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**Rock'n'Roll: The Sounds of Rebellion?**

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## 1. Introduction

Rock'n'roll music is quite commonly associated with rebellion as becomes clear from the books that tell the story of this music. For Brown the story of rock'n'roll is the tale of the development of 'the sounds of rebellion to an American art form' (1983).<sup>1</sup> For Belz, rock'n'roll is "... protest against the music of the past and of an older generation, and against the values of that generation as they were expressed by the artificiality of *kitsch*." (1969: 31). Gillet makes the same point in stating: "From the beginning rock'n'roll had been identified with a youthful rebellion against conventional morality." (1972: 280). The rebellious and deviant character of rock'n'roll is, however, not only visible in retrospect, it was obvious for contemporaries as well. In the South, it was seen as a complot from the NAACP to corrupt the white youth. Vested interests in the music industry called it obscene junk, in the words of Frank Sinatra, 'a rancid-smelling aphrodisiac' or as the famous cellist Pablo Casals put it, 'poison put to sound' (Gillett 1972: 280; Friedlander 1996:26). Adult society reacted vehemently; rock and roll records were publicly smashed or burned, stage shows were banned or interrupted by the police, and d.j.'s who ventured to spin r&r records were fired (Miller and Nowak 1977: 303-7). In the eyes of many, rock'n'roll was a threat to society or, 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.' " (citation in Friedlander 1996: 27).

What is puzzling, though, in the view of rock'n'roll as rebellion is that it is, above all, popular music and, like all popular music, made to earn money. As a rule, such music supports the social order rather than incite resistance against it. At this point, rock'n'roll differs widely from protest songs which are made to serve as weapons in social-political struggles and not primarily for pecuniary gains. But it was, as Ennis aptly observes, not the music itself rather the meaning it got, e.g., the use of Bill Haley's 'Rock Around The Clock' in the movie *Blackboard Jungle*, that made rock'n'roll "... a banner of rebellion for the young." (1992: 213). In order to know how this was possible, I think that we have to look at the music itself *and* at the social context in which this music arose and evolved; both made rock'n'roll particularly suitable as a vehicle of protest.

As music rock'n'roll is very recognizable both for listeners (nowadays as well as in the fifties) and those who write about it. This is particularly the case when rock'n'roll is compared to the dominant popular music of the early fifties. Instead of sweet love tunes sung by suave crooners or elegant lady singers packaged in complicated musical arrangements with scores of strings, rock'n'roll involved the playing and singing of up tempo tunes directed at exciting audiences. Characteristic for rock'n'roll was the use of amplified electrical instruments and the introduction of a fierce beat. The latter made rock'n'roll a very danceable music which allowed for movements - by performers and audiences - that expressed sexuality far more explicitly than was common in those days. Sexual feelings also figured more openly than before in the lyrics of the rock'n'roll songs. These songs often dealt with other neglected feelings and experiences of adolescents as well. A classic example of the latter is Chuck Berry's 'School Day' which expressed the familiar resentment against school. Another is 'Young Love' which's text demonstrated in the eyes of young people that they can sincerely be in love. All in all, the new music was loud, exciting, and appealing to a new generation. As Friedlander puts it:

"Young people reacted emotionally to the music, moving their bodies in sympathetic vibration as the performers moved theirs. The lyrics told tales about romance, dance, school, music, and sex - just simple stories about everyday life." (1996: 27).

The social context of rock'n'roll is the American society of the fifties in which this music emerged. In this context two elements stand out, viz., the rise of youth as a new and separate social category and the repressive social and cultural climate that reigned postwar America. Particularly, the combination of both is important because on the one hand this new social category had to find and define its own cultural place while on the other adult society did - unknowingly - everything to deny the new youth their cultural niche. This made the new music very attractive for the young. It offered the promise of a lifestyle catering exclusively for the needs of the youth and was, above all, definitely not adult. The more rock'n'roll severed the adult 'Brady Bunch' kind of dream of peace and quiet, of never-ending love and marriage consumed in agreeable suburbs and blessed with two or three nice - All-American - kids, the more attractive it became to the youth and the more it appalled their parents.

At this point, we meet, however, another puzzling fact. The music existed years before the term 'rock'n'roll' was coined (Marcus 1982: 12; Brown 1983: 15; Tosches 1991: 2; Pratt 1990:136). It was, however, not recognized by the emerging - white - youth as a music that could suit their demands nor by the adults as a threat to the social order. Social recognition of the potentialities that a musical style has seems to depend not only on its musical characteristics, i.e., on the way that notes are put on paper or sounds are recorded. The question is what this 'more' is and this is the first question of this paper. I contend in it that every style, be it a music, fashion, or art style, is socially constructed. This means that rock'n'roll, like all popular music styles, is as much the creation of composers, songwriters, singers, and musicians as it is the product of the dialectics between the creative efforts of these actors, their efforts to make money, the commercially induced activities of the other actors in the music industry, and - last but not least - the reception of it by those for whom the music was made, the audiences. At the same time, a style - in this case rock'n'roll - gets its specific meaning in society. Signification does not only involve the actors who create, produce, or listen to the music but draws others in society into this process as well - in this case, parents, schoolteachers, vicars, managers of radio and TV stations, etc. How this signification comes about is the second question of this paper.<sup>2</sup>

Although signification and construction cannot be separated in reality, it is necessary to make an analytical distinction between both in order to analyze the puzzles connected to the emergence of rock'n'roll. Therefore, I will first deal with the emergence and development of rock'n'roll seen as the social construction of a new musical style. After that, I will analyze the social context of America in the fifties in which the music got its meaning as a means of protest. Before tackling both issues, however, I will have to look first into the structural setting in which rock'n'roll emerged and developed as a popular music style because this setting offered the opportunities for this emergence and set through its constraints the limits for rock'n'roll's evolution. In the closing section, I will come back to the social construction of rock'n'roll and the related signification of the music as rebellious.

## **2. The Structure of American Popular Music**

Music is always divided in many different ways and one of the important divisions is the division into separate

sectors or streams as Ennis (1992) calls them. The division in streams follows closely the extant social and geographical boundaries in society. Classical music is, e.g., the music of the higher strata and folk music that of the lower orders. Popular music is meant for everyone in society, but here again divisions abound. This was also the case in the United States at the end of the 40s - the point where my story begins - and thus the landscape of popular music in this country was divided into several separate musical streams.

A musical stream is in Ennis' conceptualization a kind of loose structure which has a distinguishable artistic system, forms an economic entity, and serves its own audiences who recognize the stream's music as belonging to their style of life. By setting the musical preferences of its audiences, each stream marks off the boundaries between social groups and therewith contributes to the formation of group identities (1992: 20-2). Although there are overlaps between the elements of the different streams, each stream forms a unique mix of these elements that separates it from the other streams. Following Ennis we distinguish the following musical streams. The main streams are: (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, Ennis distinguishes three smaller and more specialized streams, i.e., (4) jazz; (5) gospel (the black as well as the white variant); and (6) folk music.

Alongside class and geographical distinctions, this division reflects a very important distinction in America's musical life, the existence of a deep-seated racial divide. There is white and there is black music and never the twain *should* meet. Luckily, they did from the beginning and this enriched American music in innumerable ways. It gave American music its distinctive color and this holds for classical and popular music and for all so-called white and black music styles.<sup>3</sup> The extant racial barrier, however, gave black artists only three possibilities: (1) to adapt their performance to white standards; (2) to play jazz music<sup>4</sup>; or (3) to make music for their own group. This last form of music was - wholly in style with the practice of segregation - referred to as race (or euphemistically *sepiea*) music. At the end of the forties, it got a more appropriate name - rhythm and blues. The importance of this small excursion into the world of the American race relations will become clear below when I show how important the segregation has been for the development of rock'n'roll music and thus for the later coming beat and rock music.

*Musically*, each style differed from each other. After World War II, the dominant pop stream mainly produced sentimental ballads, melodramatic songs, and novelty tunes. It was the era of Bing Crosby, Perry Como, Doris Day, The Andrews Sisters and the bigbands. The latter, however, rapidly declined in popularity toward the end of the forties. The country stream cultivated the music from rural areas in the South and South West, above all the so-called hillbilly music. This music got its name, country and western, in 1949 and encompassed musical styles like bluegrass, honky tonk, and cowboy songs. Well-known names of this period are Eddy Arnold, Bill Monroe, Flatts and Scruggs, Hank Snow, Kitty Wells, and Hank Williams. Out of the rhythm and blues stream came the more exciting rhythmic dance tunes and naughty party songs. Important artists were Louis Jordan's Tympani Five,<sup>5</sup> Big Joe Turner, Wynonie Harris, Ruth Brown, and Amos Milburn.

The larger streams always aim at reaching audiences that are as large as possible because that is commercially interesting. At this point the smaller streams differ. Here the search for musical purity and the pursuit of musical

integrity reign which built a self-limiting tendency into these streams. In jazz, art oriented standards dominate; folk songs are judged on their honesty and authenticity; and gospel is ruled by its function - the worship of God. Still, these streams have room for commercial success which produces in everyone of them a tension which can be seen in the succession of more commercial and more pure periods. In the early fifties, jazz was on its way back from the commercially interesting bigband and swing era. Jazz became more serious and was as an art form oriented at smaller audiences (see, e.g., the emergence of bebop and the exclusive jazz club). Gospel was on the other hand moving in the commercial direction which may be seen in the growing number of gospel records, the rising amount of air play, and the (often occasional) crossing over of gospel songs and artists into the larger streams. In this period folk suddenly became popular as, e.g., may be seen in the enormous success of songs like 'Goodnight Irene' and 'Tzena, Tzena, Tzena' and in the rise of the folk group the Weavers on the pop chart.

Yet, each stream tried to keep their musical boundaries intact which, as we have seen, did not preclude interstream contacts by which the streams influenced each other reciprocally. The most important form of interstream contact - the boundary crossings - were the crossover of hits and performers from one stream to the other, i.e., a record of one stream appears on the chart of another stream, and the covering of hits of other streams. Examples of such boundary crossings in the early fifties are: the direct crossover of the R&B hit 'Sixty Minute Man' of The Dominoes (1951); the reverse crossover of Nat King Cole's 'Mona Lisa' to the R&B charts (1950); Kay Starr's cover for the pop market of the Clover's R&B hit 'Fool Fool Fool' (1951); June Valli's cover (pop) of the country hit (originally a white gospel song) 'Crying In The Chapel' which was followed by a cover version of the Orioles for the R&B market (1953); and the success of Gordon Jenkins and the folkgroup the Weavers on the pop charts with the folk song 'Goodnight Irene' which was also covered several times for the pop, C&W, and the R&B market. There was also much traffic between between the country and western and the pop streams by artists like Hank Williams, Tennessee Ernie Ford, Frankie Laine, and Margaret Whiting who had hits on both the C&W and the pop charts.

The boundaries between streams were also crossed in other ways. A popular strategy of music people was to take the music of other streams as a source of inspiration. They did this mainly by making a new song that closely resembled a hit in another stream, a so-called answer song. At the same time, however, such an answer song had to fit in in its own stream which goal was reached by mixing it with the musical traditions of that stream. A notable example in this respect is Patti Page's enormous success hit 'Tennessee Waltz' in which elements of C&W and pop were combined. It was originally an answer song to a country hit of Bill Monroe, 'Kentucky Waltz'. Several years later, Patti Page made it a hit in both the pop and the country charts, it was covered several times, and it led to at least eight answer songs in different streams in the following three years (Ennis 1992: 203).

There was another way in which the boundaries between streams were crossed, viz., the movement of performers to and fro between two streams. This has been quite common between jazz and pop music, particularly in the big band and the swing era. Louis Armstrong is a case in point as are Benny Goodman and Count Basie. This also happened quite regularly between the gospel and the popstream and, as we have seen above, between country and western and pop. The effect was a growing influx of musical elements from other streams into the pop stream

because the artists of other streams brought with them their own musical background, such as gospel or folk, and the specific musical traditions of their streams. Although pop music affected the music of the other streams as well, the focus in this article will be on the flux into the pop stream because the main developments in rock'n'roll took place within this stream.

This pattern of criss-cross contacts<sup>6</sup> began to change in the early fifties. The musical resources of the pop stream got exhausted which enlarged the demand for 'external' material. At the same time, the emphasis in the pop stream shifted more and more to the use of new material instead of recombining parts of old successful songs.<sup>7</sup> This result was a growing influx of songs, covers, and performers into the pop stream. The people in the pop stream were, however, not only active in taking people and material from the other streams. They also roamed "... the musical theater, the movies, music from England, the Continent, anywhere ...." (Ennis 1992: 194) and even forayed in the field of the classical music, e.g. Vic Damone's 'Tell Me You Love Me' was based on an aria from the opera 'I Pagliacci' and Bill Darnell's 'Tonight Love' on Listz' 'Second Hungarian Rhapsody' (Whitburn 1986).<sup>8</sup>

The result was that pop music became a jumble of styles with a musical quality that was way below that of the music of the thirties and forties. In Donald Clarke's words, the early fifties were "... one of the most dismal periods in the history of popular music." (1995: 311). The core of the music was still formed by the traditional romantic Tin Pan Alley style but the songs were much less inspired than before because in this period "... showbizz survived on habit." (Cohn 1970: 12). Alongside those 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' (8 versions in 1950) and 'On Top Of Old Smokey' (4 versions in 1951). In many hits influences from C&W and South American music were clearly visible as well. A popular practice was also to find out through trial and error 'what went with what'. This led to all kinds of combinations of which some were simply too bizarre to be successful, e.g., teaming up the opera singer Enzio Pinza with the C&W group 'The Sons of the Pioneers'; others - seemingly improbable - succeeded such as the duets by country-folk artist Tennessee Ernie Ford and Kay Starr whose style tended to R&B (Ennis 1992: 195). Another notable trend in pop music was the production of - often nonsensical - novelty songs. These became very popular. 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 was the most important A&R man of the period, Mitch Miller, who added to records sounds 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 in the field of pop music was than Patti Page's rather silly '(How Much Is) That Doggie In The Window' (1953 - 8 weeks #1). As Jasen typifies the music at the beginning of the 50s,

"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")." (1988:279).

*Economically*, the six streams were changing - albeit at a different pace - in the years that followed world war II. The onset of most of these changes dates from before the war, but the changes were only fully realized after. In that

period, the basic unit of popular music, the sheet music, was definitely giving way to a new unit, the record. Two technological innovations in relation to the growing prosperity in the country were crucial in this respect. The first was the invention of the vinyl record which made it possible to replace the shellac 78 rpm record by the 45 rpm single record and the 33 rpm long playing record. The second was the introduction of the smaller less expensive phonograph player. This enabled the record companies to create a two-tier record market: one for the hit single records to be played on 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. Ennis points out that there was also an artistic change that was related to the shift from sheet to recorded music. In his words: "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." (1992: 99). 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 of tracking down musical talents and catering for them.

At the same time, the structure of the broadcasting industry was changing, in part 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 the smaller local radio station; "... the small, independent station became the postwar meteoric star of the broadcasting industry." (Ennis 1992: 136).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, television pushed the radio from its throne in the home 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 replaced in particular the nationwide broadcasted radio shows which thrived on bringing live music. Television also meant less advertising dollars for the radio stations and thus smaller program budgets. As a consequence the radio became the medium for broadcasting recorded music by disk jockeys which also meant that radiostations and record companies were from then onwards "... inexorably bound together." (Peterson 1990: 105).

The loss of the family as their target forced the stations to specialize in music programs for specific audiences such as housewives in the morning or high school youth in the late afternoon. For this goal they developed new formats such as Top Forty, middle-of-the-road, or classical music programs. This trend was strengthened by another invention - the inexpensive radioset - which offered (as America's prosperity grew) each audience its own radio; along the slogan of the association of radio manufacturers: 'A Radio in Every Room' (Ennis 1992: 132). The rise of the small local radio stations fitted in nicely in these trends in the realm of entertainment. They could make cheaper programs for specific target groups that were of interest to the firms which sought ways bring their products to the attention of the (potential) buyers of their products. Radio thus became broadcasting recorded music for audiences divided to age, sex, and social position. The specialization was also regionally bound, e.g., country and western in the South, and, in a lesser extent, along the color barrier. In contrast to the pre-war situation, there were now a number of radio stations that provided r&b music exclusively for the African-American community (about 700 in 1954 according to Gillett 1972: 279; see in this respect also table 6.3 in Ennis 1992: 183). Together, these developments favored musical diversity and this went against the tendency in the music industry to produce more of the



same (Peterson 1990: 113).

The fact that the record became the central unit of exchange in popular music changed the structure of the popular music streams.<sup>10</sup> As this structure forms the opportunity structure for the emergence of rock'n'roll it is necessary to delve deeper in this - economical - aspect of the popular musics. The main nexus between the actors in this field remained money<sup>11</sup> but the set of actors and their interrelations had changed. At the end of the forties and the beginning of the fifties the following three-nodal structure had evolved.

The first node consists of *the producers of popular music*, the companies, which put popular music on records, and the artists, who make and perform this music.

Record companies produce music to make a profit. This involves, first of all, to get artists to create and perform songs so that they can record them. This includes tracking down musical talent, coaching it, and making suitable material available for the artists they had found; tasks commonly referred to as Artists and Repertoire (A&R). Record companies also seek ways to bring the music they have produced to the attention of the potential buyers of the records. One of the central strategies to do this consists of bringing d.j.'s to play their records on the radio (the practice of plugging). This air play also brings in money because radio stations pay for the right to play records as does the selling of the records which is why they are in the music business after all.

In the early fifties, the field of pop and country music was in the hands of the major record companies, Decca, Mercury, RCA-Victor, Columbia, Capitol, and MGM, above all, because each had their own national record distribution system. In 1955, a seventh major player entered the music market, ABC-Paramount. These companies preferred to keep the situation on the music market stable and were averse to innovations that would drastically change popular music. They also did not care much about the black music market. This offered a niche for - mostly small - independent record companies, the so-called indies who also used it as a way to enter the other music markets. After the war, hundreds of such companies arose but around 1950 the bulk of the R&B market was in the hands of seven indies, i.e., Alladin, Atlantic, Chess, King, Modern, Savoy, and Specialty.

The artists - songwriters, composers, singers, and musicians - are in the music business for two reasons; an artistic one - the desire to 'do their thing' - and a commercial one - they long for a Cadillac, i.e., for fame and wealth. Particularly, the latter motive brings them under the domination of the record companies which obviously restricts the former.

The second node consists of *the consumers of popular music*, the audiences. Audiences have their own position in the field of popular music and play a specific role in the hit-making game. Although they do not make the music themselves and do not decide which music will be recorded or broadcasted, their decisions whether to buy a record or to listen to it have effect on popular music. As Gillett rightfully states, "... [A]udiences ... can determine the content of a popular art communicated through the mass media." ([1970] 1996: viii). People listen to music and are quite willing to pay for that in order to be released from the commitments and compelling boundaries of daily life; it is popular music's main function in society.<sup>12</sup> As this daily life and its commitments differ from group to group and from social category to social category, there are as many audiences as there are groups and categories in society.

In the early fifties, pop was the commercial music of the nation both for teenagers and their parents. Country &

Western was the popular music of the whites in the Southern and South Western States and Rhythm & Blues was the pop music for African Americans.

The third node embraces *the mediators of popular music*, the radiostations with the indispensable disk jockeys, the advertising agencies who deliver the commercials that pay for the radio programs, and the exploiters of jukeboxes.

The owners of radiostations employ music as a means to generate money from firms who like to advertise their products on the radio and both do so to make a profit. Part of the money the stations collect goes to the record companies (and through them to the artists) for the right to play these records. The early fifties were the era in which the small independent local radio stations with their programs for specific audiences flourished. An important target group - and growing in importance - was the youth, particularly those in high school. They kept listening to the radio in larger measures than their parents or their younger siblings; listening to the radio in their rooms or in cars offered them the opportunity to withdraw from the pressures of family life (Weinstein 1992: 94). They also got more money to spend and were thus of interest to advertisers. As they increasingly became the category that bought the single records, radio became more and more the medium through which record companies could reach the prospective buyers of their product, the record. Radio became thus predominantly a teenage medium that transmitted their hit songs.

The disk jockey spins the records, takes care of the station announcements and the commercial messages, and packages the whole in a performance that would attract the target group to his program. D.j.'s are - like the artists - doubly motivated. Their programs offer a way of expressing themselves and of making a living.

In the early fifties, disk jockeys had become central to music programs (and their job involved more than just spinning records). First, the d.j. was an on-air salesman who opened local markets to nationally advertised and marketed products. Second, he was a radio station performer who could - through his personal way of bringing his program - reach specific audiences and tie them to the station. This made them crucial to the owners of the radio stations who competed fiercely with other radio stations for the advertising dollar. Third, the d.j. was the musical master of ceremonies and this task made him indispensable for the music industry which provided him with the records he needed for his program. Although each d.j. had to perform all three tasks, there was a growing specialization with regard to the emphasis a d.j. put on one of the aspects of his job. There were d.j.'s who acted primarily as a salesman for the advertising companies. Others made their programs a personality show in order to build a maximum audience and still others concentrated on making hits out of the new records they presented. The last type of d.j. became crucial for the emergence of rock'n'roll as they were primarily involved in bringing new music.<sup>13</sup>

The advertising agencies link the firms to the radio stations and are responsible for the commercial messages that are broadcasted between the records. Their motivation is a financial one. Their role in radioland increased as America was booming in the postwar period. The youth benefitted from the latter in a large degree which made it a target group in more than one respect.

The exploiters of jukeboxes buy records to have them played in their coin operated music machines. They pay for

the records and pay a fee for the right to play the music recorded on them. They are also in the game for making money. In the early fifties, they were still an important customer of the record industry. They bought between a quarter and a third of all records sold, paid their fees, and, more importantly, brought new records to the attention of the major buying group, the youth.

The rise to prominence of the single record also changed the hit-making process. Popular music in America had been a hit-making machine from early on. Hits offer the opportunity to sell songs, either as sheet music or as records. They also bring money and fame to the artists who created and/or performed them. The listeners to popular music are indispensable in this process because it is their preference for new over old that keeps the machine running. The speed of this hit-making process was stepped up after the war mainly because modern audiences, the young in particular, preferred new songs far more than old ones. The young became the ones who bought pop records, listened to pop music on the radio or put coins in the jukeboxes to hear their favorite music. In this climate of frenzy about hits, a part of the disk jockeys engaged themselves explicitly in the job of making hits, i.e., finding out which records stood the best chance of becoming a hit (see for a description of the way they did this Ennis' portrayal of Bill Randall, a legendary hit-making d.j. 1992: 151-9). This added pressure to the hit-making process as did the demands of the exploiters of juke boxes for new records. The same was done by the other actors that depended on loyal audiences, the owners of the radio stations and the advertising agencies. The result was a shift "... in emphasis from old favorites to new songs in an ever-accelerating 'hit parade'." (Ennis 1992: 99).

The third element of a music stream - *the identity-lifestyle-boundary aspect* - was also affected by the described musical and economic changes. As we have seen above, the need for new material was increasing in the pop stream while its capacity to produce it declined which led to a host of boundary crossings. Moreover, the competition with the other streams increased because the record-steered-economic structure also became their way of organizing. Particularly, those active in producing C&W and R&B records looked for possibilities to enlarge their share of the music market. This boosted the tempo of boundary crossings even further. At the same time, however, the increasing amount of boundary crossings inspired many in the music business to stem this tide and to keep the boundaries in tact. It was all right to take over directly from other streams, to cover their hits, or to borrow (steal as some would call it) elements from them, but this should not mean taking over the whole business.

Keeping the boundaries involved, however, more than keeping one's share of the music market. It coincided with the central cultural and normative trend of the fifties; the endeavour to keep society's culture unchanged and to maintain its norms strictly, while the same society underwent major economic and technological changes.<sup>14</sup> The cultural torpor could be witnessed in all cultural fields and that of popular music was no exception. As I already stated before, the creative process involved in making pop music stagnated and the people in the music industry were using the old standard formulas over and over again. At this point, it is important to note that this stagnation not only proceeded from the oligopolic position of the major record companies as Peterson (1990) contends. Popular music is not only a commodity but also a part of the culture of a society and is as much influenced by cultural trends as it is by economic phenomena.

The postwar economic and technological changes in society had an unexpected major effect on the popular music scene. These changes created on the one hand the need for better educated employees while they offered on the other hand the financial room to free young people from the obligation to join the work force. This meant that more young people could go to school till they were eighteen or older than ever before and this way a new social category was created: youth consisting of people who were no longer kids but belonged not yet to the adult world either as they fell out of society's labor structure with its values, identities, rules, and responsibilities. Due to the growing affluence in society, these youth had, moreover, more money to spend than ever before. As every new category in society, this emerging category had to find its own place in society and to define who they were; i.e., to develop an own specific life style and identity, One of the important means to do so in modern society is popular music.

The confusing state of affairs in the realm of popular music around 1950 was, however, not much of a help for the young who groped for their own place. 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 Miller and Nowak ironically note, "Pop records had the final passionate impact of marshmallow whip." (1977: 293). This bland music could obviously not give the young people the good times they were eagerly looking for. Another of its weak points was that it did not relate to the feelings of these young people. Moreover, pop offered little for the new youth to identify with. As Cohn rightfully notes, the youth in the early '50s "... had no music of their own, no clothes or clubs, no tribal identity. Everything had to be shared with adults." (1973: 16). The other streams could not help out, either. C&W was regionally bound, often associated with the 'country bumpkin', and, in general, too far off from the life world of the young in the (sub)urban areas of America. R&B, on the other hand, had much in store for young people but segregation held it out of reach of the majority of them.

### **3. The Social Construction of Rock'n'Roll**

In retrospect, the signalls pointing to a serious mismatch between the preferences of the youth and the music the popstream was offering are clearly visible. One of the signs was the growing preference for black music. From 1950 onward, the black presence in pop music increased as more R&B hits crossed over directly or were covered. The Orioles' hit, *Crying In The Chapel* (1953), shows that the preference for black styled music grew even further. This R&B cover version became a hit on the pop chart while June Valli's pop version had already been a hit earlier that year (Ennis 1992: 216). 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<sup>15</sup> 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. One of those signs is the popularity of songs that dealt directly - the Dominoes' *Sixty Minute Man* - or indirectly - Nat King Cole's *Too Young* - with this issue.

At the end of the forties, however, the boundaries between the musical streams were still intact and in the

following years most people in the music industry attempted to keep the situation that way. The same applies to other boundaries in society as reflected in its cultural and normative structure. In this situation of 'stasis', a remarkable feat occurred; a part of the white youth no longer content with the faint coloring of the dominant popular music went for the real thing - black music. This turn of an 'avant garde' of the white youth to black pop music was the more remarkable, especially because the factually existing racial barrier kept this music practically out of their reach. Illustrative in this respect is the self-imposed censorship of many 'white' radio stations who had a conscious policy of not broadcasting rhythm and blues records. In 1950, this avant garde was, as Riesman (cited in Gillet 1996: 11-3) noted, a small minority characterized by elaborate standard of music listening and a dislike of name bands and the commercialization of radio and music. This 'rebellious' minority differed in other respects as well because - as Riesman keenly observes - 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." (Riesman cited in Gillet 1996: 13).

This youthful avant garde tuned into black radio stations and bought the records they heard there in black record stores. Soon other white youth followed because they were fed up with the extant popular music. As I described above, this dull, lifeless, and uninteresting music had little to offer and it was no wonder that "[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 fifties, about 20 to 30% of the listeners to black radiostations were white (Clarke 1995: 372). This turn to black music was important for the emergence of rock'n'roll as popular music, although in itself it did not lead to the social construction of rock'n'roll as a new style of popular music. This construction was a prolonged process which I will analyze below on the basis of the three phases - steps - I recognized 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 which often gets a specific label. The second step concerns the elaboration and development of the found style and encompasses the experiments of the people composing, making and recording this music and the exploration of its possibilities. In the third phase or step, the newly found and elaborated musical style is consolidated; its canon is fixed and the style is cleaned of all the too exuberant characteristics that emerged in the second phase. In studying the literature about the emergence of rock'n'roll it became clear that these phases or steps were not separated in time. There was no neat succession of steps but they partly overlapped.

### **3.1 The innovation of rock'n'roll**

The first step in this process was set by some disk jockeys. The active searching for rhythm and blues by the white minority meant the beginning of a trend that did not go by unnoticed. There were a couple of d.j.'s, notably Alan Freed, who were aware of this change in preferences and some succeeded in persuading their bosses to give them room for programming R&B music for white youth audiences.<sup>16</sup> For instance, Alan Freed had his way in Cincinnati and in 1951 he organized a radioshow filled with R&B music which he named 'Moondog's Rock and

Roll Party'. From 1952 onwards, Freed presented these, mostly black, artists in live shows which became very popular among the youth. This way, he became "... the white champion of black pop ..." (Ennis 1992: 8). Examples of songs he and other d.j.'s 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 steps that Alan Freed and other enterprising d.j.'s took to bring black pop to white audiences were important contributions to the social construction of rock'n'roll as a new format in popular music. First, Freed gave a part of the existing R&B music, viz., those songs which's beat, feeling, and lyrics appealed to the youth, a new name.<sup>17</sup> This labeling of specific musical pieces as rock'n'roll allowed for marking these and similar pieces off from other forms of popular music and treat them as a new musical entity. Second, these d.j.'s brought this erstwhile segregated music to the attention of a wider part of the 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 r&b records were ignored (Gillett 1996: 38/9). Therewith, these d.j.'s 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'n'roll. They did not only put pressure on the - mostly conservative - owners of the radio stations, but initiated reactions of the juke box distributors and of people in the music industry as well. The former put more and more rock'n'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 1996: 14). The music industry, in their turn, increasingly crossed the boundary between the white and black pop music. More R&B songs reached the pop charts and more R&B hits were covered. The result was that black artists and their music were introduced to the white youth outside those who already listened to d.j.'s like Alan Freed. Together, the actions and reactions of white youth, d.j.'s, juke box owners, and the music industry created the foundation on which rock'n'roll could develop in its own way and evolve into a separate - the seventh - stream in American popular music (Ennis 1992). This laying of the foundation may be seen as the first step in the social construction of rock'n'roll.

At that time, rock'n'roll consisted mainly of R&B songs and it is no wonder that this music influenced rock'n'roll deeply. Rhythm & Blues brought several lasting musical elements to the emerging rock'n'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'n'roll, in Ennis' succinct phrasing, "...with one of its greatest gifts, the ability to deliver passion at the edge of control." (1992: 211). Another notable contribution was R&B's openness about sexuality. The lyrics skipped the euphemisms about hearts and roses and went straight - often too straight - to the point (Cohn 1970: 14/5). This openness made R&B especially attractive to the youth. At this point, it differed markedly from the dominant pop music which was far more reigned by the restrictive norms of the Calvinist protestant ethic. As Marcus colourfully typifies these contributions,

"[T]heir 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." (1982 [1976]: 154-5).

### 3.2 The elaboration of rock'n'roll

The second step in the social construction of rock'n'roll involved the shaping of rock'n'roll as a musical format in its own right once its foundation was laid. This step was set by a specific part of the music business in a specific regio. In the South<sup>18</sup>, there were artists, small record producers and independent record companies consciously looking for ways to combine elements of R&B with the musical traditions they grew up in. They sensed that there was a market for pop music with a markedly black influx alongside the existing R&B music. Johnnie Ray's instant success - two millions copies were sold of 'Cry' (1951 - 11 weeks # 1) 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) musical elements in search for this new market. As a former d.j. Haley was familiar with all the postwar popular music styles and in the early fifties his musical interests and commercial instinct directed him to where pop, rhythm & blues, and country music met (Ennis 1992: 220). After some trials that were not very successful, Haley came in 1953 with his band 'The Comets' with a record called 'Crazy, Man, Crazy'. It "... became the first rock'n'roll song to make the best selling lists on *Billboard's* national chart." (Gillett 1996: 3). This song was followed by a 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).

Haley's adding of musical elements out of the C&W tradition to the already present R&B elements is a major contribution to the development of rock'n'roll. Particularly, the fact that he did so as a white artist - still more accepted than black artists in the America of the early fifties - contributed greatly to the effect of his innovation. He also made this music more acceptable to white youngsters with his cleaner lyrics; he cleaned, e.g., Joe Turner's rhythm and blues song 'Shake, Rattle, And Roll' and he was also careful enough with the lyrics of his other songs. Some appraise this negatively - Cohn, e.g., depicts it as watering down the explicit sexual meaning of rock'n'roll (1970: 19) - others praise Haley for this because he only disguised the real meaning for those who did not listen carefully - as Brown states, "He really did not take the meat out of the lyrics; he just covered it with a disguise" (1983: 25).<sup>19</sup> 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, as he said, from the 'old style rhythm and blues' as performed by band-leaders like Lionel Hampton and Jimmy Preston and of course from the jump-styled rhythm and blues bands like Louis Jordan's Tympani Five (Gillett 1996: 23; Pratt: 136). All in all, Haley's creative efforts furthered rock'n'roll's development toward a musical format that was something else than merely 'renamed' R&B music.

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 has become one of the well-known of these people, particularly as the one who found Elvis Presley. Phillips started as a d.j. after the war and was able to found his own business in 1950. His first enterprise was the Memphis Record Service which was engaged in tracking down talents, supervising them, and recording their musical

performances. The results were leased or sold to independent companies. He was so successful at this that he was able to found his own record company, Sun, within two years. In those years he recorded white as well as black artists but was the most successful with black blues singers such as Jackie Brenston, B.B. King, Howlin' Wolf, and Little Junior Parker. His main contribution to rock'n'roll came with Elvis Presley. The story of how the two met and worked together is told already so many times and in so many different ways that it has become an urban legend by now which does not have to be reiterated here. The important thing about this cooperation was that Sam Phillips skillfully mixed his musical experiences and knowledge *and* his intuition of what young people were looking for<sup>20</sup> with Presley's musical talents and his upbringing 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'n'roll style known as rockabilly in which gospel, rhythm and blues, and country and western, particularly hillbilly music, met. The 'Presley-Phillips' cooperation led to classic rock'n'roll records like 'That's All Right Mama' (1954) - Elvis' first record, 'Good Rockin' Tonight' (1954), 'You're A Heartbreaker' (1955), 'Baby Let's Play House' (1955), and the last record Elvis 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 for the coming rock'n'roll singers, musicians, and songwriters which was a crucial step in the development of rock'n'roll as a separate music stream. They did, however, more. With his singing Elvis solved what was still a contradiction in Bill Haley's approach - the incongruence of white doing black - by doing black while being white (Ennis 1992: 253). Surprisingly, this also opened the way for black artists like Chuck Berry or Frankie Lymon to do the opposite - doing white while being black. This made, as Ennis rightfully assesses, rock'n'roll a racially integrated stream.

The conscious 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 and had also far-reaching effects on the life style of young people. As Gillett states, "Presley's success .... encouraged Phillips to try other singers with comparable styles and material ...." This way, he put performers forward like Carl Perkins, Roy Orbison, Johnnie Cash, and Jerry Lee Lewis. The first made in 1956 one of the classic rock'n'roll hits 'Blue Suede Shoes'; the latter became one of rock'n'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) belong to the best of rock'n'roll. Presley's singing also directly inspired young artists all over America, among which singers like Gene Vincent, Eddie Cochran, and Buddy Holly. Elvis brought, however, more to rock'n'roll than music. He thoroughly influenced the way the music was to be performed and set the standards for appearance, dress, and behavior of many youngsters. 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 were important in this respect.<sup>21</sup>

Sam Phillips was not the only independent in the record business who took the rock'n'roll road to success. Many of the other independent record producers and companies were experimenting and recorded new - often young - artists who longed for a chance to make it. The popular music market was booming and attracted entrepreneuring people from outside the music business into the hitgame; some founded a record company themselves, others



became freelance producers who tracked new talents, coached them and managed their careers. All were looking for their own niche in this market; producing a specific music for a specific audience which music should have the potential to break into the national market at the same time<sup>22</sup>. The result was a profusion of new labels, artists, songs, musical styles, and records.

Whitburn's review of the Billboards charts shows very clearly that the new music was not the province of all the indies. In fact, only Sun and Specialty were fully committed to rock'n'roll music (Gillett 1996: 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 which almost all indies did in an attempt to reach the national market. (Gillett 1996: 69). These groups were important in shaping rock'n'roll music because alongside recording straight forward rock'n'roll songs these vocal groups used musical material that came from the area where R&B, Tin Pan Alley, and C&W met; precisely the area where rock'n'roll emerged. The already mentioned Orioles' hit 'Crying In The Chapel' (1953) is an example in its kind; here country, white gospel, Tin Pan Alley, and black pop met and brought the producing record company 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 & The Teenagers (1956 - Gee label). Most of these groups were one-hit wonders but some survived during a longer period; see, e.g., the Coasters who made hits for Atlantic from 1957 to 1964.

It would go too far to give a survey of all vocal groups and their record companies and to assess which of their records belonged to rock'n'roll. It is enough to note that the indies were important for rock'n'roll by recording these new young groups. It would also take us too far to describe all the independents who produced one time or another a rock'n'roll record. It will suffice to mention only the most important of them in order to assess the importance of the role the independent record producers and companies played in the 'making' of rock'n'roll music. I have already mentioned the two most important companies, Sun and Specialty. The first produced over 200 rock'n'roll records (Gillett 1996: 90) and the second discovered one of rock'n'roll most flamboyant stars, Little Richard; for Cohn the most splendid rocker and the most exciting live performer (1970: 33). His 'Tutti Frutti' (1956), 'Long Tall Sally' (1956), 'Lucille' (1957), 'Good Golly, Miss Molly' (1958) became rock'n'roll classics and through his way of performing Little Richard became a rock'n'roll legend and had a great effect on later rock performers.

Four other companies, Atlantic, King, Chess, and Imperial, were influential in shaping this new music as they gave talented rock'n'roll artists a chance and the artists at their turn were important by taking these chances. Of these, Atlantic is probably the best known and most influential independent company of the post-war era. As Gillett 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." (1996: 70). Atlantic - on its own label and that of its subsidiaries Atco and Cat - was very active in the field of rhythm & blues and rock'n'roll and its 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.<sup>23</sup> Among their valuable contributions to the development of rock'n'roll music were the R&B 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. Alongside these more rhythm and blues oriented songs, Atlantic also brought straightforward rock'n'roll, 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'n'roll came above all from its geographical position, Cincinnati, which gave King a privileged access to artists from the South and the Midwest. The company was equally strong in the field of C&W and R&B and took the initiative to record R&B versions of country and western songs. From there it was but a short step to rock'n'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 # 1 R&B hit, 'Work With Me, Annie', in 1954 and in the same year its logical sequel 'Annie Had A Baby' by Hank Ballard and the Midnighters. These songs - "... whose lyrics barely disguised their sexual celebration." (Ennis 1992: 212) - had like their predecessor 'Sixty Minute Man' also a moderate success on the pop chart (#22 and #23).<sup>24</sup>

Chess was specialized in blues with famous names like Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker. In 1954, it entered like other indies the vocal group market with the Moonglows and the Flamingos. Chess made its most lasting contributions to rock'n'roll by recording Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley. Berry, in particular, became one of rock'n'roll's major figures with songs like 'Maybellene' (1955), 'Roll Over, Beethoven' (1956), 'Too Much Monkey Business' (1956), 'School Day' (1957), 'Rock & Roll Music' (1957), and 'Johnny B. Goode' (1958). He made important contributions to rock'n'roll as guitarist but, above all, as the lyricist of American teenage life. For Belz (1969: 61-6), Berry is the Folk Poet of the fifties who expressed the ordinary realities of the world of youth - cars, girls, growing-up, school, and music and that is why Shaw crowns him with the honorary title 'the song laureate of the teen generation.' (1974:147).

The concerns of young people were also at the focus of the songs of the Everly Brothers. This duo singing in a close-vocal harmony style was part of the fastly developing rock'n'roll style although they are somewhat difficult to place. They shared with Chuck Berry their subject - teen concerns or, as Gillett (1996: 46) calls it, teen angst -, their country roots with rockabilly, and the close harmony style with the earlier mentioned vocal groups. These sons of established country and western artists began their career in the C&W 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 C&W 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 1996: 109). Despite their strong leaning to country music, the brothers Don and Phil Everly belong to rock'n'roll to which development they made important contributions. As Friedlander states, they

".... developed a unique country-rooted vocal style .... [which] combined sensational harmonies, .... [and] a blend of acoustic and electric guitars. Their hit songs .... painted a masterful portrait of teen concerns, including romance and school and a sometimes humorous look at adolescence." (1996: 57).

Songs like 'Bye Bye Love' (1957), 'Wake Up Little Susie' (1957), 'Bird Dog' (1958), and '(Till) I Kissed You' (1959)

belong to rock'n'roll classics as do the Warner produced songs 'Cathy's Clown' (1960) and 'Lucille' (1960).

Imperial was the record company that produced another of rock'n'roll's legendary figures, Fats Domino. This piano playing singer from New Orleans developed with his bandleader Dave Bartholomew a specific R&B style, the New Orleans Dance Blues. This warm-sounding lay back music became rock'n'roll retrospectively, "... 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 is in itself a clear demonstration of how the social construction of a musical style works; in order to belong to a new style it is not necessary to change one's music - labelling this music as such may suffice. Domino's R&B records (dating from the late 40s) thus became rock'n'roll and songs like 'Ain't That A Shame' (1955), 'My Blue Heaven' (1956), 'Blueberry Hill' (1956), and 'I'm Walkin'' (1957) belong to the canon of rock'n'roll classics. Imperial also contributed in a quite different way to the development of rock'n'roll. It brought Ricky Nelson and made him one of the first teen idols of the fifties. This 'teen-age son' of the famous TV soap 'Ozzie and Harriet' used material that was "... reminiscent to rockabilly and classic rock but his weak voice and clean looks resembled the teen idols." (Friedlander 1996: 60). With songs like 'Poor Little Fool' (1958) and 'Be-Bop Baby' (1957), he presented a 'soft-rock' alternative to Elvis Presley, particularly because his songs appealed to youthful audiences without irritating their parents; a strategy copied and developed further by others in the music industry.

Finally, rock'n'roll was influenced by the emergence of a new figure in the music business the freelance, independent producer. In the line of their predecessor, Sam Phillips, they produced and managed artists. Leiber and Stoller were a duo who produced the songs of the Coasters which 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 was, originally, heavily influenced by Presley's rockabilly style. He was contracted by Decca and made five - not well selling - singles in 1956. After this fruitless adventure Holly met Norman Petty in 1957 out of which a successful cooperation and a new group, the Crickets, emerged leading to the now classic rock'n'roll hits 'That 'll Be The Day' (1957) and 'Peggy Sue' (1957).<sup>25</sup>

From 1954 onward, rock'n'roll advanced very quickly and soon about 40% of the hit songs belonged to the emerging rock'n'roll stream (Anderson et al. 1980: 35). Many of the established pop stars had - at least for the time being - to give way to the advancing 'rock'n'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, although they partly recovered their dominant 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 of the newly discovered musical style. The elaboration of the possibilities of this style depended, however, not only on the room the indies offered, but as much (if not more) 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'n'roll comes in sight, viz., the geographical location - the American South - in which this music emerged. The musical traditions that provided the building blocks of rock'n'roll existed here alongside each other and, despite the extant segregation, the streams met not so much in public but in the people who created rock'n'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. It is obvious that without the swift and enthusiastic reception of rock'n'roll by young audiences, listeners to as well as buyers of rock'n'roll records, there would not have been rock'n'roll. Although their actions are far less glamorous than those of others in the rock'n'roll stream, they are as indispensable. The actions and interactions of the record companies/producers, artists, and audiences meant the second step in the social construction of rock'n'roll.

### **3.3 The consolidation of rock'n'roll**

While this new music manifested itself clearly and the interest in it grew, the vested interests in the music industry reacted halfheartedly and defensively. They remained in the background; torn between the desire to keep away from this horrible music as far as possible and the anxiety to lose their share in the music market. The strategies the majors (and other settled actors in the popular music industry) employed - which I will describe below - must be seen in the light of this dilemma. In several ways, these actors became involved in rock'n'roll in the hope that it would either prove to be a fad that would pass (with their help if needed<sup>26</sup>) or that they would be able to control it as they did with other forms of popular music. The haphazard way in which they intervened in the market of youth music contributed, however, to the evolution of rock'n'roll. The established music industry set - quite unintentionally - the third step in the social construction of rock'n'roll because with their actions they unknowingly preserved the music they hated so much.

The first major record company that became active on the market of rock'n'roll music was Decca. It was the only major that could do so at such an early time in the development of rock'n'roll (1954) because it had been involved in producing black dance music for a long time out of the interest of Decca's founder, Jack Kapp. It was thus no surprise that Decca employed A&R men that were susceptible for the changing preferences of a part of the white youth. Decca took Bill Haley and his band the Comets from Essex and gave Haley the opportunity to make his rock'n'roll records. As Gillett (1996: 51) shows, Decca remained undecided about what to do next on the market of youth music. On the one hand, the company produced imitative cover records like the cover 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 at a later date and contracted authentic rock'n'roll artists. Mercury contracted the Platters which became one of the most famous black vocal groups. They enriched the fast developing rock'n'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 did Capitol with Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps, who made 'Be-Bop-A-Lula' (1956) and Johnny Otis, who recorded the rock'n'roll song 'Willie And The Hand Jive' (1958).<sup>27</sup> The relationship between the major record companies and rock'n'roll music remained, however, an uneasy one. They made rock'n'roll records but were at that time not really involved in developing this music.

RCA-Victor intervened in a somewhat different way. This major took Elvis over from Sun Records at the end of 1955 (as did Warner Bros in 1960 with the Everly Brothers) and adapted his songs and performance style as much

as possible to mainstream standards. RCA succeeded in turning away Elvis from 'strict' rockabilly, but could not prevent that much of rock'n'roll remained for the time being in his performances and records which gave the music a chance to evolve further in its own direction, i.e. as rock'n'roll. Important rock'n'roll hits on the RCA label were Elvis' first record for RCA 'Heartbreak Hotel' (1956), his rerecording of Carl Perkins' hit 'Blue Suede Shoes' (1956), the cover he made of the famous R&B song of Willie Mae 'Big Mama' Thornton 'Hound Dog' (1956), and the flipside of this record 'Don't Be Cruel' (1956). Although Elvis switched over the years more and more to a crooner-entertainer's style, songs like 'My Baby Left Me' (1956), 'Jail House Rock' (1957), 'Don't' (1958), and 'Hard Headed Woman' (1958) still remain within rock'n'roll's idiom.

Another - very popular - tactic the majors employed consisted of the well-known practice of covering successful hits. If R&B hits were involved, covering meant cleaning up the offensive parts in the lyrics and softening the music ('castrating them' as Cohn calls it) and the same was done with rock'n'roll songs as well. One of the first companies that was involved in covering rock'n'roll was Dot, an independent company, which 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' (by Fats Domino), 'Tutti Frutti' (by Little Richard) and 'At My Front Door' (by the El Dorados)." (Gillett 1996: 100). Covering hits from other streams was a standing practice among the majors and they continued with this policy when rock'n'roll broke through. Mercury was the most active major record company in this respect. Examples are the cover versions of 'Tweedle Dee' and 'Tra La La' by Georgia Gibbs and of 'Sh-Boom' and 'Earth Angel' by the Crew Cuts. When the greatly adapted cover versions of the pop singers became less acceptable for the youthful audience, the company reacted by keeping the covers more in line with the originals<sup>28</sup>. See in this respect the cover version of the Gladiolas' hit 'Little Darlin'" by the Diamonds (Gillett 1996: 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 (p. 25).

As I mentioned above, the way the major record companies reacted was not successful and they had to leave a growing part of the fast increasing music market to the indies. The majors looked therefore for a different way to regain control. By now, they had learned that covering this music was a dead-end road toward mastering rock'n'roll. They also experienced that they were not able to produce rock'n'roll records sung by their own stars; Perry Como, e.g., turned Gene and Eunice's 'Ko Ko Mo' (1955) into a pop success, but it was definitely not a rock'n'roll record. At the same time, they learned that it was possible to subject this new music to the production techniques they were familiar with. It proved to be possible to knock the rough edges of Elvis Presley. This became a formula which they used for producing other records; see, e.g., 'Butterfly' by Charlie Gracie and 'At the Hop' by Danny and the Juniors (Gillett 1996: 40-1). From here on, it was but a short step to producing 'rock'n'roll' singers of their own - a phenomenon known as the creation of the teen idol.

Ideally, a teen idol is a neat looking boy (or girl for that matter) who sings songs that are acceptable to teen audiences but do not offend their parents. Although doing this looks easy enough, the creation of teen idols proved to be more 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 had set (see above), however, without the attractive but hidden suggestions of sexuality and being bad. As Gillett succinctly states: "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." (1996: 113). At the musical side, the vested music industry<sup>29</sup> used the trusted - equally clean - Tin Pan Alley formulas that were adapted to teen criteria. The former meant romance and not too bad music (with, if possible, strings and vocal backing by close harmony singers); the latter that a song had to have some beat, be suitable for dancing, and dealing with the feelings of teenagers, such as love, cars, school, etc. 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<sup>30</sup> from Canada was the neat boy the majors were looking for and his songs fitted their requirements. As first in the series idols he acted as a kind of model. His first hit 'Diana' (1957) - 9 million records sold (Cohn 1970: 55) - became a teen anthem by which he introduced self-pity as a lasting feature of teen music alongside self-assertion that the earlier rock'n'rollers propagated (Gillett 1996: 63). Other famous songs of Anka were: 'You Are My Destiny' (1958); 'Put Your Head On My Shoulder' (1959), and 'Puppy Love' (1960).

The teen idols came other than most of the earlier rock'n'roll artists from the North. They had often an Italian-American background which gave them the dark complexion that was so useful for pictures in the teen magazines and for appearances on TV. Although there appeared a series of such teen idols, the most widely known were Tommy Sands - 'Teen-Age Crush' (1957); Frankie Avalon - 'Ginger Bread' (1958); Connie Francis - 'Who's Sorry Now' (1958); Dion and the Belmonts - 'I Wonder Why' (1958); Neil Sedaka 'Oh! Carol' (1959); Bobbie Rydell - 'Little Bitty Girl' (1960); and Bobbie Vee - 'Rubber Ball' (1960).

The careers of these idols were helped much by TV as were the careers of earlier rock'n'roll stars such as Elvis Presley who appeared in TV shows of Ed Sullivan, the Dorsey Brothers and Steve Allen. The decision of the TV networks to present rock'n'roll singers and teen idols in these shows did much to make the new music acceptable. At the same time, TV was a family matter and this compelled the networks to keep it 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'n'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 TV programs, the emphasis was on being nice and civil. This program format spread all over the country which brought rock'n'roll to every teenager but - by favoring the softer approach of the teen idols - it hindered rock'n'roll's natural progression.

The success of the teen idols induced, moreover, the people in the music industry to fabricate more of the same; a policy that Gillett typifies as taking ".... the image of Elvis Presley and repackage it as Frankie Avalon, Fabian, Freddie Cannon and the rest ...." (1996: 325). The whole process culminated in the person of Fabian. This highpoint is described by Cohn ironically 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 recordmen 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." (1970: 78).

The music of the teen idols - teen pop (Gillett 1996) - became to dominate the market of youth music after 1958 when the early rock'n'rollers faded from the screen. Apart from the push that the music industry and TV gave to this music, it was the reaction of the wider youth audiences to it that gave the teen idol and other teen music the edge over the more pure rock'n'roll music. The irony was that rock'n roll's capacity to draw an ever wider part of the youth into its orbit brought about its demise because among the growing number of people who gave up on Tin Pan Alley music there were more who chose teen pop than 'real' rock'n'roll. Those with a preference for the real thing had obviously in most cases crossed over much earlier.<sup>31</sup> This shift was also furthered by developments in radioland. Partly due to the payola scandal, the role of the hit-making d.j. declined and the popularity of the Top Forty format - less susceptible to plugging - rose. The latter was based on the sales of single records and thus furthered the rise of teen music to prominence. The demise of rock'n'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 Miller and Nowak as follows:

Many of the great stars left the music by that time [1958-59]. Elvis 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 fifties, 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 [Eddie Cochrane died in car accident in Great Britain]." (1977: 309).

Still, the teen music retained enough of rock'n'roll, particularly if the focus is not entirely on the worst examples of teen pop, to carry the music through the musically lean years which began in 1958/59 and lasted till the British avalanche hit America in 1963. A part of the songs that the teen idols sang may, moreover, be reckoned as belonging the cannon of rock'n'roll. Take as examples Neil Sedaka's 'Oh! Carol' (1959), Frankie Avalon's 'Ginger Bread' (1958), and a quite a few of Paul Anka's songs (see above). The same is true of a part of Connie Francis' hits. Look, e.g., at 'Lipstick On Your Collar' (1959) or 'Stupid, Cupid' (1958). In fact, the teen music functioned as bridge between the classic rock'n'roll of the 1954-58 period and the beat music of the early sixties and the later coming rock music.<sup>32</sup> It could do so because it retained the main elements of rock'n'roll, such as its beat, its attention for the concerns of the youth, the way it delivered feelings and passions to its audiences, and its use of electrical instruments. These elements did not fade away from the musical scene as the classic rock'n'roll did after 1959. Ironically, the vested people in the music industry kept - out of greed - the very music alive they hated so much. The interventions of the vested music industry as a whole contributed to the consolidation of rock'n'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'n'roll.

One should, moreover, not forget that at the same time - despite the demise of important rock'n'roll stars - others continued with their music as did Fats Domino, the Everly Brothers, and Clyde McPhatter. The vocal groups the Coasters and the Platters did the same. There were also singers from the R&B stream who succeeded at last to break through on the pop chart. Among these were Ray Charles, Lloyd Price, Etta James, and a vocal group, Hank Ballard & the Midnighters. These singers and groups contributed to the continuation of rock'n'roll as music style. Others kept the torch of rock'n'roll burning as well; singers like Roy Orbison and Brenda Lee and the black girl vocal groups such as the Shirelles, Chiffons, Crystals, and Ronettes. It would, however, take me too far to delve deeper in

their music and contributions. It is clear that attempts to smother rock'n'roll one way or the other failed. As Richard Aquila 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." (1992: 278).

#### **4. Rock'n'Roll: From Fun to Rebellion**

Popular music means fun, shows who you are, and brings relieve. Functionally stated, popular music has three functions in society which it can fulfill because it has the potential to give people:

1. a good time and free them from the commitments of social life - its release function;
2. a means to distinguish themselves from others - with music people show who they are and demarcate their place in society - its identity function;
3. the opportunity to recognize their experiences and hardships in the lyrics of its songs - its relieve function.

Popular music is thus a precious possession for which people are willing to pay and over which they are (sometimes) ready to quarrel.

These functions of popular music in daily life make it a mirror of society and a means to understand - at least a part of - it. For instance, slavery in the Americas brought forward distinctive forms of music and these reflected the hardships the slaves experienced; a study of this music thus may help to understand living in slavery. The same is true of the hard life of farming in the Appalachians. In the case of rock'n'roll, its musical characteristics and lyrical content enable us to understand what went on in post-war America, particularly why it came forward so unexpectedly, spread so suddenly, and turned into a form of social protest. In my explanation, two historical events that took place in the United States after the second world war occupy a central place: the emergence of youth as a new social category and the ambiguous reception it got from adult society. Both events are only understandable as they are placed in the context of the transformations that proceeded from the war. It ended the economic depression that began with the crash of '29 and it brought the United States to world power.

The war efforts fully released the economic potential of the United States and brought the country into an economic boom not in the least helped by the burst of - often war-related - technological inventions. The war-related expenditures and innovations did, moreover, not finish with the end of the war but were spurred on by the advent of the Cold War (see below). The economic boom brought work and prosperity to many Americans which led to a drastic rise in consumption.<sup>33</sup> In combination with technological innovations like television, portable transistor radios and small inexpensive record players, it boosted mass production which further promoted the growth of the economy. This growth also accelerated the on-going transformation of small firm and rural America into a world of big industry dominated by corporations. These economic developments favored further urbanization and led in the late forties and early fifties to suburbanization on a large scale. One of the effects was the migration of large numbers of African-Americans from the rural parts of the South to the Northern cities which the white middle classes were leaving for the suburbs. This dual process exacerbated by the influx of other minority groups



impoverished these cities and led to ghettoization. The city remained, however, the place to work and the separation of work and home gave the automobile a central position in social life which led to massive construction of highways, fly-overs, etc. This spurred the economic boom but deteriorated city life even further.

America's status as world power was based on economic power and military superiority, not in the least through the possession of the atomic bomb. It was, however, disputed by the Soviet Union which brought the erstwhile allies in a worldwide competition that went on for decades to come. The animosity between the Americans and the Soviets was not new but existed for quite some time as a part of the struggle between capital and labor and the myth of the 'red scare' was used from 1917 onward as a successful means to thwart the rise of socialism as a workers movement (Miller and Nowak 1977). This animosity turned after 1945 into a fierce competition between superpowers, as both countries were called from then on. On the external political stage it took the form of a war without actual fighting, the Cold War. Both countries formed the hub of a system of allies and competed for the allegiance of countries which had not (yet) decided to which bloc to belong. Both alliances made huge efforts to win military superiority which meant, above all, in the fifties the development of nuclear weapons, particularly the H-bomb, and the means to carry these weapons to each others territory, such as submarines, long-distance bombers, and inter-continental ballistic missiles. The competition also meant that the Cold War could always turn into a hot one as it, e.g., did in Korea (1950-53), or into crises, see, e.g., the Hungarian revolution of 1956, which could easily bring the world into the third - and maybe final - world war.

Internally, the competition with the Soviet Union manifested itself in a sharp revival of the red scare myth. A series of witch hunts followed directed on actual and 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. What was even more important at the time, communists were said to have infiltrated federal government and they secretly guided and shaped U.S. policies in favor of communism. These witch hunts were not limited to (former) members of the Communist party or to well-known fellow travellers but every one 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. These politicians were suspect anyway in the eyes of many conservatives because of their support of organized labor and Roosevelt's New Deal (Halberstam 1993: 3-9). Richard Nixon and Joseph McCarthy are well-known examples of politicians who were elected on the basis of anticommunist smear campaigns against their political (liberal) opponents. As Miller and Nowak rightfully assess, such politicians were not responsible for the paranoia over communism that swept all sectors of the American society; they merely capitalized on it. Anti-communism made numerous victims and made keeping a low profile and conformity to central values in the fifties (see for a detailed description of the numerous postwar anti-red witch hunts and their roots Miller and Nowak 1997: 21-42 or I.F. Stone's book about this period with the significant title 'The Haunted Fifties' 1963).

The economic and social transformations of the fifties did not only bring prosperity but also fostered a widespread insecurity which led to a strange combination of a somewhat naive optimistic belief in a bright future and a deep-seated feeling of anxiety proceeding from ubiquitous change that people felt they could no longer

control. At this point, side effects like the deteriorating inner-cities and rising criminality further strengthened this anxiety. It was, moreover, exarabated by the consequences of becoming - overnight as it were - an economic, political, and military superpower. In this respect, the doom of annihilation by the atomic bomb loomed large in the American mind. In such a situation, it is only natural that people long to enjoy the newly found prosperity and to maintain it but also to forgo the threats they perceived all around them. The majority of the Americans tried to do so by a thorough conservatism in the cultural and political realms and by supporting a strict normative conformity.<sup>34</sup> It seemed that many people were so anxiously trying to reach the safe haven of a trusted - mythical - past that they, most intellectuals included, were abdicating as it were their right to dissent. According to Miller and Nowak, the fifties were 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." (1977: 7). In Aquila's succinct typification:

"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." (1992: 269/70).

The transformation of America had yet another effect. The technological changes created the need of better educated employees and workers and the economic growth provided the means for providing more and higher education. The result was that there were more young people at school in the fifties than ever before and they stayed there for longer periods of time. A new social category arose; young people - mainly between the age of 12 and 18 - who were no longer kids and could thus not be treated like that, but were not yet adults either and thus lacked the rights and responsibilities that a position in the work force could give them. These youngsters were, moreover, all in the same situation - high school - safely secluded from the rest of society. The result was, as Denney (1965: 159) assesses, an unclear position, partly inside and partly outside society. Yet, this new social category needed like any other social category its own place in society; a social place with rights and responsibilities and a cultural space with cultural artefacts that were definitely theirs. The latter means, above all, to have at their disposal a style of life which they could recognize as their own and through which they could express themselves.

At this point, the new generation of adolescents met a deeply ambiguous situation. On the one hand, being young got a positive marking not in the least because much of the newly acquired disposable income was directed toward the family and invested in the children (Warner 1992: 199). Parents pampered their kids and let the adolescents, or teenagers as they were called, participate fully in the economic prosperity. To be young was to be special and to be young was the period in life to indulge in the benefits of belonging to this new category, particularly in the niceties the teen industry was offering (Miller and Nowak 1977: 270). Young people could so because they had the time and the money for leisure activities. On the other hand, there was the overwhelming pressure to conformity and the omnipresent conservatism. Both left not much room to give the adolescents rights and responsibilities other than doing their best at school and be nice. Room for experimenting with behavior was lacking which made it difficult to shape their own subcultures, lifestyles or to create their own identity.<sup>35</sup>

As Miller and Nowak (1977: 275) show, most teenagers conformed to the demands of adult society, particularly in the early fifties. As I have shown before, some of them went looking for new ways, such as the youthful avant garde that turned to black music. With the benefit of hindsight, it is not difficult to explain why they chose this music. It was the music of and for outsiders who were far less reigned by the moral and cultural oppression of the fifties and who could make music that was exciting and that dealt with themes that were no go areas in the rest of the society. Traditionally, the musical forms arising from the African-American community had a strong beat, expressed feelings in a direct manner, and dealt with experiences of oppression and exclusion. Black popular music in particular had the potentialities for creating new youthful lifestyles and identities. Jazz was no longer a candidate in this respect as it was either moving to the realm of Tin Pan Alley music or to the realm of the highbrow elite culture. Black gospel in itself did not offer much room for secular subjects and feelings and folk music was either rural music or the music that expressed the hardships of the lower classes. This made folk music for the time being an unlikely candidate for life style experiments of the white middle class suburban adolescents.

I have already dealt with the way the preference for black pop music spread among the young and how this led to the construction of rock'n'roll and teen music. Rock'n'roll could do so because it gave young people a good time especially because r&r let them dance again. In rock'n'roll they could recognize their experiences and problems that were repressed in conformist society and it offered ample opportunities to build a youthful life style around it. The turn to black popular music and the resultant development of rock'n'roll meant the beginning of the development of specific youth subcultures with their own music, clothes, leisure activities, etc. which was - as was to be expected in a capitalist society - a thoroughly commercial. The fifties is the period in which the foundation on which such subcultures could arise was laid. This basis consisted of the affluence and spare time which the young had and which allowed them to search for (and when found to adopt) artefacts that they could use as symbols and tokens of their identity and lifestyle (Hebdige 1979). It also consisted of the presence of people and organizations eager to make a buck out of it. Rock'n'roll, much helped by movies like *The Wild One* and *Rebel Without a Cause*, acted in this constellation as a catalyst which released the needs of the adolescents as well as the potential of the world of commerce to serve them (Miller and Nowak 1977: 292). It was not only the music itself which played this role but also the way it was performed. Through their behavior and their clothes the new rock'n'roll stars became early role models for the emerging teenage category.<sup>36</sup>

At the same time, it became clear that the manifestations of the emerging youth subcultures and life styles were not welcomed very warmly. As a matter of fact, the adult world reacted very hostile and the first signs of a break between generations became visible. In Belz's words:

"To conservative adults in 1950's, 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." (1969: 44).

The emerging youth life style was, moreover, not only perceived as a threat to the normative order, but was for many adults fully incomprehensible. In their view, they did everything to give the new generation they never had had - education, better housing, nice neighborhoods, radios, recordplayers, records, etc . - and still it did not seem to be enough.

Generally, the responses to the music choice and behavior of young people took two forms. First, rock'n'roll

elicited very negative reactions specifically directed at putting an end to the music and the way it was performed. Rock'n'roll aroused a moral panic (Street 1986: 15) and many establishment figures spoke out against it very vehemently. Church officials typified the music as rebellious and satanic and warned that it would subvert the American youth. Other establishment figures followed and the demand arose that rock'n'roll music should be banned from the radio and d.j.'s who ventured to spin rock'n'roll records should be fired (which happened more than once). Such records should also be removed from the juke boxes. Ceremonial sessions were organized in which rock'n'roll records were publicly smashed or burnt. Sometimes, local authorities prohibited rock'n'roll shows or hindered performances of this music as much as possible (Shaw 1974: 154/5; Aquila 1992: 270). The same kind of negative reactions came from people in the music industry who often had a specific interest in putting rock'n'roll out of business. "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: 270/1).

The adversity and emotionality of the condemnations did, however, not only arise because rock'n'roll grossly deviated from the dominant standards in popular music or that its lyrics often dealt with tabooed subjects and feelings. Such flagrant deviations from common standards and norms could be experienced as threatening in any period, but the fact that it happened in the fifties made the reactions extra vigorous. As I have shown, conformity in itself had become the central value in this period and thus deviations from extant norms themselves were enough to get negative reactions. The rejection was, moreover, strengthened by rock'n'roll's origins, i.e., the music of those on the wrong side of the color barrier. Segregation was an integral part of the 'holy' social order and deviation from it, however implicitly, was like other deviations not tolerated or as Weinstein put it: "... white adolescents were adopting black cultural styles and black heroes [which meant] .... miscegenation, racial mixing, and was seen as a rebellious against the dominant group." (1992: 95).

Second, the 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 deviancy and the topic of juvenile delinquency quickly rose to the top of the agenda. The media put the light on rock'n'roll and 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'n'roll and delinquency was, moreover, strengthened by the fact that Bill Haley's 'Rock Around the Clock' was used as openingstune in a contemporary movie about juvenile delinquency, *Blackboard Jungle*. The popularity of movies on this topic in the fifties is another indication of the widespread interest in juvenile delinquency and its status as an issue on the agenda. As Aquila dryly notes, this is to be expected in a social climate in which everything that deviates from the cultural and normative order was seen as a threat to the American way and thus:

"Rock and roll was linked to almost every social problem imaginable, including drugs, sexual promiscuity, gang warfare, pronography, teenage pregnancy, prostitution, organized crime, and communist subversion." (1992: 270)

The main effect of the hostile reception of rock'n'roll music (and of the related behavioral style elements) and it's

emotional rejection was the signification of rock'n'roll as:

- a *forbidden* fruit and this made it, as everybody since Eva could know, attractive in itself;
- definitely *not adult* which made it suited as a building block of a youth subculture because it is obvious that adolescents in search for a place of their own will choose anything as long as it does not belong to the dominant adult culture.

This search for a place of their own is, as Miller and Nowak (1977: 275/6) rightfully observe, the main deviancy of the adolescents in the fifties. Alongside this, they were on the whole as conformist as their parents. The artists who made the music were not rebels either. It was, above all, the negative reaction of the adults that labelled the music, the artists, and the audiences as such and thus they delivered - unknowingly and unwillingly - the means with which the teenagers could shape the social place that they needed so much. If anything, rock'n'roll was an aesthetic rebellion rather than a moral or a political one (Hatch and Milward 1987: 83; Denisoff ). For many adolescents, the situation was clear. Now they were freed from the oppressions of working life, it was time to enjoy it and rock'n'roll was perfect to do so. It became also clear to them that the adults would not let them and thus they hailed with Chuck Berry rock'n'roll as the means to deliver them 'from the days of old' (Junker 19 :235/223).

Still, if the teenagers who listened to rock'n'roll and took over its insignia did not mean to rebel morally and politically, they actually did so with their behavior. As Ennis insightfully observes, "[T]o listen to that music [r&r], to dance to that music, and to make that music was a political act without being political." (1992: 19). Denisoff comes much to the same conclusion as he assesses that rock'n'roll was strictly spoken not protest music. Yet, its lyrics lauded the values of the teenage culture and rock'n'roll expressed, above all, dissent with parental authority and the social rules concerning school, love, and sexuality which made it for teenagers more than just music (1983: 36 & 152/3). An insider, Scotty Moore - Elvis' guitarist, makes about the same point in saying: "He [Elvis] was a rebel: really without making an issue out of it." (Friedlander 1996: 42). In fact, it was not the youth but the overwhelming adult emphasis on conformity and keeping a low profile that made rock'n'roll rebellious.

## 5. Conclusions

The story of rock'n'roll is the story of postwar youth; a new social category consisting of young people, mainly between 12 and 18 years of age, who were no longer kids but also not yet adults. Although these youth had in a structural sense their own place in society - being at school and getting money from their parents - they lived culturally seen in a limbo. A cultural setting corresponding to these structural arrangements did not exist. There were no (or a few) values and norms specific for these young schoolgoing people and special youth lifestyles and identities were lacking.

Music often plays an important role in building such (sub)cultural settings particularly when marginal groups or social categories are concerned or those with an unclear position in society. It may do so because music has the capability to offer solace in difficult situations. Music consoles people, let them share their experiences, may give them insight in the situation they are in, or music is simply fun. What is more, music can contribute to the building

the lifestyles and identities of people. In this case - emerging youth in a quickly modernizing society - popular music is the best appointed instrument to help the young people out, but, as we have seen above, the popular music of the early fifties was not very well equipped to do so. It was thus no wonder that the youth - as always headed by an avant garde - went searching for music styles that could do the job. That is why the story of rock'n'roll is the story of postwar youth or, more precisely, why it is the story of young people in search for a place that they could call their own.

The story of rock'n'roll is, however, more than the story of young audiences in search for their own music. It is also the story of the artists who made the music. These - often young - singers, musicians, song-writers, and composers were in the same period looking for ways to make popular music that differed from the existing songs produced along the worn out Tin Pan Alley formulas. They did so because they wanted to make music they liked and also because they wanted to earn money and fame with it. The second reason implies that more was needed to create a new and better suited musical style than artists and audiences; viz., people who would take the commercial risk of putting the new and different songs on records and people who would take the same risk in bringing the new music to the prospective audiences. As we have seen, the people who could (and did) shape the opportunities for the new popular music style were there and, herewith, the story of rock'n'roll also (partly) becomes their story.

Otherwise stated, the window of opportunity for musical innovations was open in the early fifties. There existed, however, also important constraints. The extant racial barrier was one of them. Another was the hostile reception of rock'n'roll by the establishment. Vicars, schoolmasters, heads of universities, politicians, and put on actions - bans, smashing of records, public denunciations, etc. - against rock'n'roll music and took every available opportunity to bring rock'n'roll stars in disrepute.<sup>37</sup> People in the music industry assisted in this attack and attempted to block rock'n'roll's progression (see, e.g. the way they organized the payola scandal and the downfall of rock'n'roll's most outspoken d.j., Alan Freed.<sup>38</sup> The reactions of established society to rock'n'roll turned the emergence and development of this music into a battle which soon outgrew the field of popular music. It made this startling new and attractive music, that shocked so many Americans and later so many Europeans as well, popular as part of the emerging youth subcultures. The result was not only a popular music scene which was - definitely - very different from the scene before but also a youth whose behavior at the end of the fifties could scarcely be compared with that of the youngsters in the beginning of that era.

The conclusion that rock'n'roll helped to turn the realm of the young upside down does not solve the puzzle posed in the introduction completely. We know on the basis of the description in section four how rock'n'roll was made rebellious. This answer, however, leads to a paradox, i.e., a rebellion without rebels. Accepting such a paradox as a solution is only possible as long we acknowledge the paradox as one of the basic facts of social life. Human actions, above all, human interactions frequently have quite unexpected, often unintended, sometimes even perverse effects and may thus put society upside down without anyone really striving at it. Miller and Nowak bring the same point forward in their book about the fifties in a chapter about rock'n'roll with the challenging title *More Than a Music*. They state:

"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 teen-ager 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 the music was nearly inevitable. It was a re-evaluation refused, for the most part, until later years. But rock and roll did help contribute to a new attitude emerging in the late fifties. 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." (1977: 312).

## Notes

- 1.. This is the subtitle of his book *The rock and roll story*. The same association is to be found in other titles of rock'n'roll books as well, e.g., Pratt (1990) titles the chapter in his popular music book *Rock 'n' Roll: Sexuality and Expressive Rebellion* and Street (1986) named his book *Rebel Rock*.
- 2.. The main books I used in this section are Gillett's *The Sound of the City* (1996) and Ennis' *The Seventh Stream* (1992). In the text, these books are not referred to unless specific elements or citations of one of these authors are used.
- 3.. I will and cannot go into the question whose role has been the most important. One thing is clear, though, the Afro-American contribution to American music has been invaluable and has in important ways been responsible for its world-wide success.
- 4.. Jazz is a different story with respect to the color barrier. Although its origins lay in the African-American community, jazz '.... was played by people of all colors, including whites.'" (Ennis 1992: 79). Moreover, jazz was, unlike black pop or country music, not exclusively the music of an ethnic or regional grouping, although the appreciation of jazz music by whites was generally limited to elite audiences.
- 5.. This group's music was closely related to the jazz style and it was one of the few black groups that reached the pop chart - 19 songs between 1944 and 1949 of which one became a #1 hit and four turned into million sellers - without making undue concessions to the white taste.
- 6.. See for an meticulously elaborated survey of the criss-cross pattern of contacts between the streams chapter seven in Ennis' book, page 193 to 229 (1992).
- 7.. According to Ennis, 'the making of new pieces out of old pieces' is a basic process common to all arts. In order to keep an art alive, however, new pieces have to be manufactured as well and new performers put to the fore. Ennis calls this the arts' hit game which is reigned by two rules: (1) the conformity and (2) the contrast rule, i.e., tomorrow's hits should resemble those of today or yesterday or differ from them as much as possible (1992: 32/3).
- 8.. Howard Junker gives an interesting review of the eclecticism of the pop music of the early fifties. He mentions the folk wave; the adaptation of arias and other classical music pieces (points a.o. Mario Lanza's success); songs coming from Broadway, off-Broadway, and movie productions; the inspiration of the exotic with 'Uska Dara' as typical example; the invasion from Latin America, particularly the mambo craze; themes from TV series; and last but not least the host of novelty numbers and Christmas cuties (1972: 231-3).
- 9.. In 1950 there were already about 2.000 AM radio stations which number rose to about 3.400 in 1960. There were also about 700 FM stations in 1950 which number decreased somewhat in the same decade (Ennis 1992: 265).
- 10.. Although the record induced changes became the most clearly visible in the pop stream and in the C&W and R&B streams as well, the smaller streams were not immune for them. Records had been important in jazz for a long time, but now they got a more central place in gospel and folk music, too.
- 11.. Popular music is (1) always commercial music as it is (partly) made with a view on making a profit and (2) destined for a mass audience. As Street states, "Success [of pop music] is measured by sales." (1986: 142). 1 and 2 may be seen as dimensions on which the streams differ with Tin Pan Alley almost completely on the commercial-mass side and folk/gospel on the other. Rock'n'roll leans on both dimensions more to the 'Tin Pan Alley' pole than the 'folk/gospel' pole. In words of Street: "Most pop music is mass-produced for mass sales to the young." (1986: 4).
- 12.. The dialectical relationship between commitment and release is an important theme underlying Ennis' book. See for a succinct but very enlightening exposé of the role of music in this respect page 2 and 3 (1992). Greil Marcus identifies the same relation which he identifies as an inherent contradiction underlying American life (1982, see, e.g. p. 22).
- 13.. See for an extensive survey of the rise of the d.j. and the way they specialized Ennis (1992), in particular page 109 to 111 and page 131 to 160.
- 14.. The country stream was the most anxious to keep its music clear from influences from the other streams and the main reason for doing this

was not economic but cultural. These efforts increased (and were successful) with the coming of white rock'n'roll singers like Elvis Presley. The mix of black pop and country these singers brought also appealed to country audiences and threatened to 'pollute' this music.

15..Shaw (1974: 59) also signals a shift to a more direct presentation of emotion in popmusic by a louder and more expressive singing style. He points in this respect to the growing popularity of singers like Frankie Laine, Eddie Fisher, Rosemary Clooney, and Kay Starr.

16..See for the names of the most influential d.j.'s and of the radiostations where they made their programs Gillett 1996: 38/9.

17..This 'name giving' is widely disputed in the literature about rock'n'roll. Without delving too deep into this matter, it is clear that Alan Freed did not invent the term 'rock'n'roll'. It is, however, highly probable that he was the first who publicly used this term for a new - white - audience to designate a specific part of black pop music. In this respect, an interview with Billy Ward is interesting (cited in Ennis 1992: 18). In this interview, probably for an entertainment magazine, Ward relates how Alan Freed came to the name 'rock'n'roll'. It popped up in their conversation while listening to the Dominoes' record of the 'Sixty Minute Man'.

18..Although many of the indies, which produced most of the the R&B records, were not actually based in one of the Southern states, most of them were strongly linked to this region. A large part of the music and the artists they recorded came from the South and the same was true for the listeners/buyers of their records who either lived in The South or migrated from there quite recently.

19..But as Ennis contends, the term 'rock' definitely lost its sexual connotation with Bill Haley and from 'Rock Around The Clock' onward it referred only to dance (1992: 213).

20..Sam Phillips' famous statement in the early fifties was, 'If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars'. According to Marcus. Harmonica Frank Floyd, a white man in his early forties, was Sam Phillips' first try in finding such a man. This Frank Floyd makes, however, also clear how inarticulate Phillips' intuition was; 'Old Sam Phillips only had one thing to tell me. Said it over and over. Gimme something different. Gimme something unique.' (Marcus 1982: 11/2).

21..Ennis rightfully points to the many contradictions in Presley's behavior and appearance, but also concludes that Elvis despite his deferential behavior never could take away the underlying image of being one of the 'rough' crowd.

22..One of the main differences between the majors and the indies concerns the role that the national music market played in their strategies and decisions. The majors were almost fully focused on this market and they avoided risks in their music choice in order not to jeopardize their position on this market. The chance of a breakthrough in this market, if only occasionally, was the prime mover of the indies and they were well aware of the fact that these chances depended on more risky musical experiments. As rock'n'roll songs were such risky experiments in the beginning, the policies of the latter favored the emergence of rock'n'roll in a major way.

23..In fact, quite a few were so catchy that the majors quickly covered them and through their better distribution facilities were able to reap the commercial rewards where they had not sown.

24..'Work With Me, Annie' was then sanitized in the well-trying Tin Pan Alley tradition and became a #1 pop hit as 'Dance With Me, Henry' by Georgia Gibbs.

25..Recorded by Decca's subsidiaries Brunswick and Coral.

26..For instance, by actively promoting alternatives to rock'n'roll such as the polka or the calypso.

27..Johnny Otis' career is typical for boundary crossings between the streams out of which rock'n'roll arose. This Greek-American went into black music in the forties and became an important figure in R&B music as leader of his own band and producer of a travelling rhythm and blues show. In the latter, he featured singers like Little Esther, Willy Mae Thornton, and Marie Adams. He went on to become a producer and discoverer of new talent (Etta James), singer and songwriter - he wrote with Leiber and Stoller 'Hound Dog'. Quite naturally, he turned to rock'n'roll as performer and songwriter as this music emerged in the mid-fifties.

28..With covering the music industry furthered again the development of rock'n'roll. As Shaw remarks: 'Ironically, it was the cover that led him to the original and helped pave the way for the rise of rock'n'roll' (1974: 29).

29..The record companies that 'made' these idols were partly majors and partly independent companies. The former were ABC-Paramount - Paul Anka; MGM - Connie Francis; RCA-Victor - Neil Sedaka; and Capitol - Tommy Sands. Among the latter two newly formed Philadelphia-based companies, which like Dot focused on the pop market were the most important. These were Chancellor Records - founded in 1958 - with Frankie



Avalon and Fabian and Cameo - founded in 1956 - with Charlie Gracie and Bobbie Rydell. Later other new indies followed such as Laurie (founded in 1958) with Dion and the Belmonts and Liberty (founded in 1955) with Johnny Burnette and Bobby Vee (Gillett 1996).

30.. This phenomenon was new in pop music. Roy Brown and Chuck Berry were the first singers in R&B and R&R who wrote their own songs. In the late fifties, several of these singer-songwriters came forward. Alongside Paul Anka, the most well-known were Neil Sedaka and Bobby Darin. They paved the way for others like Paul Simon, Neil Diamond, and Bob Dylan and made the singer-songwriter combination a standard feature in pop music (Gillett 1996; Ennis 1992).

31.. This development seems to be a law in popular music: a growing audience for a particular music style inevitably brings with it a pull toward the middle of the road - an apt typification of a pop music style at a later date.

32.. Contrary to Tillekens (1998), I do not see rock'n'roll itself as the bridge between pop and beat and rock music. In my view, rock'n'roll is a fundamental revolution in popular music. There are two ways in which this musical revolution is connected to the later coming - equally revolutionary - developments. The first is teen pop because this standardized and diluted form of rock'n'roll retained enough of the original music to be able to function as a source for the later coming music and thus as a bridge (see also Aquila 1992: 278). The second is the music made by rock'n'rollers who kept on going and by new-coming (often R&B) artists. The latter affected the later coming musical styles directly.

33.. According to Richard Aquila, "[T]he booming postwar economy produced a culture of consumption that washed over America like a tidal wave." (1992: 270). After 1945, a new concept - consumerism - comes forward which indicates the shift in economic dominance from production to consumption.

34.. This conformity was the effect of the red scare as well as the support of it.

35.. In a way, they shared this situation with those people in the same period who could or did not want to conform with the dominant values and norms in American society, particularly the artists and their retinue - the Bohemian fringe. Their social situation may also be compared to the position of those who were factually put outside society - the African-American community. In different ways, both reacted against the social situation they were in. Examples are the writers and poets of the beat generation and the activists of the civil rights movement whose activities met the same hostile reception as did the trials to renewal of the adolescents.

36.. They could do so the more readily as the rapid transformation of American society made parents obsolete as role models. Kenniston finely points to "... the absence of paternal exemplars in many contemporary plays, novels, and films." (1965: 204).

37.. According to Friedlander (1996: 35-6 and 49), the scandalizing of Jerry Lee Lewis by the press in 1958 for marrying his minor niece and the conviction of Chuck Berry in 1959 for violating the Mann act are clear examples of how established society struck back.

38.. See Ennis (1992) for a detailed and well-informed review of the long-standing struggle between the traditional music publishers and the 'new kids on the block', the broadcasting and record companies.

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