

The History of Rock Music: 1955-1966

Genres and musicians of the beginnings

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The Flood 1964-1965

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

The Tunesmiths

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The Beach Boys' idea of wedding the rhythm of rock'n'roll and the melodies of pop music was taken to its logical conclusion in Britain by the bands of the so-called "Mersey Sound". The most famous of them, the Beatles, became the object of the second great swindle of rock'n'roll. In 1963 "Beatlemania" hit Britain, and in 1964 it spread through the USA. They became even more famous than Presley, and sold records in quantities that had never been dreamed of before them.

Presley had proven that there was a market for rock'n'roll in the USA. Countless imitators proved that a similar market also existed in Europe, but they had to twist and reshape the sound and the lyrics. Britain had a tradition of importing forgotten bluesmen from the USA, and became the center of the European recording industry. European rock'n'roll was less interested in innuendos, more interested in dancing, and obliged to merge with the strong pop tradition. European rock'n'roll, from Italy to England, was much more melodic than the original. In fact, none of the most famous British, French and Italian rockers qualify as a "true" rocker: they were still pop singers. Johnny Kidd and the Pirates was the notable exception, particularly with *Shakin' All Over* (1960).

A clear difference between USA rock'n'roll and British rock'n'roll was that USA rock'n'roll had a relatively rural (Mid-western and Southern) origin, whereas British rock'n'roll was strongly urban and industrial from the very beginning. London, in particular, was experiencing a rebirth. Just like all other European capitals, the "swinging London" was awash in money and enthusiasm. But, unlike most European capitals, London (and all the other British industrial cities) had a vast reservoir of poor, alienated youth, the price that Britain paid for being the most industrialized country in Europe.

A more crucial difference was one that truly changed the way rock'n'roll was perceived by the public: the British had a stronger concept of the "group" as opposed to the "individual". The rocker had been a typical USA phenomenon: a musical transposition of the "loner", the misfit, the nomad that is frequently celebrated by USA novels and films. Britain had a different musical tradition, that was grounded on the orchestra: to them, a jazz or blues or rock "band" was simply a small-scale orchestra. Also, Britain had a different social background: the "gang" prevailed over the "hero". The names of the first rock bands were aping (often in a mocking way) the names of the gangs that operated in their territory. USA rock'n'roll had translated the sense of individual frustration into the cult of personality. British rock'n'roll translated the sense of collective frustration into the cult of the group. USA culture, particularly in the Midwest and in the South where rock'n'roll was born, emphasized identity, but British culture, particularly in the industrial cities, emphasized the loss of identity in favor of membership in a group.

When the London bands pared down the "trad" orchestra to a guitar-driven combo, British rhythm'n'blues was born (namely Rolling Stones and Yardbirds). When the Liverpool bands replaced the instruments of skiffle with drums, bass and electric guitar, skiffle mutated into a new genre, that was renamed "Mersey sound" (or "Merseybeat") in 1963 (Mersey being Liverpool's river). The Casanovas (later Big Three) were perhaps the first of the Merseybeat groups (or at least the first to play at the Cavern, in may 1960).

Just like Presley's success spawned a generation of rockers, the success of the Beatles spawned a generation of rock bands. As the Beatles were easily accepted by the mainstream (they conformed with the conventions of the white, conservative "teen idol" era), rock bands that imitated them were also tolerated.

True to their musical roots, the Beach Boys and the Beatles continued to produce melodic music, and became more and more sophisticated in their arrangements.

The [Beach Boys](#) (2) had the idea first. Ballads such as *Don't Worry Baby* (1964) were a synthesis of Phil Spector's "wall of sound", Chuck Berry's teenage vignettes, doo-wop's stately four-part harmonies, as well as the cornerstone of a new form of pop music. That form was born with *I Get Around* (1964), the greatest of their car songs, *Help Me Rhonda* (1965), the most acrobatic of their multi-part vocal inventions, *Barbara Ann* (1965), the most anarchic of their geometric constructions, and *Good Vibrations* (1966), the first pop hit to employ electronic sounds. Brian Wilson, the genius behind the Beach Boys' sound, became the quintessential eccentric of melody, particularly on **Pet Sounds** (jan 1965/mar 1966 - may 1966) and the "lost album" **Smile** (aug/dec 1966, but released only sep 2004). Brian Wilson created a unique role for himself when he quit playing: basically, he was a composer who had a band to perform his repertory. The Beach Boys became immaterial.

The [Beatles](#) (2), thanks to the creativity of their producer George Martin (who was for them what Brian Wilson was for the Beach Boys), popularized the new styles that were emerging from the underground. They began with effervescent party-tunes such as *Love Me Do* (1962), *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), *I Feel Fine* (1964) and *Help* (1965), but their melodic genius truly blossomed with the sophisticated slow ballads of *Yesterday* (1965), *Michelle* (1965), *We Can Work It Out* (1965) and *Eleanor Rigby* (1966), while *Penny Lane* (1967) topped everything else in terms of harmony. Heralded by the proto-psychedelic pastiche

of *Tomorrow Never Knows* (1966) for sitar, organ drones and backward guitar, their best albums, **Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band** (feb/mar 1967 - jun 1967) and **Abbey Road** (apr/aug 1969 - sep 1969), were tours de force of studio arrangement that further enhanced their melodic talent by employing everything from the symphonic orchestra to tape loops. The double album **The Beatles** (jul/oct 1968 - nov 1968) showed how neo-classical, psychedelic, music-hall, blues and folk music could coexist and complement each other in the ditty-oriented context of pop music.

Less famous but far more arduous were the vocal harmonies of the [Hollies](#), whose creativity also peaked at the same time with *Bus Stop* (1966) and *Carrie-Anne* (1967), and the baroque album **For Certain Because** (? 1966 - oct 1966).

The success of the Mersey Sound and of the girl-groups altered the panorama of pop music, forcing even the most conservative teen-idols to adopt a more lively style. Mary "Dusty Springfield" O'Brien's *I Only Want To Be With You*, composed and arranged by Ivor Raymonde (the apotheosis of British vocal counterpoint), Sandie Shaw (Goodrich)'s *Girl Don't Come* (1964), and Petula Clark's *Downtown* (1964), written by Tony Hatch, were truly "youthful". Marianne Faithful stood out as the symbol of the new generation for her wistful interpretations of the Rolling Stones' *As Tears Go By* (1964) and Jackie DeShannon's *Come And Stay With Me* (1964).

The Punks

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Britain was not only the Beatles. In fact, the Beatles were mis-representing the British scene. The three great British bands of 1964 were rather the Kinks, the Animals and the Rolling Stones. Each of them defined a new style, that, decades later, still stands on its own.

The [Rolling Stones](#) (14) were probably the most impressive agglomerate of talents to come together in Britain before the Soft Machine: decadent vocalist Mick Jagger (who distorted soul crooning and turned it into an animal instinct), guitarist Keith Richards (who took Chuck Berry's riffs into a new dimension of fractured harmony), multi-instrumentalist Brian Jones (who penned their baroque and psychedelic arrangements), and the phenomenal, funky rhythm section of bassist Bill Wyman and drummer Charlie Watts. Steeped in the blues, they redefined the rock performer, the rock concert and the rock song. They turned on the degree of vulgarity and provocation to levels that made Chuck Berry look silly.

Rock music would never be the same again after the Rolling Stones sang *The Last Time* (1965), i.e. the Staple Singers' 1958 hit, and *Satisfaction* (1965), which redefined the meaning of "anthemic" in music (lascivious, bluesy, dirty, thumping). And **Aftermath** (mar 1966 - apr 1966) went already beyond that model with the lengthy *Going Home*, the dulcimer-tinged ballad *Lady Jane* and the majestic crescendo of *Out Of Time*. *Paint It Black* (1966), *Ruby Tuesday* (1967) and *She's A Rainbow* (1967) introduced eastern elements and baroque arrangements (and Nicky Hopkins on piano), while **Between The Buttons** (dec 1966 - jan 1967) added a salvo of stylistic raids and the psychedelic vignette of *All Sold Out*. The sound hardened with *Jumping Jack Flash* (1968) and *Street Fighting Man* (1968), the whole band charging like rabid dogs, while **Beggar's Banquet** (jun 1968 - dec 1968) revisited their blues roots in a slower, almost

ecstatic tone. *Sympathy For The Devil* (1968), which wed demonic tribalism and epic piano (Nicky Hopkins), and *Gimme Shelter* (1969), which abstracted the elements of the Stones' jamming style (an oneiric texture of post-psychedelic guitar counterpoint, pounding pseudo-vooodoo rhythm section, profane gospel invocation), were post-modern meditations on their own sound.

The sound of *Honky Tonk Women* (1969) and *Brown Sugar* (1971) was the classic of the classics, exuberant and irreverent, visceral and incendiary, the ultimate bacchanal on Earth, while **Sticky Fingers** (jun 1970 - apr 1971) sounded like a pensive analysis of their blues roots and of their demonic mission. **Exile On Main Street** (sep 1971 - jun 1972) was the satori of this self-referential phase. Their songs, zooming in on a milieu of neurotics, psychopaths, prostitutes, punks and junkies, and arranged (mainly by Brian Jones) with harpsichord, marimba, violin, dulcimer, trumpet, xylophone and flute, revolutionized each of the classical instruments of rock music: the drums incorporated the lascivious tom-tom of tribal folk, the martial pace of military bands and the sophisticated swing of jazz; the guitar amplified the raw and ringing style of Chuck Berry; the bass orchestrated a depraved sound, the singing turned the sensual crooning of soul music into an animal howl, half sleazy lust and half call to arms; and the arrangements of keyboards, flutes and exotic instruments completely misinterpreted the intentions of the cultures from which they were borrowed. The revolution carried out by the Rolling Stones was thorough and radical. Indirectly, the Rolling Stones invented the fundamental axis of rock'n'roll: the sexy singer, sexual object and shaman, and the charismatic guitarist. For at least forty years that would remain the only constant in rock music (and one of the external features that set it apart from jazz, folk, classical music). The Stones represented a generational trauma.

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The [Kinks](#) (1) were purveyors of the melodic miniature, but with a much stronger emphasis on the riff than the Beatles ever dreamed of. Their style was sophisticated and full of wit, a fact which turned each song into a realistic vignette of middle-class life. *A Well Respected Man* (1965), *Sunny Afternoon* (1966), *Dead End Street* (1966), *Waterloo Sunset* (1967) and *Autumn Almanac* (1967) were still recycling Chuck Berry's trick, but with the mastery of a bard. They were by far the band most rooted in the British tradition, with a keen awareness of history and British values. In fact, the young Ray Davies sang about himself and his generation, and the adult Ray Davies would sing about the British nation, his goal consistently Homeric in creating myth out of public history and social memory. They also invented the most famous riff of all times, *You Really Got Me* (1964), thereby single-handedly invented garage-rock, hard-rock and heavy-metal. Their "hard" style was refined by *All Day And All Of The Night* (1964) and *Till The End Of The Day* (1965). *See My Friends* (1965) introduced Indian music into rock'n'roll. They also rank among the inventors of the concept album in rock music, thanks to their masterpiece **Village Green Preservation Society** (nov 1966/jul 1968 - oct 1968), and among the most prolific writers of rock operas ever.

The [Animals](#), led by white shouter Eric Burdon and producer Mickie Most, were probably the most creative among the British bands that reinterpreted the blues tradition for the young punks of the 1960s. They turned rhythm'n'blues into the epic call to arms for masses of frustrated teenagers. In their hands, the blues became an anthemic sound of rebellion. Very few bands captured the spirit of the time as the Animals did.

These bands were not only producing original and exciting music. They were also advancing the process of identification of the fan with the star. The rocker was still a "hero", somewhat detached from the masses (sometimes a black singing about white kids, sometimes an adult singing about teenage life), while the singer of these new bands was a kid like everyone else, singing, basically, about his own life.

The genre of the generational anthem peaked with the [Who](#) (13). Few bands embodied the rebellious spirit of the young urban misfits like the Who, the most celebrated of the "mod" bands ("mods" were the urban thugs, organized in gangs). *I Can't Explain* (1965) and *My Generation* (1965) "were" pure rage and desperation. Those geysers of youthful energy also revealed the talent of the greatest songwriter of that generation, Pete Townshend. While the Who continued to wave the flag of the generational uprising with *Magic Bus* (1968) and *We Won't Get Fooled Again* (1971), Townshend proceeded to refine his compositional skills with ever more complex suites, such as *A Quick One* (1966) and *Rael* (1967), and eventually coined a whole new format with his influential rock operas, **Tommy** (mar 1969 - may 1969) and **Quadrophenia** (may 1972/jun 1973 - nov 1973). Throughout their career, the Who consistently reflected the mood of their generation. Their entire repertory can be view as the long and epic autobiography written by an entire generation. On the way to erect the myth of their generation, they also invented a music anchored to colossal guitar riffs, pounding drums and operatic vocals, which ten years later will be renamed "heavy-metal". While the Rolling Stones, the Animals and the Kinks were rooted in the past (whether rhythm'n'blues or music hall), the Who invented a style that was the future of rock'n'roll.

It was only fitting that these bands emphasized the anthemic element of rock music. Their songs often sounded like a miniature anthem: a "generational" anthem. Other early purveyors of this genre where the [Them](#), with the feverish *Gloria* (1965), and the [Troggs](#), with a demonic version of Chip Taylor's *Wild Thing* (1966), two of the songs that became the epitome of garage-rock.

While they never became particularly famous, the [Yardbirds](#) (1) were innovators of momentous importance. First and foremost, the Yardbirds are the band that established the supremacy of the guitar, granting dignity to the rock solo and pioneering the use of dissonant techniques such as feedback and fuzztone. They invented the "rave-up," i.e. the fast, wild, reckless blues spasm that would serve as the foundation of rock music for the rest of the decade. **Roger The Engineer** (mar 1966 - jun 1966) was a tour de force of guitar and rhythm experimentation. Garage-rock, hard-rock, progressive-rock and acid-rock all owe their existence to the Yardbirds. It is not a coincidence that their three successive guitarists would start three of the most influential British bands of all times: Jeff Beck Group, Cream, Led Zeppelin.

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Many more British artists were launched in those ebullient years. Milestone hits included: Dave Clark's *Glad All Over* (1963), the Searchers' *Sugar And Spice* (1963), written by Tony Hatch, Manfred Mann's *5-4-3-2-1* (1964), Spencer Davis' *Gimme Some Loving* (1966), written by the young Steve Winwood, the Bee Gees' *Massachusetts* (1967), the Tremeloes' *Here Comes My Baby* (1967), written by the young Cat Stevens, etc.

British bands such as the Rolling Stones, the Animals and the Yardbirds capitalized on black music in a way that USA bands did not seem capable of doing. It was easier to sing like blacks in Britain than in the segregated USA. (Nonetheless, no white blues band of the time was fronted by a black singer).

The Garages

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The contagion spread to the USA, where rock bands sprang up in every garage. The Kinks and the Who were the main influence on countless garage bands that had nowhere to perform at, and no crowd to perform for. Truth is, those bands already existed. What did not exist before the British Invasion was the mass market to support those bands. "Garage-rock" was born the night of may 1963 when the Kingsmen staged the first *Louie Louie* marathon (playing Richard Berry's 1956 song over and over again for one hour, sung by Jack Ely in an amateurish manner that simply made it more legendary). The Kingsmen shared the leadership of the Pacific North-west school with the [Sonics](#), whose dynamite rock'n'roll peaked in 1964 (*The Witch*, *Psycho* and *Strychnine*), the Wailers, who had backed singer Rockin' Robin Roberts' first cover of *Louie Louie* (1960), and [Paul Revere and the Raiders](#), who became famous in 1966 with two Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil hits (*Kicks* and *Hungry*). The [Standells](#), formed in Los Angeles in 1961, became famous with Ed Cobb's *Dirty Water* (1966). These bands were born in the early 1960s, before their British counterparts even began recording. Their sound was raw and raunchy. Their attitude was vicious and insolent. They were the proto-punks. But certainly 1965 was the year that these "garage bands" became popular, that every kid wanted to be in a band. That was the year when Dick Clark's tv show "Where the Action Is" began airing from a different location every week. Each city developed its own scene, although few of the most virulent bands made it nationally. Chicago's alternative heroes were the [McCoys](#), who unleashed the power chords of *Hang On Sloop*y (1965), the [Shadows Of The Knight](#) and the Amboy Dukes.

In New York, the [Strangeloves](#) concocted the tribal *I Want Candy* (1965), while keyboardist Felix Cavalieri's Young Rascals, fundamentally the same band as the Starlighters of *Peppermint Twist* (1960), recorded the frantic and rousing *Good Lovin'* (1966) in the style of a gospel jam.

The southern states were not immune to the revolution. The Gentrys' *Keep On Dancing* (1965), from Memphis, was one of the feverish anthems of the year; while out of Texas came Kenny and the Kasuals' *Journey To Tyme* (1965), one of the first instances of guitar fuzztone, the Sir Douglas Quintet's *She's About A Mover* (1965), and Sam the Sham & The Pharaos' *Wooly Bully* (1965).

California produced several of the amateurish, provocative alter-hits of 1966: [Count Five's](#) *Psychotic Reaction* (1966), Syndicate of Sound's *Little Girl* (1966), [Music Machine's](#) *Point of No Return* (1966) and *Talk Talk* (1967).

Ironically, it was a band of Mexican musicians, ? (Question Mark) And The Mysterians, who, with *96 Tears* (1966), popularized the trademark sound of this age: the tinny organ (usually, a Farfisa organ) that provided both a drone in the background and rousing riffs for the chorus.

The [Monks](#) (1) were formed by USA soldiers stationed in Germany. They played

primitive and furious rock and roll, somewhere between the Kinks' *You Really Got Me* and the punk-rock of ten years later. **Black Monk Time** (nov 1965 - mar 1966) is one of the most formidable albums of the era.

The [Missing Links](#) were Australia's premier garage-punks.

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