

The History of Rock Music: 1955-1966

Genres and musicians of the beginnings

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Before the Flood 1957-1962

(These are excerpts from my book ["A History of Rock and Dance Music"](#))

Pop restoration

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The years between 1957 and 1965 can be considered the "dark age" of rock'n'roll. Many thought that rock'n'roll had simply died, an ephemeral, short-lived fad like many others. The wild, lascivious, insolent rocker was quickly replaced by a generation of polite, well-dressed, romantic "teen-idols" that ruled the airwaves till 1965. Paul Anka's *Diana* (1957), Pat Boone's *Love Letters In The Sand* (1957), Bobby Darin's *Dream Lover* (1959), Frankie Avalon's *Why* (1959), Fabian (Forte)'s *I'm a Man* (1959), Bobby Rydell's *Wild One* (1960), Rick Nelson's *Hello Mary Lou* (1961), Bobby Vee (Velline)'s *Take Good Care Of My Baby* (1961), and Neil Sedaka's *Breaking Up Is Hard To Do* (1962), and, among the girls, Brenda "Lee" Tarpley's *I'm Sorry* (1960), Connie "Francis" Franconero's *My Heart Has A Mind Of Its Own* (1960) and Leslie Gore's *It's My Party* (1962), were emblematic. At best, rock'n'roll was fused with country music to yield a more "traditional" (and white) form of music for young people, as was the case with the [Everly Brothers'](#) *Bye Bye Love* (1957) and *All I Have To Do Is Dream* (1958), written by Felice and Boudleaux Bryant.

In 1958 Don Kirshner opened offices for songwriters and producers at the Brill Building of New York that would become the most powerful force in pop music. This event is symbolic of the return to the old order of the pop singer backed by an orchestra. But the songwriters employed by Kirshner (Gerry Goffin, Carole King, Barry Mann, Cynthia Weil, Neil Sedaka, Neil Diamond) and by his competitors (Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich, Bert Berns and Jerry Ragovoy/Ragavoy, Kerome "Doc" Pomus and Mort Shuman) were of a caliber hitherto unseen in popular music. The impact of rock'n'roll was evident even on these conservative, pop songwriters: the focus of their lyrics was the teenager. King wrote (with lyricist Goffin) *Will You Love Me Tomorrow* (1960) for the Shirelles, *Take Good Care Of My Baby* (1961) and *Run To Him*

(1961) for Booby Vee, *Up On The Roof* (1962) for the Drifters, *A Natural Woman* (1967) for Aretha Franklin, the dance novelty *The Loco-Motion* (1962) for Little Eva Boyd. Goffin also wrote *Do You Know Where Are You Going To* (1975) for Diana Ross. Mann & Weil wrote *On Broadway* (1963) for the Drifters, *You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling* (1964) for the Righteous Brothers, *We've Gotta Get Out Of This Place* (1965) for the Animals, *Kicks* (1966) for Paul Revere. Barry & Greenwich wrote *Then He Kissed Me* and *Da Doo Ron Ron* (1963) for the Crystals, *Do Wah Diddy Diddy* for Manfred Mann, *Hanky Panky* (1966) for Tommy James, *Sugar Sugar* (1969) for the Archies, *River Deep Mountain High* (1966) for Ike and Tina Turner. Gene Pitney wrote *Hello Mary Lou* (1961) for Rick Nelson and *He's A Rebel* (1962) for the Crystals. Bert Berns wrote *Twist And Shout* (1962) for the Isley Brothers (based on *La Bamba*), *Cry To Me* (1961) and *Everybody Needs Somebody To Love* (1964) for Solomon Burke, *Hang On Sloopy* (1964) for the Vibrations and later the McCoys. Jerry Ragovoy/Ragavoy wrote *Time Is On My Side* (1964) for Irma Thomas, as well as *Ain't Nobody Home* (1966) and *Get It While You Can* (1967) for Howard Tate. Berns and Ragovoy wrote *Cry Baby* (1963) for Garnet Mimms, and *Piece Of My Heart* (1967) for Emma Franklin and later Janis Joplin. Pomus & Shuman wrote *A Teenager In Love* (1959) for Dion, *I'm a Man* (1959) for Fabian, *Viva Las Vegas* for Elvis Presley, and *This Magic Moment* (1960) and *Save The Last Dance For Me* (1960) for the Drifters. Leiber & Stoller wrote *Hard Times* (1951) for Charles Brown, *Hound Dog* (1952) for Mama Thornton and then Presley, *Jailhouse Rock* (1957) for Elvis Presley, *Kansas City* (1952) for Willie Littlefield and later Wilbert Harrison, *Lucky Lips* (1953) for Ruth Brown, *Love Potion Number Nine* (1959) for the Clovers, *There Goes My Baby* (1959) for the Drifters, *Stand By Me* (1961) for Ben King, *Searchin'* (1957), *Yakety Yak* (1958) and *Charlie Brown* (1959) for the Coasters.

The success of these songwriting companies was, largely, a sign of the decline, demise and defeat of rock'n'roll (both the music and the culture).

However, like all "dark ages", the dark age of rock'n'roll hatched the embryos of the cultural revolution to come. For example, in 1957 [Link Wray](#)'s instrumental *Rumble* invented the "fuzz-tone" guitar sound (not to mention the whole concept of the "power chord"); and in 1958 Eddie Cochran (the most talented of latter-day rockers) overdubbed all instruments and vocals on *Summertime Blues* and *C'mon Everybody*. These were impressive and influential achievements. The industry, however, was not paying attention anymore, and neither were the masses.

Rock'n'roll survived in dance-oriented songs such as Danny & The Juniors' *At The Hop* (1957) and *Rock And Roll Is Here To Stay* (1958); Freddie "Cannon" Picariello's *Tallahassie Lassie* (1959) and *Palisades Park* (1962). [Tommy Roe](#) continued Buddy Holly's legacy with the bubblegum refrains of *Sheila* (1960), *Sweet Pea* (1966) and *Dizzy* (1969).

There were also white rhythm'n'blues singers, whose songs, such as [Dion](#) DiMucci's *Runaround Sue* (1961), and Johnny "Rivers" Ramistella's *Poor Side Of Town* (1966), introduced new styles to rock singing, and there were serious purveyors of the "heartbreak", particularly [Del Shannon](#) (born Charles Westover), whose *Runaway* (1961) employed one of the early electronic sounds and whose *Stranger In Town* (1965) was sheer claustrophobia; Ray Peterson, displaying his four and a half octave voice in Jeff Barry's death song *Tell Laura I Love Her* (1960); and Lou Christie, the wailing falsetto of *Two Faces Have I*

(1963) and *Lightnin Strikes* (1966).

[Roy Orbison](#) was the world's specialist of orchestral melodramas, the terrifying voice of *Only The Lonely* (1960), *Crying* (1961) and the driving *Oh Pretty Woman* (1964), one of the most famous bass riffs in the history of rock music. He would shift from falsetto to baritone to tenor within the same song while building to an anguished climax.

The late 1950s were the years of the novelty tunes, of the "dance crazes", of the vocal groups, of instrumental rock, of exotica, of soul music. Each of these phenomena contributed something to the renaissance of rock music, although at the time they were perceived as burying Chuck Berry's invention for good and forever.

"Novelties" could be particularly ingenious: [The Tokens'](#) *The Lion Sleeps Tonight* (1961), produced by the duo Hugo (Peretti) & Luigi (Creatore), and based on Pete Seeger's *Wimoweh* (1961) which was in turn based on Solomon Linda's Southafrican hit *Mbube* (1939), employed operatic soprano, Neapolitan choir, yodel and proto-electronics.

Dance crazes

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Bobby Freeman's *Do You Wanna Dance* (1958) summarized the mood of young people after the deluge of rock'n'roll. The most famous of the "dance crazes", the twist, centered around New York's "Peppermint Lounge", was the closest thing to rock'n'roll to come out during the dark ages. The dance had no well-defined moves and it was openly erotic. Invented by the Midnighters' frontman Hank Ballard with *The Twist* (1958), covered by Chubby Checker who then continued with *Let's Twist Again* (1961), *Limbo Rock* (1962) and many others, the twist spawned Joey "Dee" (Dinicola) and the Starlites' *Peppermint Twist* (1961), by the house band of New York's Peppermint Lounge, Bobby Lewis' *Tossin' And Turnin'* (1961), King Curtis Ousley's *Soul Twist* (1962), Dee Dee Sharp's *Mashed Potato Time* (1962), and the Isley Brothers' *Twist And Shout* (1962). It quickly faded away after "Beatlemania" took over the USA, but it was important to blur the line between white and black music (Freeman and Ballard were black).

The hits of Virginia's producer Frank Guida, namely Gary U.S. Bonds' *Dear Lady Twist* (1962) and Jimmy Soul's *If You Wanna Be Happy* (1963), a cover of Hubert "Roaring Lion" Charles' *Marry An Ugly Woman* (1934), were marketed as "twist" but were actually calypso.

Philadelphia was an inexhaustible source of new dances, mainly devised by the songwriting duo of Kal Mann and Dave Appell, for example *The Wah Watusi* (1961), first recorded by the Vibrations.

Dance music was mutating into a genre of its own, thanks to a French invention. When the occupying German troops shut down Paris' dance halls (which were guilty of promoting Jewish and Black music), private clubs began playing dance records for their customers. "La Discotheque" opened in 1941 to play the jazz music that was banned in dance halls: since it could not hire jazz musicians, it was only playing records. At the end of the war, the phenomenon spread everywhere: after all, it was also cheaper to play a record than to hire a band,

and dancers would rather listen to a set of different styles from different musicians than to a set played by the same band. In 1947 Paul Pacine opened the "Whiskey a Go-Go" in Paris. During the 1950s, Paris lived its own "dolce vita" and the "discotheques" were its headquarters. The idea moved to the USA in the 1960s: the first New York disco was the "Peppermint Lounge", opened in 1961, and the first California disco was the "Whiskey-A-Go-Go", which opened in 1965 on Sunset Blvd in Hollywood. Live music would remain the main business for all these discos, but the seeds of a record-oriented club scene had been planted.

Instrumental rock 1958-60

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Instrumental rock abandoned the sax-driven sound of rhythm'n'blues, best illustrated by Johnny Paris (Pocisk) and the Hurricanes' *Red River Rock* (1959), based on the country standard *Red River Valley*, and by Chuck Rio's Champs with *Tequila* (1958), and shifted the emphasis towards the guitar. [Duane Eddy](#) was the champion of the guitar-driven instrumental, with *Cannonball* (1958), *Ramrod* (1958) and *Forty Miles Of Bad Road* (1959), and began a trend towards more and more atmospheric music, such as *Sleep Walk* (1959), written and performed by the New York duo of guitarist Santo (Farina) and drummer Johnny (Farina), *Walk Don't Run* (1960), written by jazz guitarist Johnny Smith and performed by Seattle's [Ventures](#) with an emphasis on tremolo guitar, and (in Britain) *Apache* (1960), written by Jerry Lordan and performed by the Shadows with an emphasis on Hank Marvin's twangy guitar (ex Vipers). Even the drums were employed as lead instrument, as was the case with Sandy Nelson's *Teen Beat* (1959) and Preston Epps's *Bongo Rock* (1959). The most original of the instrumental hits was French: the composer of musique concrete Pierre Henry composed an avantgarde ballet, *La Reine Verte* (1963), that included a rock movement, *Rock Electronique*, a devilish spiraling anthem that juxtaposed electric guitar and proto-synthesizer.

Prodromes of the flood

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At the turn of the decade, a number of events announced what was about to happen. In 1959 two California teenagers, Frank Zappa and Donald Van Vliet, cut a record together. In 1960 Larry Parnes, Britain's most famous impresario, arranged a show for the Silver Beatles in Liverpool, and the following year the magazine "Mersey Beat" was founded in Liverpool by Bill Harry (and in the same year the Shirelles' *Will You Love Me Tomorrow* (by King & Goffin) coined the kind of romantic multi-part vocal harmonies that would make the Beatles rich and famous). A British producer, [Joe Meek](#), began using the recording studio like an instrument for his space opera **I Hear a New World** (mar 1960 - may 1960), a genre of orchestral and sometimes electronic extravaganzas that would peak with the space-age pop muzak of Attilio Mineo's **Man in Space with Sounds** (? - 1959 - ? 1962), composed in 1951. In 1961 Bob Dylan arrived at New York's Greenwich Village. In 1961 [Dick Dale](#) used the term "surfing" to describe the instrumental rock'n'roll of *Let's Go Trippin'* (1961). In 1961 the British bluesman Alexis Korner formed the Blues Incorporated, that would include a rotating cast of young musicians such as Charlie Watts, John Surman,

John McLaughlin, Mick Jagger, Brian Jones, Keith Richard, Eric Burdon, Jack Bruce, Ginger Baker, and spawned the similar combos of [Cyril Davies](#), [Graham Bond](#), [Long John Baldry](#), and John Mayall. In 1962 a Seattle guitarist, Jimi Hendrix, began working as a session-man. In 1962 Robert Wyatt and others formed the Wilde Flowers, the beginning of the dynasty of the Canterbury school. The Tornado's instrumental *Telstar* (1962), architected by Meek and driven by Roger Lavern's organ, became the first British record to top the USA charts. These were all premonitions.

Los Angeles' producer [Phil Spector](#) invented a style of production named "wall of sound", best exemplified by the Crystals' *He's A Rebel* (1962, a Gene Pitney song that was sung by Darlene "Love" Wright and actually did not feature the group) and *Da Doo Ron Ron* (1963, by Barry & Greenwich), by Darlene Love's *Christmas* (1963, again Barry & Greenwich), perhaps Spector's noisiest production, by the Ronette's *Be My Baby* (1963, also Barry & Greenwich), by the Righteous Brothers' *You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling* (1964, by Mann & Weil), the era's peak of pathos, by the Shangri-Las' *Leader of the Pack* (1964, again Barry & Greenwich), one of the most articulate stories, and by Ike and Tina Turner's *River Deep Mountain High* (1966, another Barry & Greenwich composition). Spector was the Wagner of teenage emotion (and, hidden between the lines of all that pandemonium, of teenage lust).

Surf music

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Sure, in 1962, most pop hits were written and produced at the Brill Building, New York, the headquarters of pop music, and in 1963 almost 50% of USA recordings were made in Nashville, the headquarters of country music. But, within a year, the Beach Boys' *Surfin'* (released in december 1961) and [Jan \(Berry\) and Dean \(Torrence\)](#)'s *Surf City* (1963) made surf-music (and California) much more relevant.

In 1957 Frederick Kohner's novel "Gidget" had popularized the Hawaian sport of surfing, particularly in California. The habits and codes of surfers had ended up creating what arguably became the first alternative youth subculture.

Surf music was a harmless invention, but sometimes the most unlikely event turns out to be the spark that sets the world on fire. Surf bands were playing rock'n'roll, and they were playing it with new subtlety and vigor. They bridged rock'n'roll with pop music, and came up with a genre that had both a strong rhythmic element and a strong melodic element. The Beach Boys were still essentially a pop, vocal group, but played the kind of music that Chuck Berry had invented. Basically, they sang Four Freshmen harmonies over Chuck Berry rhythms. Songs such as the [Trashmen](#)'s feverish and demented *Surfin' Bird* (1963) were even more unconventional, and so were albums such as Jan Berry's soundtrack for the film **Ride The Wild Surf** (1964). Instrumental surf bands were even more futuristic, playing something that did not relate to pop music at all, as immortalized by the [Surfaris](#)' *Wipe Out* (1963, written by Merrell Fankhauser) and by the Chantays' dual-guitar fantasia *Pipeline* (1963). Last but not least, surf music put California on the map of rock music, a fact that would have momentous consequences.

The Avantgarde

Avantgarde composers were experimenting with "tape music", computer music, noise, and new instruments such as the synthesizer and the sequencer. Indirectly, this process led to redefine avantgarde music: instead of an exclusive of seasoned (and mostly European) composers, it became a relatively grass-roots (and mostly USA) phenomenon. Sure, the composers were still educated at the most prestigious schools of music: but their stance towards composition/performance was moving away from the concert hall and towards the praxis of jazz music. The composers of this generation tried many (and wildly different) avenues of experimentation, from musique concrete to electroacoustic synthesis, but they shared a fundamental aesthetic belief in the power of "sound", as opposed to the traditional emphasis on harmony and melody. Last but not least, in 1959 Ornette Coleman had invented "free jazz", and a major revolution was underway in jazz music. The impact of these ideas would not be felt for decades, but would eventually catch up with the music for guitar, bass and drums invented by Chuck Berry.

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