

The History of Rock Music: 1955-1966

Genres and musicians of the beginnings

[\(Versione italiana\)](#)

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Background: The 20th Century

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

USA: Popular music as continuous innovation

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Rock'n'roll is usually defined as a merger of rhythm'n'blues and country music. While this is roughly correct, many more factors came into play in the first half of the 20th century that enabled the birth of rock'n'roll and its future developments.

One could start with 1892, when popular music became big business and music publishers started renting offices around 28th Street in New York City, next to the vaudeville theaters of 27th Street, an area that would be renamed "Tin Pan Alley". Sheet music was the primary "product" of popular music and the industry was dominated by music publishing houses. In 1914 the American Society for Composers (ASCAP) was founded to protect songwriters. That same

year, the first blues was published (Hart Wand's *Dallas Blues*).

Other events that would shape the rest of the century occurred in the first two decades. In 1914 Jerome Kern invented the "musical" by integrating music, drama and ballet and setting it into the present. While that would generate an industry of its own, the real revolution for white popular music took place without almost anyone noticing. In 1910 John Lomax published "Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads", and in 1916 Cecil Sharp published a collection of folk music from the Appalachian mountains, two events that sparked interest for the white musical heritage, although the world had to wait until 1922 before someone, Texan fiddler Eck Robertson, would cut the first record of "old-time music". The following year, John Carson recorded two "hillbilly" songs, an event that is often considered the official founding of "country" music. In 1924 Riley Puckett introduced the "yodeling" style of singing (originally from the Swiss and Austrian Alps) into country music, the style adopted in 1927 by the first star of country music, [Jimmie Rodgers](#), who wed it to the Hawaiian slide guitar and, de facto, invented the white equivalent of the blues. In 1925 Carl Sprague became the first musician to record cowboy songs (the first "singing cowboy" of country music). And, finally, in 1925, Nashville's first radio station (WSM) began broadcasting a program that would eventually change name to "Grand Ole Opry". Country music was steaming ahead.

Black music also came into its own. The first jazz record was cut in New York in 1917. Mamie Smith's *Crazy Blues* (1920) was the first blues to become a nation-wide hit. And Bessie Smith would follow suit with her first blues record in 1923. Neither was a real blues musician (itinerant, street performer from the South). But in 1926 Blind Lemon Jefferson became the first real bluesman to enter a major recording studio.

By 1921, 106 million records were sold yearly in the USA, mostly published on "Tin Pan Alley", but control of the market was already shifting towards the record companies.

It is not a coincidence that, at about this time, new record companies were created that would last for a century. In 1924 the Music Corporation of America (MCA) was founded in Chicago as a talent agency, and the German record company Deutsche Grammophon (DG) opened the Polydor company to distribute records abroad. In 1926 General Electric started the Radio Corporation of America (RCA). In 1928 the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) of 47 affiliate stations was created. In 1929 Decca was founded in Britain as a classical music company, and RCA purchased the glorious Victor Talking Machines. In 1931 EMI, formed by the merger of Gramophone and the British subsidiary of Columbia, opened the largest recording studio in the world at Abbey Road in London.

Record companies also realized that the support was not adequate to a mass market. In 1926 Vitaphone introduced 16-inch acetate-coated shellac discs playing at 33 1/3 RPM (a size and speed calculated to be the equivalent of a reel of film), but they were hardly noticed.

The effect of all this turmoil was felt also in the much more conservative, traditional field of "pop" music. In 1925 the Mills Brothers invented the "barbershop harmonies", which would become the reference standard for all future vocal groups, and in 1926 Bing Crosby cut his first record and invented

the "crooning" style of singing (thanks to a new kind of microphone), a style that would become the sound of the white middle-class of the USA. Maybe it wasn't "popular" music, but in 1927 the German classical composer Kurt Weill began a collaboration with the playwright Bertold Brecht, incorporating jazz, folk and pop elements in his soundtracks (probably the first time that the three genres had been merged).

The term "rock'n'roll" might be as old as any of these historical events. Trixie Smith cut *My Man Rocks Me With One Steady Roll* (1922) four years before Chuck Berry was born. In 1934 John Lomax and his son Alan began recording black music of the southern states, and discovered the gospel genre of "rocking and reeling" that had been around for years, if not decades.

USA: The Future

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While most of these events were unknown (and are still unknown) to even the most scrupulous music historians, their effects were rapidly visible. The innovators of classical music were not as lucky: they did not have a recording industry that was interested in selling their ideas. But their ideas would come back after many decades to haunt the grand-grand-children of the roaring 1910s and 1920s. For example, in 1906 Thaddeus Cahill built the first electronic instrument. In 1907 Ferruccio Busoni published "Entwurf einer neuen Aesthetik der Tonkunst", predicting the use of dissonant and electric sound in musical composition. In 1913 the Italian "futurist" Luigi Russolo published "L'Arte dei Rumori", in which he proclaimed noise to be the sound of the 20th century, and especially noise produced by machines, such as his own "Intonarumori". In 1916 Henry Cowell composed quartets using combinations of rhythms and overtones that are impossible to play by humans. In 1920 Eric Satie composed music not to be listened to ("musique d'ameublement", furniture music), the first form of "ambient music". In 1922 Laszlo Moholy-Nagy advocated the use of phonograph records to produce music, not only to reproduce it. In 1923 Arnold Schoenberg completed his 12-tone system of composition (the first form of "serialism"). In 1928 Maurice Martenot invented a new electronic instrument, the Ondes-Martenot. In 1927 the Russian composer Leon Termen performed the first concerto with his "theremin". In 1930 Leon Termen invented the first rhythm machine, the "Rhythmicon". In 1931 Edgar Varese premiered a piece for percussions, *Ionisation*. All of these people were considered little more (or less) than eccentric characters, and widely ignored by the musical establishment. Instead, they were correctly predicting the future. Without their ideas, today there would be no ambient, electronic, industrial or disco music.

USA: The Depression

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Unfortunately, just when these rapid-fire set of events was picking up speed, the "Great Depression" destroyed the record industry. The record industry had hardly been affected by World War I, but suffered a devastating blow during the "Great Depression". As people stopped spending, record sales collapsed.

Needless to say, suddenly there was no interest anymore in new ideas. Nonetheless, it would be unfair to say that the 1930s did not witness important

events for the future of popular music. For example, the "boogie" pianist Meade Lux Lewis cut *Honky-tonk Train* in 1929, a premonition of the boom of "boogie woogie" that would take place in Chicago and Kansas City after Pete Johnson's and Joe Turner's first records. Gene Autry's *That Silver-Haired Daddy Of Mine* (1931) popularized the "honky-tonk" style of country music, and Bill Monroe's *Kentucky Waltz* (1933) popularized the "bluegrass" style. In 1932 Thomas Dorsey's *Precious Lord* coined gospel music in Chicago. In the same year, Milton Brown and Bob Wills cut the first records of "western swing". Last but not least, [Woody Guthrie](#) wrote the *Dust Bowl Ballads* (1935) and became the first major singer-songwriter.

Two instruments debuted that were to become the staple of rock bands: George Beauchamp invented (1931) the electric guitar (the "Rickenbacker") and Laurens Hammond invented (1933) the Hammond organ. Also important for the future of rock media, in 1930 the first "fanzines" debuted: these were science fiction pulp magazines ("Comet" and "Time Traveller") that allowed sci-fi fans to communicate. They created an "underground" community.

While it is true that the market for records had collapsed (in 1933 only six million records were sold in the USA), recovery was on the way. In 1935 the radio program "Hit Parade" was launched, and soon Roy Acuff became the first star of Nashville, and in 1937 records by the "big bands" rejuvenated the scene. In 1939 the "Grand Ole Opry" moves to Nashville's "Ryman Auditorium" and was broadcasted by the national networks. In 1940 Disney's "Fantasia" introduced stereo sound. Interestingly, in 1939 the Panoram visual jukebox was invented, a device that played short films of records, i.e. the first music videos, an idea that would be shelved for about 40 years.

Black music, in particular, was on the rise in every sense of the word. A symbolic date is 1936, when bluesman Robert Johnson cut his first record. In 1939 Leo Mintz opened a record store in Cleveland, the "Record Rendezvous", that specialized in black music and was serving a white audience: black music found an audience beyond the ghetto. In those years a new style was born, that came to be called "jump blues" after Louis Jordan scored a hit with *Choo Choo Ch'Boogie* (1946). That was, de facto, the birth of rhythm'n'blues. Few people noticed it, but Carl Hogan played a powerful guitar riff on Jordan's *Ain't That Just Like a Woman* that, ten years later, would make Chuck Berry famous. Los Angeles bluesman T-Bone Walker absorbed jazz chords into the blues guitar, starting with *I Got A Break Baby* (1942) and culminating with *Strolling With Bones* (1950). White bluesman Johnny Otis assembled a combo for *Harlem Nocturne* (1945), that was basically a shrunk-down version of the big-bands of swing, and that would remain the epitome of all future rhythm'n'blues combos.

Another important strain of popular music had to do with folk music, which Guthrie had already associated with social awareness. In 1940 [Pete Seeger](#) went further: he formed the Almanac Singers to sing protest songs with communist overtones.

Surprisingly, World War II fostered an economic boom and, indirectly, helped the music industry develop in different directions. It was during the war that Bing Crosby's *White Christmas* (1942) became the best-selling song of all times (and would remain so for 50 years) It was during the war that the first "disc jockeys" followed the USA troops abroad. It was during the war, in 1941, that a radio station in Arkansas (KFFA) hired Sonny Boy Williamson to advertise

groceries, the first case of mass exposure by blues singers. It was during the war that labels such as Savoy (1942) and King (1943) were formed to promote black music. It was during the war that Capitol was founded in Hollywood, the first major music company not to be based in New York (1942), and Mercury was founded in Chicago (1945). It was during the war that the "barbershop quartets" evolved from the slow, melancholy style of the Ink Spots to the casual, innovative style of Ravens, Orioles, Clovers. At the end of the war, the USA was electrified. War was over, the USA had won, peace reigned, and wealth was spreading. The new mood helped popular music too.

The 1940s witnessed progress both in the technique and in the style. As electric instruments spread, they affected the way musicians played. Around 1945 [Les Paul](#) (born Lester Polfus) invented "echo delay", "multi-tracking" and many other studio techniques that would be rediscovered years later by producers all over the world. In 1946 Muddy Waters cut the first records of Chicago's electric blues. And it was in 1947 that Billboard writer Jerry Wexler coined the term "rhythm'n'blues" for this new genre of blues. More labels were born to promote black music, such as Modern (1945), Specialty (1946) and Imperial (1946), all of them in Los Angeles. Atlantic was founded in New York to promote black music at the border between jazz, rhythm'n'blues and pop (1947). A label, in particular, was founded in Chicago's South Side by two Polish-born Jews to promote rhythm'n'blues: Aristocrat, better known as Chess (1947). Black music was "rocking" harder and harder, as Roy Brown stated in his hit *Good Rockin' Tonight in Texas* (1947), and Detroit rhythm'n'blues saxophonist Wild Bill Moore claimed in *We're Gonna Rock We're Gonna Roll* (1948) and in the follow-up, *I Want To Rock And Roll* (1949).

At the same time, after the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) film company opened a recording business to sell their movie soundtracks (1946), the mainstream popular music was controlled by six "majors": Columbia, RCA Victor, Decca, Capitol, MGM, Mercury. A gap was being created between these six majors, that sold white music for white people, and the small independent labels that were sprouting up around the country. The first confrontation had taken place in 1941, when radio stations refused to accept the higher royalties requested by the ASCAP, that controlled most of the New York artists, and started BMI (Broadcast Music Inc), which mainly represented independent country and blues artists from the rest of the nation. Tin Pan Alley and the ASCAP were marketing adult white families, not black families and not young people. But the independent radio stations had more success among young white people, a market that was virtually unexplored.

1948 (when [Pete Seeger](#) formed the Weavers) saw the prodromes of the "folk revival", which would affect thousands of young singers and induce many of them to migrate to New York's Greenwich Village. Jazz and folk musicians shared the same clubs and lofts, and inevitably came to influence each other. The intellectuals of the Greenwich Village were listening to both. In 1948 Billboard introduced charts for "folk" and "race" records, the latter being a euphemism for "black people's records" (and renamed in 1949 "rhythm'n'blues"). In 1950 Elektra was founded in New York to promote both scenes, and Dutch electronics giant Philips entered the recording business.

1948 was also the year that Ed Sullivan started his variety show on national television (later renamed "Ed Sullivan Show"), a show that would hypnotize the youth of the USA. In the meantime (1949), Todd Storz of the KOWH radio

station had the idea of a radio program devoted to the "Top 40" songs in the country.

In those years, two little-noticed technical events took place that would change the way music is distributed and consumed: Columbia introduced (1948) the 12-inch 33-1/3 RPM long-playing vinyl record, and the idea of the "album" was born, and RCA Victor introduced (1949) the 45 RPM vinyl record. In 1951 they would agree to split the record market: Victor selling 33 RPM long-playing records and Columbia selling 45 RPM records. (In a matter of months, Columbia converted its entire catalog of 78 RPM records to the 45 RPM format).

Another strain in popular music, "exotica", was created piecemeal starting from the late 1940s. First (1947) Korla Pandit (John Red), pretending to be an Indian guru and playing a Hammond organ, started a Hollywood-based tv program that, indirectly, publicized exotic sounds. Then (1948) Rodgers & Hammerstein's **Tale Of The South Pacific** became a Broadway hit. Peruvian soprano [Yma Sumac](#) (Zoila Chavarri), blessed with a five-octave range, was presented by her composer/arranger Moises Vivanco as an Inca princess when she recorded **Voice Of the Xtabay** (feb 1950 - ? 1951), arranged by Les Baxter. Finally, [Les Baxter's Ritual Of The Savage](#) (? 1951 - ? 1952) incorporated exotic themes and a theremin in instrumental easy-listening music. Martin Denny's **Exotica** (dec 1956 - ? 1957) gave a name to the trend. His vibraphonist, Arthur Lyman, recorded **Taboo** (? 1958 - may 1958), the third classic of the genre.

Those were also the years of Carl Stalling's cartoon soundtracks. Stalling had started by scoring the first "Mickey Mouse" cartoons for Walt Disney in 1929, and had joined Warner Brothers in 1936. The 1940s were the golden decade of cartoon soundtracks, when composers such as Stalling had virtually unlimited free hand in assembling the most eccentric and awkward combination of sounds and samples.

The Avantgarde

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(The following is an excerpt from my book on avantgarde music).

The end of the decade and the beginning of the 1950s were also important for avantgarde classical music. Composers in both Europe and the USA experimented with techniques that, again, would not be fully understood until the end of the century. John Cage had already composed *Imaginary Landscape N.1* for magnetic tape in 1939. When (1946) the city of Darmstadt in Germany set up a school for avantgarde composers, the magnetic tape became one of their "instruments". In 1946 New York jazz pianist Raymond Scott founded "Manhattan Research", the world's first electronic music studio, for which he built one of the first synthesizers. In 1948 Pierre Schaeffer created a laboratory for "musique concrete" (music made of noises, not notes) in Paris and performed a concerto for noises. Joseph Schillinger published "A Mathematical Basis of the Arts" (1949), in which he proposed that popular music could be composed by combining snippets of existing popular music. Needless to say, few people realized that, fifty years later, that process (renamed "sampling") would become widespread. Karlheinz Stockhausen joined the school of music at Darmstadt in 1951, and began composing "elektronische musik". In the same year, the French

national radio set up a studio to record electronic music in Paris, and the West Deutsche Radio created a similar studio in Cologne (the NWDR). Across the ocean, John Cage was composing music for radio frequencies (1951), multi-media pieces that employed a computer (1952), and electronic collages of hundreds of random noises (1952), while (1952) electronic engineers Harry Olsen and Hebert Belar built the first synthesizer at RCA's Princeton Laboratories, the "Mark I".

It was just a matter of time before new genres based on electronic instruments appeared: Edgar Varese inaugurated tape music with *Deserts* (1954) and premiered his *Poeme Electronique* (1958) in a special pavilion designed by architect Le Corbusier, where the music was reacting with the environment; in 1957 Max Mathews began composing computer music at Bell Laboratories and a computer composed the *Illiad Suite* (1957), using software created by Lejaren Hiller; Bruno Maderna's *Musica su Due Dimensioni* (1957) was the first "electroacoustic" composition, mixing traditional instruments and electronic tape; and John Cage's *Cartridge Music* (1960) was the first example of "live electronic music", which uses the electronic instrument "like" a traditional instrument (save that, obviously, the electronic instrument can play the sounds of all instruments as well as sounds that no acoustic instrument can play).

Last, but not least, John Cage had introduced "chance" and non-musical gestures into the compositional process. The structure of *Music Of Changes* (1951) was determined by coin tosses and the patterns of the "I Ching". *Water Music* (1952) instructs the performers to also perform non-musical gestures.

While the middle-class of the USA was listening to the gracious, peaceful, pleasant music of pop crooners and harmony groups, a whole new world of sound was being created that would literally disintegrate that old world of ordered notes.

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