of school, however, does not really play an important role in rock and roll lyrics (Brehony, 1998). This "boring" and "obligatory" reality just was mostly negated by simply leaving it out and by directing all attention to its counterpart – leisure – instead.

The core of the songs' idiom, of course, was the articulation of romantic love, adapted to the petting and dating practices of adolescents (Frith, 1987). A good example here is "Young Love" (1957), a song written by Carole Joyner and Ric Cartey which gave teen idol Tab Hunter a number one hit for seven weeks in 1957.

"Young love, first love Filled with true devotion
Young love, our love We share with deep emotion"

It is songs like these, which by their lyrics made the expression of sincere love legitimate for young people, by stressing the authenticity of their feelings. Maybe even more so, as Simon Frith (1987) argues, young people were attracted to rock and roll by its power to articulate and communicate feelings, like for instance in Buddy Holly's "Rave On" (1958):

"Well the little things you say and do
Make me want to be with you
Rave on, it's a crazy feelin' and
I know its got me reelin'
When you say, I love you
Rave on ..."

Rock and roll obviously gave young people a voice to articulate their feelings of uncertainty, their frustrations and their successes decisions. Their new status position compelled them to make their own life choices and rock and roll clearly helped them to voice their considerations and to cope with the emotional consequences. However, looking at songs like these, it is not yet clear why they were perceived as rebellious. Admittedly, at the face of it, they look rather harmless.

6.3. The Generation Gap

Most teenagers were rather enthusiast while most adults, to say the least, were not that happy. By declaring its life style “boring”, the idiom of rock and roll, no doubt, did not fit in nicely with America’s new consensus. By saying that young people had a right to enjoy their lives now, it contrasted to the views of most parents who were perceiving school as an investment and a postponement of gratifications. By stressing the lures of street life instead of domesticity, it evidently broke with the perspectives of the New American Dream. By replacing the Tin Pan Ally idiom of reference and irony with directness and banter, it surely did shock adult society (Kleijer and Tillekens, 2000). Above all, adults at that time were not particularly used to speak overtly about their emotions. In all these respects rock and roll was clearly deviating from their expectations. All this, however, will not suffice to explain rock and roll’s image of rebellion.

Despite all these contrasting elements, there were also many lines of correspondence between the new consensus and the idiom of rock and roll. Admittedly, many adolescents took to outfits that looked differently, they behaved in novel ways and spoke a language that was difficult to understand by their parents and also clearly preferred a very different sort of music. In many respects, however, most of them were much the same as their parents. As Douglas Miller and Marion Nowak (1977: 275) observe, like their parents most teenagers were conformists and strove for security like they did. The only difference was that they increasingly did so in another way and exactly that made that the manifestations of the emerging youth subcultures and life styles were not welcomed very warmly. At best, the reaction was a mixture of indulgence – “aren’t these kids cute?” – and concern – “these kids are in trouble!” (Miller and Nowak, 1977: 291). More often, however, the adult world reacted very hostile because the young built their culture mainly on items that were not adult. This attitude in turn, for young people, made the rock and roll ways of behaving, dressing, listening to music and so on, especially attractive. As Charles Brown (1983: 29) aptly phrases: “If it irritated our parents, it had to be good.” In the same vein Keniston (1965: 210) calls the youth culture of the early 1960s “belligerently non-adult” (emphasis by Keniston).

The first signs of a break between generations became visible and the adults’ reactions were at their fiercest when the new music of the young was involved. The next two statements both give a good impression of the degree to which rock and roll was really abhorred.

“To conservative adults in 1950s, the new music appeared to be an expression of hostile, rebellious youth. To his enthusiastic audience, Presley’s spontaneous dancing was a visual counterpart to the feelings which his singing inspired” (Belz, 1969: 44).

“With its black roots, its earthy, sexual or rebellious lyrics, and its exuberant acceptance by youth, rock and roll has long been under attack by the established world of adults. No other form of culture, and its artists, has met with such extensive hostility” (Martin and Segrave, 1988: 3).

The music and for that matter all the other expressions of the emerging youth life style were, moreover, not only perceived as a threat to the normative order, but they were fully incomprehensible for many adults as well. In their view, they did their utmost best to give the new generation everything they had never had themselves – education, better housing, nice neighborhoods, radios, record players, records, and so on – and still this generosity nor their permissiveness toward their children seemed to be enough.

6.4. Blaming the Music

Rock and roll was countered by adult society in two ways. The first type of reaction concentrated itself on the music by blaming it for its bad taste, while the second widened its scope to the behavior of the young in general. Rock and roll scared society and many representatives of the establishment spoke out against it very vehemently. Church officials typified the music as rebellious and satanic and warned that it would subvert American youth. As ...

“... Columbia University’s Dr. A. M. Meerio was moved to conclude at the time, “If we cannot stem the tide of rock and roll with its waves of rhythmic narcosis and vicarious craze, we are preparing our own downfall in the midst of pandemic funeral dances”” (quoted in: Friedlander, 1996: 27).

Others followed track. The description of Elvis Presley in *Life* magazine as a “nightmare” for which there was no room “in the mid-century conformity daydream” is typical for the attitude toward rock and roll music (Miller and Nowak, 1977: 302). Consequently, the demand arose that rock and roll music should be banned from the radio and that deejays who ventured to spin rock and roll records should be fired – which, in fact, did happen more than once. Such records should also be removed from the jukeboxes. Ceremonial sessions were organized in which rock and roll records were publicly smashed or burnt. Quite a few times, local authorities prohibited rock and roll shows. For the same reasons, they also hindered performances of this music as much as possible (Shaw, 1974: 154-155; Miller and Nowak, 1977: 306-307; Martin and Segrave, 1988: 3-85; Aquila, 1992: 270).

The same kind of negative reactions came from people in the music world such as the famous cellist, Pablo Casals, for whom “Rock and roll [was] poison put to sound” (quoted in: Friedlander, 1996: 26). The reactions were more passionate, though, among those people in the music industry

who had a specific interest in putting rock and roll out of business. For instance, “Mitch Miller denigrated rock and roll records as “the comic books of music” ... [and] Frank Sinatra was even more abusive ... rock songs had “dirty lyrics” written and sung by “cretinous goons” ... [and] rock and roll was “the most brutal, ugly, desperate, vicious form of expression it has been my misfortune to hear” (Aquila, 1992: 270-271). At the same time, Billy Rose (1972: 280) of ASCAP called rock and roll songs “... obscene junk, pretty much on a level with dirty comic magazines.”

Here, the resistance against rock and roll meshed with the longer-standing feud between ASCAP and BMI over the domination of the American popular music scene. After their first attack at the start of the 1940s had failed, ASCAP launched another attack in the 1950s, directed at the people who actually chose and played the records on the radio, the deejays. As BMI was strong on rhythm and blues and rock and roll, the feud turned into a struggle over bad music driving out good music. The disk jockeys were accused of favoring bad music, i.e. rock and roll and rhythm and blues, over good “American” popular music out of sheer profit, and by doing so of corrupting the youth of America. The musical establishment incited a congressional investigation into the widespread practice of payola, i.e. paying disk jockeys for playing specific records. They succeeded in steering the investigation exclusively to those involved in producing and playing rock and roll music. Their representatives convinced the congressional investigators – just as alarmed by rock and roll as many other adults – that rock and roll subsisted on payola. Ending the payments would, they argued, mean the end of this horrendous and dangerous music (Miller and Nowak, 1977: 308; Ennis, 1992: 261-265; Friedlander, 1996: 72-73).

The adversity and emotional weight of the reactions did, however, not only arise because rock and roll grossly deviated from the dominant standards in popular music or because its lyrics often dealt with tabooed subjects and feelings. Such flagrant deviations from common standards and norms would be experienced as threatening in any period and be enough to incite negative reactions. The fact, however, that it happened in the 1950s gave the reactions an added vigor because at that time conformism itself had become the central value and this made deviance a sin in and by itself. The rejection was, moreover, strengthened by rock and roll’s whereabouts. It had originated on the wrong side of the color barrier; some even saw it as a plot by the NAACP – the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People – to corrupt the young people of America (Gillett, 1972: 280). The “color-blindness” of rock and roll formed another threat to the social order that was not being tolerated. As Deena Weinstein (1992: 95) concludes:

“... white adolescents were adopting black cultural styles and black heroes [which meant] ... miscegenation, racial mixing, and was seen as a rebellious act against the dominant group.”

6.5. *A Moral Panic*

In the second type of reaction, adults expressed their worries in a more generalized manner. They interpreted the manifestations of the new behavioral patterns among the young as signs of a

generation going astray. In their view, these were indicators of a quick spreading pattern of deviance. This view was buttressed by the media that were full of horror stories about youth gangs, gang wars in inner cities, and grisly murders committed by teenagers. The worries about youth were also fed by books with alarming titles like *1,000,000 Delinquents*, criminological and psychological treatises, and sensationalist novels and films. Despite the fact that youth crime figures were still rather low in the early 1950s, a moral panic arose and the idea that society was run – terrorized, some would say – by spoiled teenagers spread like wildfire (Miller and Nowak, 1977: 271, 280-281, 334; Hine, 1999: 240-241). The topic of juvenile delinquency quickly climbed the top of the agenda and the world of politics intervened by directing more money to the police departments. This led, as was to be expected, to a fast growth of a juvenile bureaucracy which soon produced delinquency figures that were more in line with the popular view; a perfect example of Robert K. Merton's self-fulfilling prophecy (Hine, 1999: 241).

While this moral panic was developing, the media were quick in putting the light on rock and roll. They castigated the music as an “inciter of juvenile delinquency” and pointed to Alan Freed as the prime offender (Shaw, 1974: 155). The connection between rock and roll and delinquency was, moreover, strengthened by the fact that Bill Haley's “Rock Around the Clock” was used as opening tune in a contemporary movie about juvenile delinquency, *Blackboard Jungle* (1955). Even before the rock and roll's rise to prominence, movies on this topic were quite popular and there were many of them, mostly B-movies. They reinforced the feelings of anxiety further, particularly by portraying the typical – mythical – examples of youngsters going astray. Take, for instance, Marlon Brando “the quintessential biker-hood” in *The Wild One* (1954) (Pratt, 1990: 134) or James Dean the moody, ill-understood and therefore rebellious teenager in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) (Melly, 1970: 30). Of all the visible and audible manifestations of the emerging youth culture in the streets, cinemas, and on TV and radio rock and roll functioned as the focus of adults' fear and anger because most of the elements of this culture were present in it. And so, as Richard Aquila (1992: 270) wryly remarks:

“Rock and roll was linked to almost every social problem imaginable, including drugs, sexual promiscuity, gang warfare, pornography, teenage pregnancy, prostitution, organized crime, and communist subversion.”

6.6. *From Fun to Rebellion*

For young people the effect of this consternation worked out the other way. The hostile reception of rock and roll music made it a forbidden fruit and thus more attractive by itself. This forbidden fruit status self-evidently enhanced the usefulness of rock and roll as a building bloc of the emerging youth culture. The main effect of this reception and, of course, of its emotional rejection was, however, that they made rock and roll suitable as a vehicle for protest. Everyone who would like to

protest could – as a portion of young people in fact did – use the music this way and for them rock and roll evolved into “a banner of rebellion” (Ennis, 1992: 213). Still, many teenagers did not mean to rebel morally and politically. However, they actually did so by listening to rock and roll and by taking over its insignia. As Philip Ennis (1992: 19) insightfully observes in respect to rock and roll:

“[T]o listen to that music, to dance to that music, and to make that music was a political act without being political.”

R. Serge Denisoff (1983: 36, 152-153) comes to much the same conclusion by assessing that rock and roll evidently was not protest music. Yet, its lyrics lauded the values of the teenage culture and rock and roll, above all, did express dissent with parental authority and the social rules concerning school, love, and sexuality. An insider, Scotty Moore – Elvis Presley’s guitarist, made about the same point by saying: “He [Elvis] was a rebel: really without making an issue out of it” (Friedlander, 1996: 42). The signification of rock and roll in other than strictly musical ways was the unintended outcome of a chain of actions and reactions. The appropriation of rock and roll by the young for the construction of their own culture made this music an indispensable component of being young and thus of being different from others in society. Yet, these teenagers – or the artists who made the music – were no rebels. Their main departure from the new American consensus, was their search for a place of their own (Miller and Nowak, 1977: 275-276). As the music they used to create such a place differed only in an aesthetic sense; rock and roll was an aesthetic rather than a moral or a political rebellion (Denisoff, 1983: 33; Hatch and Milward, 1987: 83). Lawrence Grossberg (1992: 147) sums this conclusion up as follows:

“Without concern for the organization of political and economic consensus, rock sought to rock the cultural boat; it did not consider that the latter was connected, in powerful ways, to the former. It sought to open up culture to the needs and experiences of its own audiences, not to deny or overturn the consensual and institutional structures which had made those experiences, and its own existence, possible.”

It was, as Grossberg (1992: 147-148) argues, the exaggerated reaction of adult society to this change in taste that gave the choice for rock and roll a different meaning. The attacks rock and roll elicited from the outside, moved this music style outside the new consensus, to which it was connected by many lines of correspondence. Or, as Miller and Nowak (1977: 312) conclude at the end of their chapter on rock and roll:

“Even at its most furious the music had been unable to counter the life-programming most kids recognized as their future. Rock only provided a diversion from its colder constraints. But it was in the way rock and roll united teens as a self-acknowledged different group that the music performed its most

challenging act: a challenge calling not for revolution but, more precisely, for reassessment. Once a teenager broke off from the music of adults, and especially once the parents began making bitter judgments about a simple matter of entertainment, a re-evaluation of more than music was nearly inevitable.”

For many adolescents, the new post-war situation was clear. Now the young were freed from the oppression of working life, it was time to enjoy it and rock and roll was perfect to do so. It became also clear to them that the adults – if they could help it – would not let them. Thus they hailed with Chuck Berry rock and roll as the means to deliver them “from the days of old” (Junker, 1972: 235, 223).

7. Unintended outcomes

7.1. The Creation of Youth

Rock and roll definitely changed the world of American popular music and, though it did not fully replace the “old” pop music, it took over its dominant position. This takeover implied a profound change of the musical idiom of pop music which depth may be fathomed by comparing the last number-one hit of the 1950s, Frankie Avalon’s “Why”, with the first one, “I Can Dream, Can’t I” of the Andrews Sisters (Whitburn, 1987b: 31). Still, rock and roll remained American popular music, rooted in the popular music styles existing in the United States of the early 1950s. Yet, it did not become an indistinct mix because its makers based their music mainly on one of these styles, rhythm and blues, and added only those musical elements from other streams that suited them. As rhythm and blues influenced rock and roll deeply, it brought several lasting musical elements to the emerging rock and roll music such as the beat that is typical for most black music, the feelings of the blues, and the exuberance of black gospel. The latter infused rock and roll, in Ennis’ succinct phrasing, “... with one of its greatest gifts, the ability to deliver passion at the edge of control” (Ennis, 1992: 211). Another notable contribution of rhythm and blues was its openness about sexuality. The lyrics skipped the euphemisms about hearts and roses and went straight – often too straight – to the core of the matter (Cohn, 1969: 14-15). This legacy of rhythm and blues was skillfully mixed with material coming from other streams brought about a music style that was startling new, attractive, and shocking to many Americans and later to many Europeans as well. In Greil Marcus’ colorful phrasing:

“Their music coming out of New Orleans, out of Sam Phillips’ Memphis studio and washing down from Chicago was loud, fiercely electric, raucous, bleeding with lust and menace and loss” (Marcus, 1982: 154-155).

Rock and roll attracted, above all, young people. Those who went for it had two reasons. First, they formed a new social category of young school-going people between 12 and 18 years of age who – just like other social categories – needed a cultural place of their own. Music is very well suited for building such a place and the young readily annexed rock and roll for this purpose. Second, their parents let them fully share in the post-war prosperity. This enabled the young to buy the commodities to build this place of their own which were soon widely available because the world of commerce was all too eager to serve the teenager. The result was the emergence of an autonomous youth culture in which rock and roll occupied a central place. This gave rock and roll a symbolic dimension which made it more than just popular music in much the same way a common household item, the safety pin, took on a second – symbolic – meaning in the punk subculture (Hebdige, 1979: 2). The central place of rock and roll in the youth culture, in turn, affected the direction in which the music evolved. Rock and roll and the youth culture created each other simultaneously through a myriad of dialectical interactions between the makers of the music and their youthful audiences. This gave rock and roll meanings that soon went beyond the lyrics of its song, its beat, or the moods of its music (Denzin, 1970: 1036; Tillekens, 1998: 26). Rock and roll became an integral part of a new way of life, or in David Shumway's words, it became a cultural practice (Shumway, 1991: 755-756).

The transformation of schooling and the subsequent creation of youth as a separate social category, in combination with the availability of money were, as Thomas Hine (1999: 225-227) rightfully assesses, the necessary conditions for the emergence of a modern youth culture. As a matter of fact, such a culture arose in other Western countries as well where and when both conditions met. By themselves these conditions, however, do not explain why rock and roll became the music to build the youth cultures with. As far as the United States are concerned, the case seems to be clear. The opportunities such as the musical resources, the artists, the record producers, and their potential audiences were there while the existing constraints were not insurmountable. Structurally, this explanation makes sense. It is true to say that the set of circumstances present in the United States of the early 1950s, partially explains the emergence of rock and roll and the way this music acquired its shape; a typical example of how culture is socially produced (Peterson, 1994: 163). The fact, however, that rock and roll achieved the same place in many other Western countries and that young people there also fell for rock and roll the moment they came in contact with it, suggests that there must have been more to it. Though most American cultural products were attractive in their own right in the West European countries after the war, the quick adoption of rock and roll was rather strange because the young in those countries were not familiar with its main components, rhythm and blues and country and western. Alternatives for rock and roll were, moreover, readily available in these countries such as traditional jazz, skiffle, modern jazz, and French chansons: all in vogue among young people in countries like England, France, the Netherlands and Belgium. Some of those styles of popular music were possible candidates to

become youth music as well (Tillekens, 1998: 25). This suggests that not all has yet been said and that the music itself also had some characteristics that may explain the preference for rock and roll.

7.2. The Meanings of Music

It is important to note that the meanings of music pieces cannot completely be reduced to social processes; music clearly has meanings of its own (Shepherd and Wicke, 1997: 48). All music has inherent characteristics such as timbre or rhythm that bring about the same response across audiences experiencing the same sort of feelings. Otherwise said, there is an invariant relationship or correspondence between sound and affect which makes some sorts of music more suitable for some and less fit for other situations. This was also the case with rock and roll, for which specific elements were selected out of the array of the extant musical streams. This selection was not an arbitrary one, as it had to fit to the needs of the new youth culture. Musically, rock and roll was rather simple, but it was also loud and exciting (Burns, 1996). This came, above all, from the use of amplified electric guitars and the adoption of the “screaming” saxophone style of rhythm and blues – see, for instance, Rudi Pompilli, Haley’s saxophone player, and, above all, King Curtis whose saxophone enlivened many of the Coaster’s records (Gillett, 1970: 132). In combination with this loudness came the beat that made rock and roll a great music to dance to. Rock and roll music was, in other words, fun and gave the adolescents a good time in ways that were exclusively theirs. This exclusivity made it – and this is as important – a means of distinction and identity; in Hebdige’s words “a significant difference” fit to be communicated to others (Hebdige, 1979: 102). Rock and roll did, however, more by dealing with the exigencies of teenage life and with feelings that were peculiar for their age. Moreover, and maybe most importantly, the music facilitated the artist to voice these feelings in their singing. Examples are Paul Anka’s “Lonely Boy” (1959) and Neil Sedaka’s “Oh Carol” (1959), that was also covered by Paul Anka. In both songs the music and the tone of voice of the singers expresses teenager’s self-pity as much as the lyrics do. These correspondences and rock and roll’s not-being-adult fitted in with the needs of the young far more closely than their potential alternatives.

These characteristics – musical correspondence and exclusivity – make it clear why rock and roll evolved into the favorite music of the young once the youthful avant-garde opened a window of opportunity for its development. The opportunities came out of the rapid transformation of postwar America: the rise of a new social category – youth – in search for a cultural place of their own with enough money to buy the components for building such a place; the existence – as far as music was concerned – of artists and record producers to produce specific youth music; and the availability of mediators such as radio stations and jukeboxes that could bring this music to the young. There were also constraints of which the extant racial barrier and the initial hesitation of most major record companies to produce rock and roll records were the most important but these were – partially as a consequence of the same transformations – not strong enough to halt rock and roll’s emergence and development.

Taken together, the combination of these events and conditions and the actions and interactions emerging out of it may explain why a new youth music arose in the early 1950s and why this music was deemed to be rock and roll – the answer to the first question of this essay. It shows, moreover, that rock and roll – once it became firmly attached to the emerging youth culture – acquired a meaning that went far beyond the “pure” musical one. This view on rock and roll’s emergence and its timing as the result of such a combination, points to the importance of the social dynamics of the early 1950s. These proved to be far more important than the changing opportunities and constraints on its own – even when they are combined with the influence of creators and audiences – to answer Richard Peterson’s famous question “Why 1955?” (Peterson, 1990). The figures of school attendance already were on the rise in the 1940s. At that time rhythm and blues was also manifesting itself. So it seems, as Peterson argues, all the ingredients were there and it all may have happened at an earlier date. To explain the late arrival of rock and roll, Peterson points at the technological and commercial development of the music industry. In this he may be right, but – as have tried to show – the time-consuming steps in the social construction in this respect are as important.

Moreover, these factors do not explain why rock and roll became rebellious – the second question of this essay. It seems that there is only one answer to that question: the way in which rock and roll was received in society. The hostile reception and the emotional rejection of rock and roll by many adults had the effect that listening and dancing to rock and roll, displaying the insignia its stars promoted, or behaving like its idols became an act of protest and rebellion against the reigning normative order. Some of rock and roll’s adherents did so consciously, but for the majority of adolescents rock and roll had no other meaning than being part of their newly developed life style and culture. This way, the adults as well as the adolescents, unwillingly and unintentionally, attached yet another meaning to rock and roll: rebellion.

7.3. Making Music

By now it may be clear, that rock and roll is more than just music. It is an intricate complex of social activities, a collective enterprise, of artists, producers, distributors, and consumers who all together produced the music and made it part of a new emerging life style. In this sense, rock and roll was – and still is – popular culture in the making. The production of rock and roll as a form of popular culture was, however, not a unique process. Other forms of popular music or, for that matter, popular culture are produced in much the same way and the story of rock and roll may be seen as an example of how forms of popular culture such as music, fashion, or dance are fabricated. The most notable aspect of rock and roll’s history is the “blindness” of the process in which rock and roll was construed. At the start of the 1950s, surely, nobody could have predicted rock and roll’s arrival. Nor was anybody during that decade able to tell which way that music would go or how long it would last. This blindness was not only present in the making of rock and roll but is typical of the way other forms of popular culture are constructed as well. It is the effect of three

elements, characteristic of such processes of social construction. First, the production of popular culture involves a multitude of actors each acting out of his or her interest; to have fun, to distinguish oneself from others, to become rich and famous, to defend one's share of the market, and so on. Second, each action not only depends on extant – historically situated – social conditions but on the – often surprising – actions of other actors as well. Third, no single actor is in control or able to determine the outcomes. In social science jargon, the construction of popular culture is an indeterminate and contingent process.

This way, the story of rock and roll shows a pattern underlying the construction of quite a few other forms of popular culture. This pattern consists of (1) the opening of a window of opportunity that may consequently trigger (2) the social construction of a new form of popular culture. In such cases, this window of opportunity is opened through an act of one of many subcultural, often avant-garde, groups in society. People in such groups draw extant – material and/or symbolic – objects into their daily lives in order to give their lives form and meaning and to distinguish themselves from others. In a way they appropriate such objects and thus change – among themselves – the common function and meaning of these objects. In the early 1950s, a youthful avant-garde did appropriate rhythm and blues music this way and in the 1970s the punk movement did the same with items like safety pins. Such acts of appropriation offer opportunities to other actors to take the subcultural innovation over, for example to use it themselves or to make money out of it. What is important, they may or they may not seize the opportunity; not every subcultural innovation is always transformed into a form of popular culture. If, however, the opportunity is seized, the process in which a new form of popular culture is constructed starts. This construction follows the lines along which rock and roll developed: (1) innovation – a more appropriate description is socializing the earlier subcultural innovation; (2) elaboration; and (3) consolidation. By then the subcultural innovation has become part of the accepted popular culture and the whole process may start all over again.

The variety of meanings that such forms of popular culture may acquire does, however, not only arise from the actions and interactions between the actors directly involved but may also come from actions of “outsiders”. For this rock and roll offers a fine example. Here, the reactions of the not-involved adults turned this cultural practice into a form of rebellion – though one without rebels – which became one of the forerunners of the social protest movement of the 1960s. It shows that popular cultural changes may have far-reaching and quite unexpected effects which, according to Max Weber (1920: 252), is one of the basic facts of social life. Human actions, above all human interactions, frequently have quite unexpected, often unintended, sometimes even perverse effects because their alchemy – quite unintentionally – may turn the switch and thereby put society on a different track and in the end even turn it upside down. Rock and roll acted as such a switch in the way Miller and Nowak describe:

“But rock and roll did help contribute to a new attitude emerging in the late 1950s. In that decade, America was a culture daydreaming of a false world, with Mr. Clean, Doris Day, General Ike, and universal luxury, without stress, Negroes, or genitalia. We were daydreaming, and rock was one of the forces that woke us up.”

Noten

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